

THE HORROR SHOW

=====**An Adventure In Terror**=====

MAFIA

■ Thomas F. Monteleone

Books

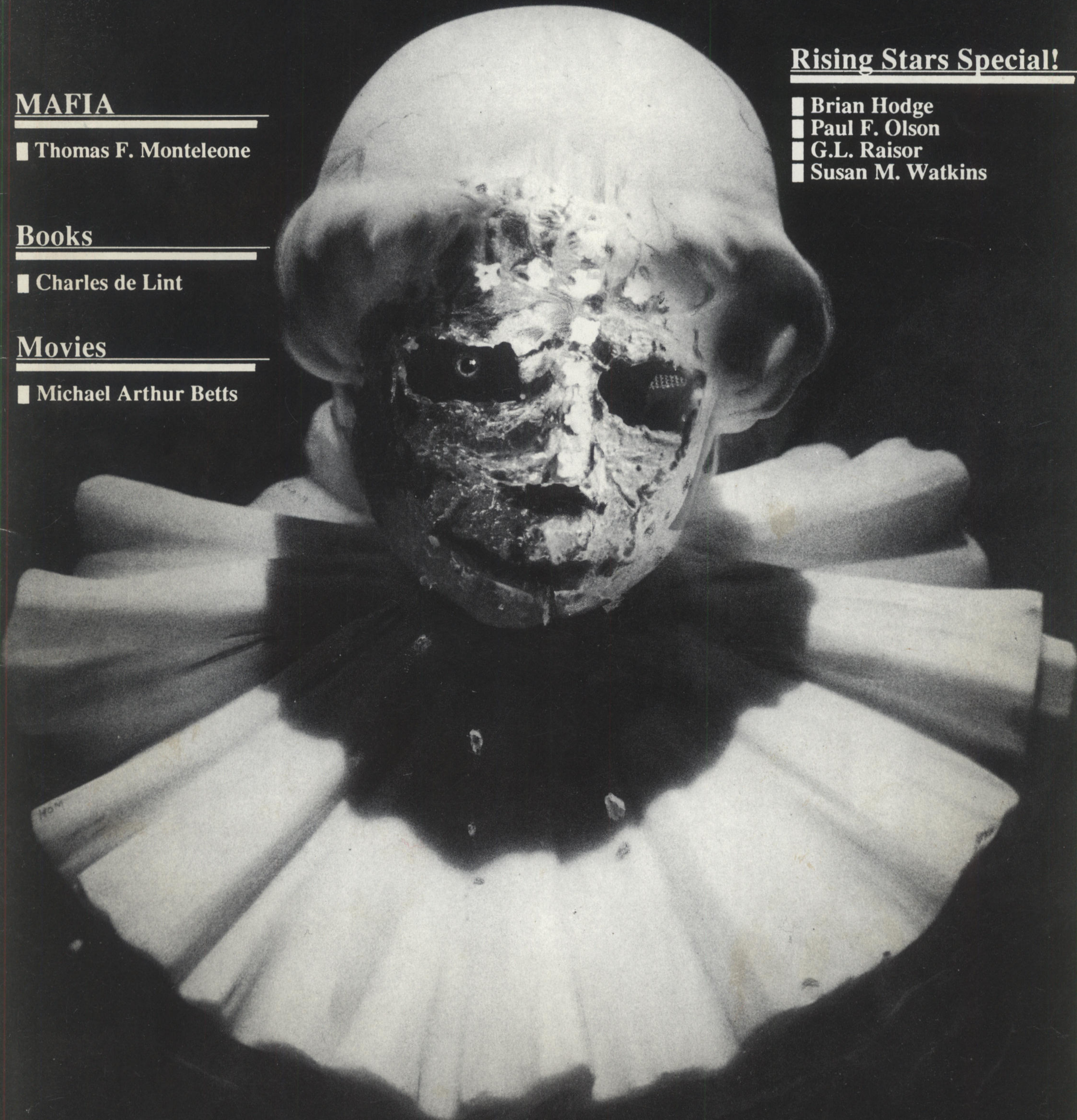
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Rising Stars Special!

- Brian Hodge
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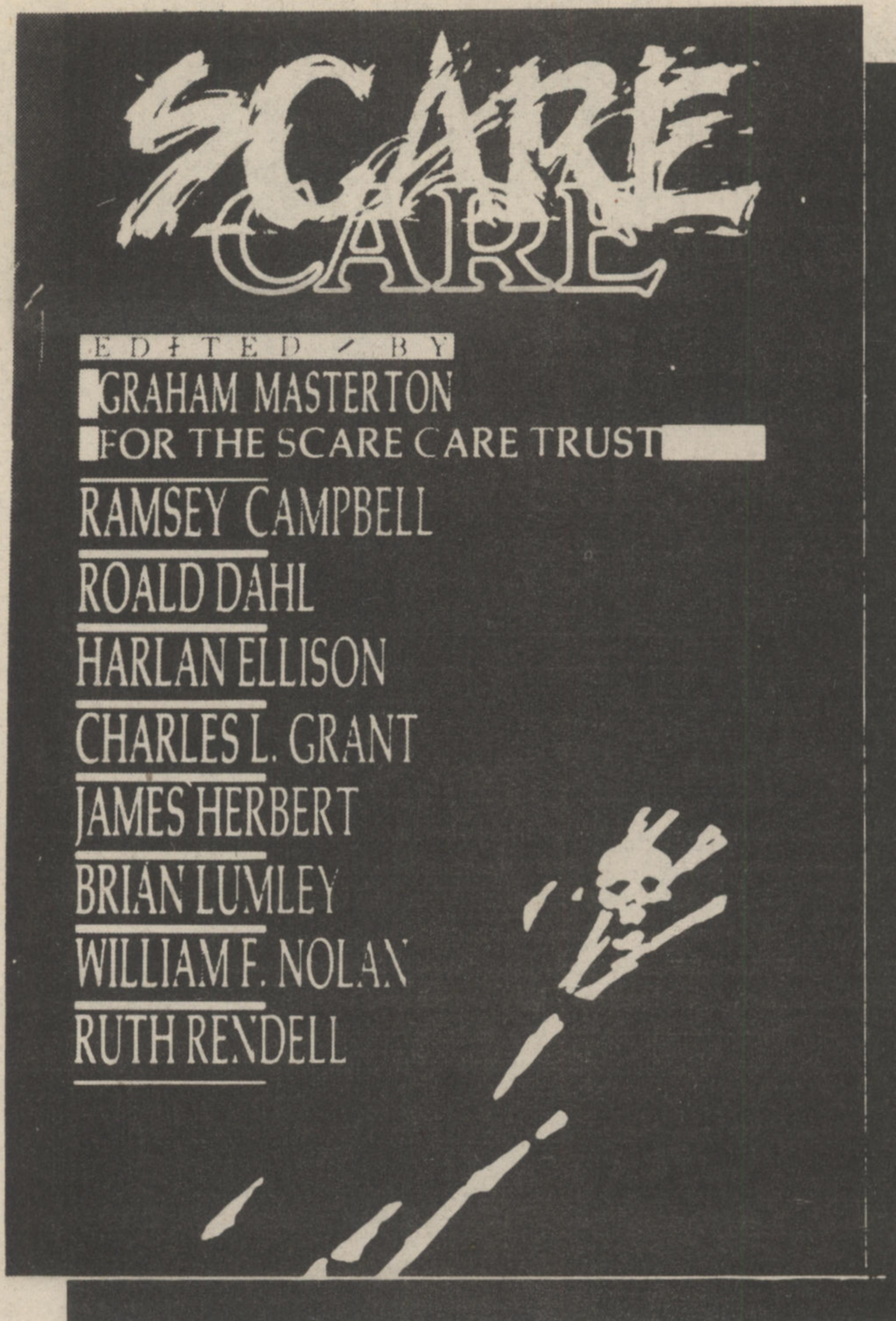
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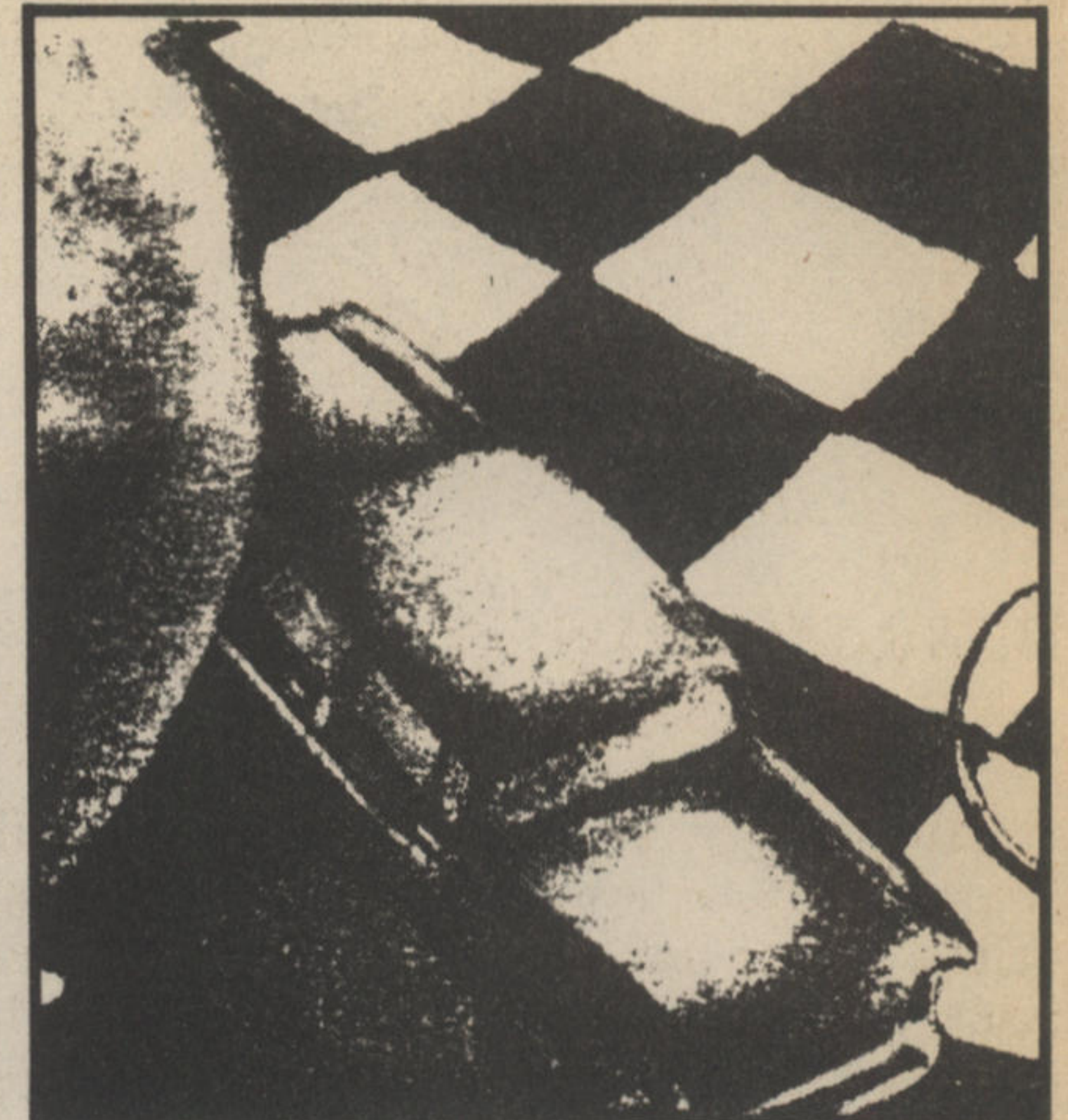
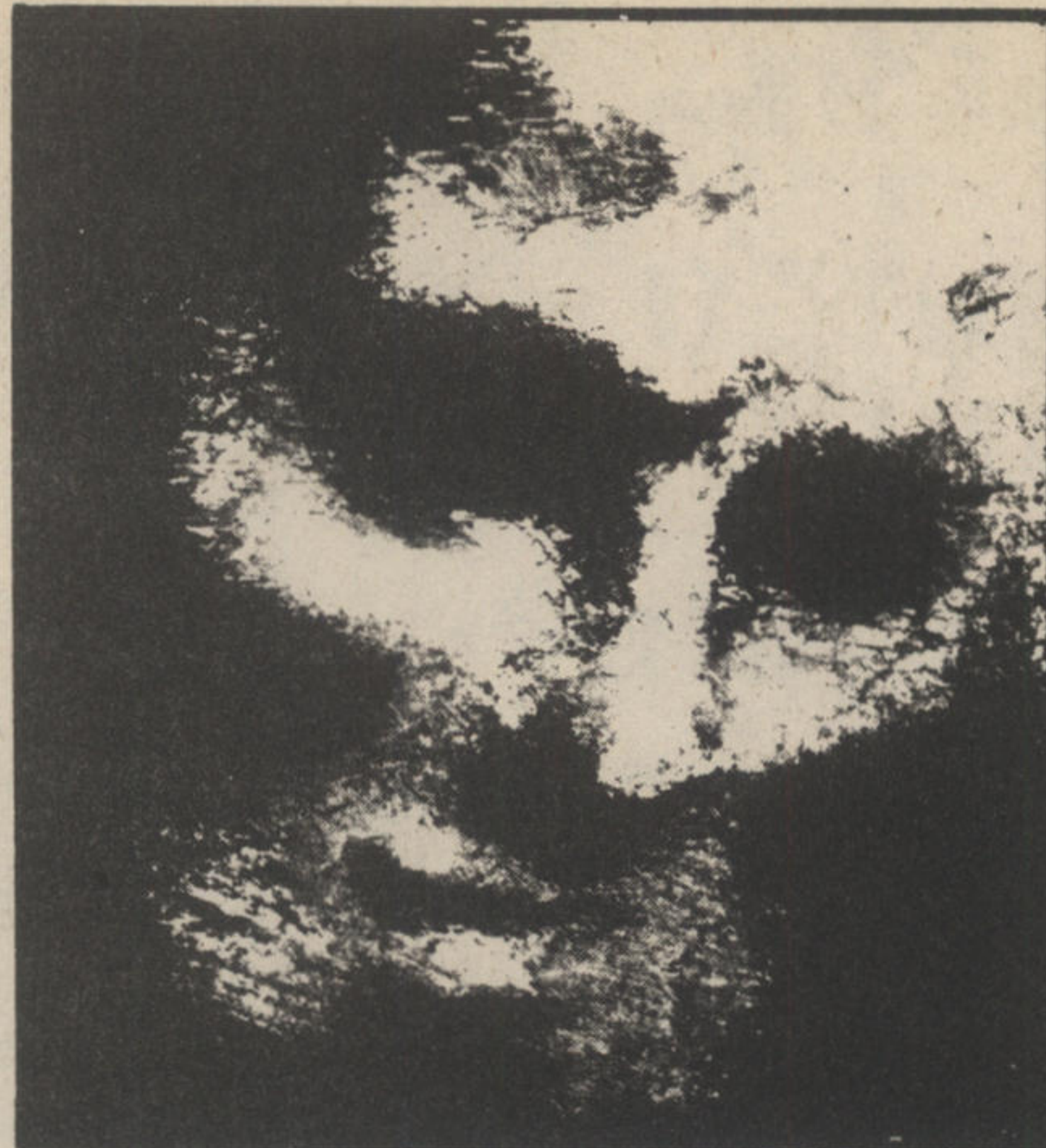
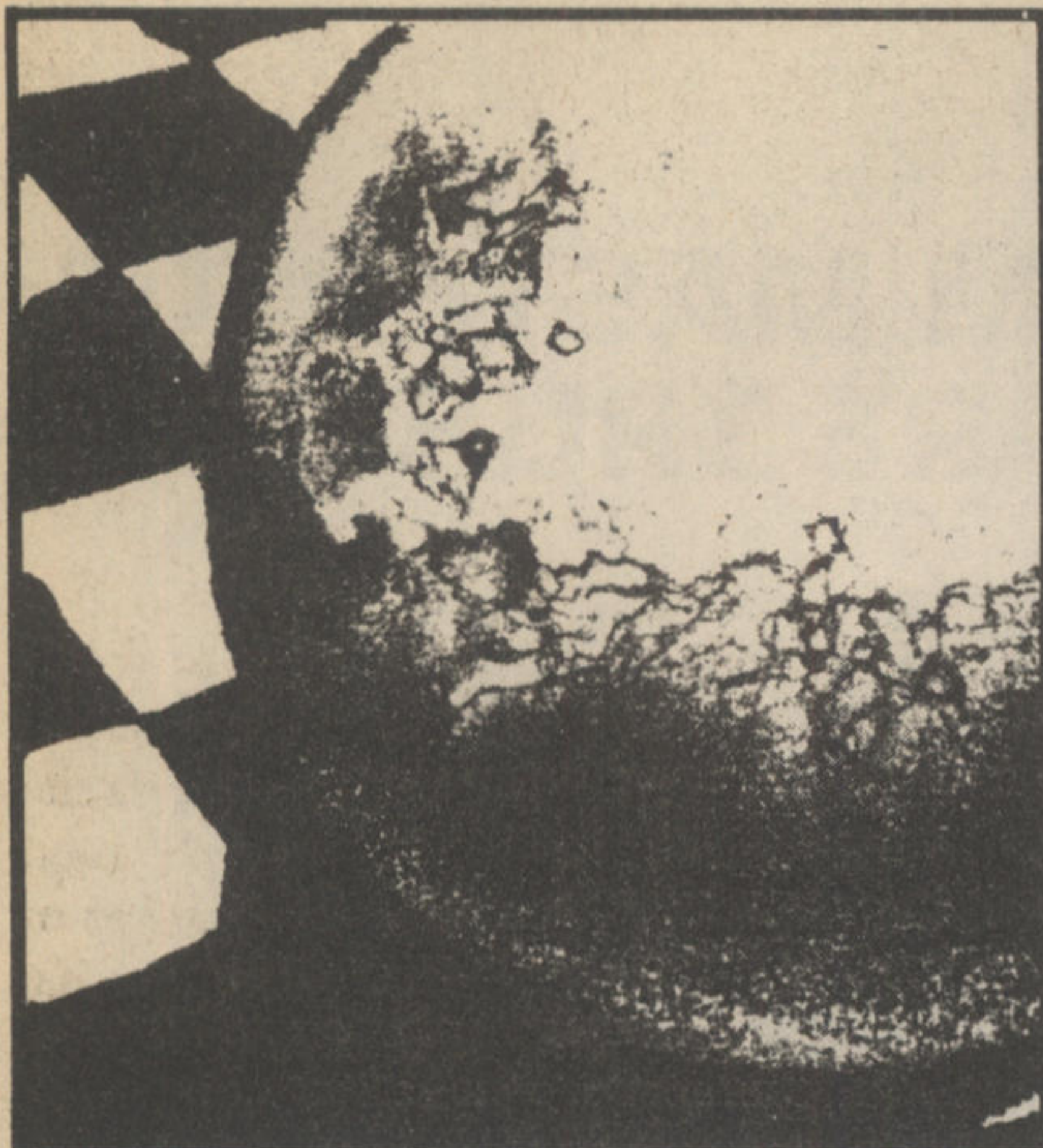
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HELLNOTES

DEAR FRIENDS:

One down and one to go.

Surprisingly, the closer we come to the final issue of *The Horror Show* the greater my sense of peace with the decision. I've received quite a number of wonderful letters from many of you, and I want to thank you for taking the time to write and for all the support you've given to the magazine over the years. Just to reiterate, though, *The Horror Show* will be publishing only one more issue after this one. It will be a special double issue, released sometime early in 1990. The likelihood that you'll be able to find this issue on the stands is very remote, so I encourage you to order a copy if you don't want to miss it.

Those of you who are subscribers should already have received a letter explaining the decision and asking how you'd like to settle your subscription account if it extends beyond 12/01/1989. If you haven't received such a letter, please drop me a card so I can get one out to you as soon as possible. You'll have the option of receiving back issues, a complete refund for the remainder of your subscription, or a combination of the two. You will, of course, be receiving the final issue. My apologies for any inconvenience, the paperwork is sometimes a little insane, but I do want to make certain that each and every reader goes away happy with his or her experience with *The Horror Show*. The magazine never could have existed without you, the readers.

I want to take another chunk of space here to list some of the other publications and dealers and organizations that you might turn to now that *The Horror Show* is disappearing. There are a number of small press magazines that are currently publishing, all of which are worth a look-see. And I've heard of at least one magazine that might be starting up to help fill the gap left in the wake of *The Horror Show's* decision to bite the dust. It's still too early to report on that effort, but perhaps in the last issue things will be ready to announce. In the meantime, for more short fiction:

Noctulpa, P.O. Box 5175, Long Island City, NY 11105.

2 AM, P.O. Box 6754, Rockford, IL 61125-1754.

Grue, P.O. Box 370, Times Square Station, New York, NY 10108.

Eldritch Tales, 1051 Wellington Road, Lawrence, KS 66044.

Cemetery Dance, P.O. Box 189, Riverdale, MD 20737.

New Blood, 540 W. Foothill Blvd. #3730, Glendora, CA 91740.

After Hours, 21541 Oakbrook, Mission Viejo, CA 92692.

Places to find good horror material:

Weinberg Books, 151 Oxford Drive, Oak Forest, IL 60452.

Night Winds Books, P.O. Box 28821, Kansas City, MO 64118.

The Overlook Connection, P.O. Box 526, Woodstock, GA 30188.

Sources for horror writers information:

Scavengers, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523.

(HWA) Horror Writers of America,

112 Hadley Rd., S. Burlington, VT 05403

I hope some of these prove to be helpful for you. If anything else comes up, I try to include it in the final issue. In the meantime, when you come across an anthology (especially of original stories) buy it! When you come across a newsstand or bookstore, find out why they aren't carrying the newest in the horror field. When you read a good horror magazine or anthology or collection of short stories, tell people

about it. The bottom line is this: the only way you're going to get to read good horror fiction in the future is if you invest your hard-earned dollars in the good horror fiction you come across today. It's the nature of the marketplace. I encourage you, though, to use your own good taste, and to hold the field to a high standard. There are a number of very talented writers out there, but if you're not discriminating in what you buy and read, then the entire horror genre will suffer in the end.

THIS ISSUE:

This is what I like to call a Rising Star issue. It's my favorite, because I get to introduce writers who you'll be hearing a lot from in the future. These aren't novices, by any means. But within the horror genre, their careers are still young. What better time to enjoy their work and see how it takes shape? Let me briefly introduce them to you:

Susan M. Watkins has been writing for a number of years, concentrating on journalism and non-fiction for the most part. Her best known work includes *Conversations With Seth*, her most recent non-fiction book titled *Dreaming Myself, Dreaming A Town*. She has only recently begun to spin tales of terror. She's quite good at it.

G.L. Raison has had a number of short stories published in such markets as *Night Cry*, *The Horror Show*, *Pulphouse*, *Razored Saddles*, and elsewhere. His has a talent for strong characters and strong endings, with a voice that's uniquely his own.

Paul F. Olson is perhaps best known as the editor of the instantly-respected magazine, *Horrorstruck*. But he's also a fine writer. His short stories have appeared in *The Horror Show* in the past, and most-recently he has concentrated his talents on novel-length works. NAL will be publishing his first novel, *Night Prophets*, sometime in 1990.

Brian Hodge might not be considered a rising star these days, at least not by his many readers. His voice is straight-forward and down-to-earth, his stories are about real people, his writing is honest. His first two novels, *Oasis* and *Dark Advent* were both released last year, and readers can expect to hear much more from him in the future.

CONCLUDING MATTERS:

If you're thinking about ordering back issues, I encourage you not to put it off. Not only are they selling at a very brisk pace right now, but I will not be holding on to back issues once the final issue has been released. Everything that hasn't sold will make a short trip to the dump. Out of sight, out of mind, I guess. So if you're thinking about back issues, check out the list on the inside back cover.

For those of you who have inquired about the meaning of *better weird than plastic*: it's an old sixties phrase we used to banter about, not all that cryptic. It means: it's better to be weird and to be yourself, than to be phony and be like everyone else.

Until 1990.

Better weird than plastic,





THE PLACE WHERE ALL THINGS GO TO DIE

SUSAN M WATKINS

I wouldn't have ever known about the junkyard in the first place if it hadn't been for Art's little boy. Whenever he came to stay with us, on school vacations and summer break, Brady liked to prowl through the woods across the road from our house. They were deep, apparently untouched woods, too--unusual for this area of upstate New York, where most forest land has been timbered off two or three times and left for trailer lots or patches of scrub.

But one reason we liked our house so much, and paid a whopping price for it at that, was because of those woods. They ran along the opposite side of our road for a couple of miles and extended two or three hundred acres back in, almost to the four-lane state highway beyond. Our house had been built eighty years ago on land cleared by hand and later planted back with hundreds of pine seedlings, which had since grown into a huge, whispering windbreak on our westerly line. The original owner had died and his sons, seven of them, were said to have drifted off to Alabama and Florida, where the jobs were. Or so the realtor told us. I suppose there was no way anyone could have known.

Anyway, those woods were full of mighty oaks and ash and beech and sugar maples as far in as we could see from the road. The thing was, growing between the roadside and the trees were masses of that damned florabunda rose hedge that was such a big thing with farmers back in the 30s and 40s, touted by extension agents as the best fencing material there was because of its wicked thick armor of thorns, and cheaper than barbed wire by a long shot. It was supposed to be absolutely impervious to animals both inside and out. And that it was. My first husband and I spent many miserable hours trying to pull newborn calves and stubborn heifers out from those hedge rows, his father having caught the florabunda bug fill throttle in 1947. By 1980, the stuff had spread like the weed it really was and proved a constant gall on the farm--not even heavy work gloves spared your hands much, and you had to haul it out with a tractor and chain to get rid of it. Which is what my first husband was doing, him and the hired man, the day I packed the car with all of my books and houseplants and clothes and left for good.

So all of that was long passed by, and now here I was with Art in our neat old

country home with the florabunda all around us like a collar. Neither Art nor I braved walking into it for more than a foot or two before we gave up. Besides, we had plenty of work to occupy us. We'd gutted the house and were trying to juggle its complete renovation along with Art's full-time contracting business and my housework and garden chores. Brady was of a different mind, though, as small boys are.

I'd thought he was a funny kid from the start, though since I'd never had kids of my own, it was hard to say if the funniness was really him or my own getting used to an eight-year-old. And I had to admit that after everything the previous decade had dished out, I wasn't particularly inclined to be as easy-going or as nice as I'd once been. I was impatient and sharp, and often overtaken by feelings I didn't like or want. Melancholy, for one, and a streak of hopelessness. Once Brady was here, all the way in on the bus by himself from Philadelphia where he and his mother lived, his kid-ness seemed more like those feelings than something of Brady himself. Art didn't help it much. He was up to his ears with his contracting business and the late evenings working on our own house, doing the rewiring and plastering and plumbing and whatever else. As time went on, he'd become more and more incommunicado. He wouldn't talk about any of this at all, in fact.

"You've got everything a person could ever hope for, Joanne," he said, the only time I tried to have a serious conversation about it, this melancholy that made me want to die sometimes, and the thing with Brady. This was that first summer at the house when all the walls were gutted out and no indoor bathroom and only a hand pump at the sink, and the only thing to cook on the original wood stove, and Brady right there nonetheless, right there with us every minute. "You've got this house and the land around us and no money hassles ever again, so what is it you've got to feel bad about?" And that was that. I felt betrayed for days. I got over it, after a while.

Afterwards, I decided to just watch Brady, observe him as though he were a bird on the feeder, and try to get to like him that way. But I don't know, probably I shouldn't have let Art put me off; looking back on it, I should have said more, insisted, and let Art's temper take its course, get it out in the open

**Brady did
a curious thing:
instead of raising his
voice and yelling over
the noise,
he leaned forward and
lowered his voice under
the racket
and I remember thinking
quite clearly that it was
someone else's voice
coming out of
Brady's mouth; someone
deep and dark and
far away and old,
though not exactly
with age; and then
I heard this voice--of--
Brady say,
"I saw where all
the things go to die."**

and clear it up between us one way or the other, not let him simmer and brood in his way as I was simmering and brooding in mine.

Meanwhile, there was Brady, all alone with two preoccupied adults out in the countryside far away from his familiar home. Most of the time, when he wasn't out in the woods, he sat and stared off into space. He didn't even watch his father doing all that supposedly interesting stuff like soldering pipes and mixing plaster; he'd just sit, day after day, doing nothing. When Art had finished rewiring and the TV finally worked, Brady wouldn't watch more than a couple of minutes at a time before he'd wander off and stand by the windows and stare out across the rough, weed-strewn yard.

It was unnerving, then annoying, and by that second summer it was making me wild with rage. Whatever it was I thought the kid should be doing had nothing to do with it. By then I was so packed with unexpressed fury, and Art with his (I think now, anyway) feeling that I was beginning to crack in half long before Brady told us about the junkyard. And if I'd been smarter, or less afraid of my own needs and impulses, then maybe I would have been able to see, before it was too late, how alike Brady and I really were, and how each of us was in silent orbit around the central figure in the household, around Art; two tiny and insignificant moons spinning in the dead of space around the monster Jupiter. And how it was that Brady had been staring out into those woods all along, how drawn he was by them; how overwhelmed and unlike ourselves we were all becoming.

Brady put on his windbreaker one June afternoon and headed outdoors with only a small, secretive look towards me to ask permission. He must have known he didn't need to ask--by then I wanted him out of there, out of the house and away from me and *doing* something. Art had been running his table saw in the living room all morning, absorbed and closed off. Anybody would have to be an idiot not to want out of there. So Brady went.

He was gone for four and a half hours. By the time we saw Brady meandering back up the driveway, Art had already searched our own property and called up all the neighboring farms. Yet he didn't say a word when Brady came into the house, and Brady didn't say anything to us either. He sat in his kitchen chair at the rough wooden table and started picking at a scab on his arm.

Art, for his part in it, was back at the table saw. I couldn't stand it. "Brady, you were gone for a long time," I said reproachfully.

He didn't answer. I saw him looking at me out of the sides of his eyes.

"Brady," I said, controlling the heat that

wanted to frame my voice, "you were gone too long. We were worried about you. Where did you go?"

He shrugged, eyes cast down. "Woods," he said, and pursed his lips. I wanted to slap him. What I did instead was fix him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and put it in front of him with a glass of milk and six Oreo cookies. He didn't say a word. He just sat there, picking at the scab and knocking his sneakers together under the table, scattering dried mud globs and weed fluff from his jeans cuffs. I kept glancing over, riveted by the shower of dirt, paralyzed by the injustice of it all. I scrubbed that pine floor every night after everyone was done using the kitchen and tracking in. If I didn't do this, I reasoned, we'd soon be wallowing in plaster dust and filth, since Art never bothered to clean up after himself. Or if he did, I couldn't tell.

I tried to keep my mind set on the worry we'd felt that Brady might be lost, rather than on my want that he'd never been born; and so to break the grim silence, I said, "Well, what'd you find out there that was so interesting, anyway?"

Brady kept his eyes downcast and picked up a sandwich half in his dirty hands. I sat in a chair across from him and smiled. I was going to have to learn how to do this for all our sakes, like it or not.

Brady swallowed the mouthful and put the sandwich back down on the plate. His eyes, when he finally looked at me, were hooded and distant.

"I saw," he said, and his father, stripping layers of lead paint off the old woodwork in the next room, turned on the heat blower and so I missed what Brady said. When I asked, "What? What did you say?" Brady did a curious thing: instead of raising his voice and yelling over the noise, he leaned forward and lowered his voice under the racket; and I remember thinking quite clearly that it was someone else's voice coming out of Brady's mouth; someone deep and dark and far away and *old*, though not exactly with age; and then I heard this voice-of-Brady say, "I saw where all the things go to die."

I pulled away, a bit repelled. "You what?" I said.

Brady took another bite of sandwich. "Where what goes to die?" I prodded, yelling, and at that moment, Art shut the damn heat blower off.

Brady looked up, but not at me. It was getting late and the cicadas and swamp frogs were singing their June night songs. "Where all the things go to die," he said.

"Things? What things? You mean there's a graveyard out there?"

Brady shot me a disgusted little glare. "All the *things*," he said. "All the things in

the world. All the *stuff*. You know--all the stuff that we use." He pried an Oreo apart and scraped the vanilla off with his fingernails. "And then we throw it out, and it all goes there to die," he finished.

"Oh," I said, not seeing at all. "You mean you found a junkyard out there?"

Brady shrugged. "Sort of," he mumbled.

"Brady, the--" I stopped myself. I'd been about to tell him that junkyards are dangerous, since they're usually full of 25-year old drums of who knew what sort of toxic ooze, not to mention rats and snakes and every other lethal possibility ever materialized on Earth. Let his father go into all of that, I decided. Something else was going on here, though of course I was utterly wrong about what it was. "What was in this junkyard?"

"All the things," Brady said. "Every one of them. They're all there." He sighed. "It's kind of sad. Scary, too, I guess."

"Every one of *what*?" I asked.

"Every one of the things that got thrown out," Brady answered, his voice straining with impatience. "I told you. It's where they go." He'd turned away from the table and the half-eaten sandwich. "You think they all rust to pieces and disappear, or just rot in some dump, but they don't."

"Well," I said, and stopped. Silence fell between us and lengthened out until the conversation was lost for good.

"Well," I began again, "you shouldn't play in junkyards anyway. All right?" We were both listening to Art washing up in the downstairs bathroom.

"I won't get lost, if that's what you're worried about," Brady said, his eyes narrow and dark, and Art walked into the kitchen and stared at the two of us, Brady sitting sideways to me and my hands folded on the tabletop.

"What's the story?" he asked, but he was searching out a clean coffee cup and the afternoon paper. "Going over the business about the woods today, Brady?"

"Yes," I said. Brady said nothing. I opened my mouth to talk about the junkyard and shut it again. Brady was watching me indirectly, his stocky little body tight as an overwound clock. That was when the thing was sealed, I suppose--when I decided that I didn't want to hear Art's injunctions on my opinions of what children should and shouldn't be allowed to do. It was me Art would jump on about this, not Brady, who was sitting there as alert as an animal in the grass, keeping track of what was coming next. Maybe he knew I could easily have started a fight with his father that nobody wanted to hear; maybe that was all it was.

But I doubt it. Art's eyes flicked across mine briefly; he was waiting for more from me, too. Then he said to Brady, "Tell you what--next time you go out there in the

woods, I'll give you a watch so you can be home in an hour or so, all right?" And Brady nodded, and Art took the paper back out to the living room to read.

It's all a great big mess, I thought then, and pushed the thought away. The next day, Brady left without his father's watch and was gone from before noon until half past six. "He knows what he's about," his father said at four. He was leaving to inspect a job his men had finished over on the south end of the county.

"You leave me with all the worry," I screamed at the door, after Art drove off. "You just dump it all onto me and let *me* feel it! You *bastard!* You *shithead!*" I grabbed the sugar jar off the table and threw it, hard, against the door. It exploded into a fireworks of sugar and glass and made a deep, satisfying gouge in the middle of Art's hand-carved scrollwork. Then I cried for ten minutes and cleaned the whole mess up. Maybe he'd ask about the dent and maybe he wouldn't.

Maybe I would have taken it out on Brady, too, except that when he came back in the house, his face was for once open and direct--like a child's should be, I thought. As usual, I misread what was going on. He drew something out of his jacket pocket and came over to me, holding it out. I was so taken with this spontaneous little act that at first I didn't notice what he had in his hand. I was just plain happy to have him in my company; to have someone with me willing to bask, even momentarily, in his own feelings right as he was feeling them.

"Look," Brady said. I grabbed his hand with both of mine and looked. He was clutching an ordinary old worn-out cue ball, all dingy and dented and barely even round anymore, let alone its original white.

"Where'd you find that?" I said, though of course I knew.

"In my part," Brady said. "It's mine. I lost it a long time ago, when--" he blinked, scowled, almost disappeared behind that too-familiar mask. "Back when I was just a little kid. My mom got it for me at a rummage sale and then I left it out in the yard by mistake and it ended up over in there, with all my other stuff."

I grinned with him. "You mean you left it out in the yard here, by our house?" I was thinking that maybe our old dog had carried it off into the woods last summer, her last summer.

"No," Brady said. He was suddenly solemn, wary. He pulled his hand away. "I left it out in the yard at my mom and dad's place. When my mom and dad were together."

"You lost it there? In Philadelphia?"

Brady nodded. His eyes were all on the cue ball, precious found treasure.

"Well, you found another one just like it, is all," I said. I wasn't about to go into another lecture about the hazards of poking through junkyards. "Lots of billiard balls get thrown out. I bet that's from some local pool hall that just threw their trash in there back when it was a public dump." Though exactly when that might have been was a mystery, I mused silently, since there was no evidence at all anywhere, not on our road or off the state highway, of an access route into the woods.

"No," Brady stated. "You don't get it. This is *my* cue ball." He turned it over and pointed to a triangle-shaped dig surrounded by half a dozen pinholes in the finish. "I did that, a long time ago," he said ruefully. "I was tryin' to pound some thumb tacks into it and I couldn't make 'em stick, and that chip came out of it." He rubbed the marks with

**"It can't be
that big," I said,
in spite of myself.
"The woods end
after a while,
over by the state
highway, and there's
a hunting cabin
a mile down
the road from us,
remember?"**

his thumb. "I us'ta think the ball went away because I hurt it," he said. "Anyway, it was with all my other stuff and it's my same cue ball."

"Brady, that can't ..." I stopped. "What other stuff?"

Brady shrugged. "All my other stuff. There's not a whole lot, but I guess I haven't gotten rid of much yet." He looked up at me. "I think I saw all of Dad's junk, too," he said.

"Dad's junk?" I was pretty confused. I thought Brady was telling me that he'd been hiding stuff out there in the junkyard, making a secret cache, or something; and now that Art was doing the same? "You mean your father's been throwing garbage away out in those woods?"

"Nah, not like that." Brady was turning the cue ball around and around in his hands.

"Not on purpose. It just goes there, when you throw it out." He shook his head. "I told you before, *everybody's* junk is there. You should see it. It goes on forever."

Right then was when it came to me that Brady must be playing an elaborate game of make-believe, creating a whole world for himself out in the privacy of those woods--much as any kid does, I guess, when they're left all to themselves. I certainly had, as a child. Instead of junkyards, I'd created a secret Indian tribe that lived in the creek by my house. The magic rocks that I brought back from there had filled a grocery carton. "So did you bring back anything else?" I asked him.

A look came across Brady's face that at first I couldn't identify; again, maybe because it was open, plain. "I tried to," he said. "There was a bunch of stuff, old toys I'd forgotten about, mostly, but it ..." he trailed off. The look was fear. My heart snagged on something, realizing it. "It all went back when I got to the edge, except for my cue ball," he finished.

"What do you mean, it all went back?"

"I got out of the woods, and it was all gone from my pockets and stuff," Brady said. "I thought maybe I'd dropped it on the way out--there's all kinds of pricker bushes and snaggy vines you have to push through--so I went back looking for it, and got all the way back inside to my part, and there it all was except the cue ball." He'd made a tight fist around it. "Maybe that's because I picked the ball up first. Or maybe they don't really want to come out with us anymore." He eyed me. "Maybe after you throw them out once, they don't trust you any more."

I honestly didn't know what to say. Any armchair pop-psych quarterback could see all kinds of serious business swimming around inside Brady's fantasy; the poor kid had even scared himself with it. And me, too, a little. "So what junk of your father's is in there?" I asked, for want of anything better.

"*Everything*," Brady hissed. "About a hundred cars, it looks like. Clothes all over the place. Tools. All the tools are together, in his pile, anyway. There's that hammer with the red handle he said I lost, back in Philadelphia. I should bring that out next and show him different." His eyes narrowed. "It just goes on and on, like everybody else's. I walked and walked and couldn't get to where it stopped, so I climbed up on top to see how far it went and I couldn't see the end. All the junk just went over the edge of the world."

"It can't be that big," I said, in spite of myself. "The woods end after a while, over by the state highway, and there's a hunting cabin a mile down the road from us, remember?"

"It's bigger inside than it is outside,"

Brady said, and then he added, too casually, "Why don't you come with me and look at it? There's something ..." and he stopped.

"Something?" I prodded, but Brady bit his lip and stared at his cue ball, and so I said, "All right, let's go have a look. I should probably report it to the conservation department anyway, if it's that full of junk."

Brady said nothing. He set his cue ball on the table and walked to the door. I looked at the clock; it was almost 7, but here in the end of June we had at least two more hours of daylight left. I put on my gardening jacket with the big pockets and wrote a quick note for Art: *We're off exploring the junkyard across the road, back by dark*, and we were out the door.

Out on the road, Brady picked a spot about thirty yards up from our driveway to start through the florabunda. "Like this," he said, and dropped flat on his stomach and wiggled in underneath the bushes where a rotting log had made something of a gap between the ground and the layers of thorn. I got myself down as flat as I could and wiggled in after him, and almost immediately my hair and jacket collar were snagged tight. I couldn't even put my hands up to free myself--when I tried, the thorns only caught and ripped my skin. It was as though the bushes had hurled themselves down on my back and were clawing at me of their own volition. Brady, far ahead of me now, called, "Keep going! You can stand up once you get in here!" So, gritting my teeth and suddenly hating Art with a fresh vengeance, I shoved myself along by pressing my face into the dirt, hair ripping, collar tearing, until I thought I was going to suffocate--and then I was pushing out into the bright world of open grass.

It was a small field, maybe ten yards across, at the edge of the actual woods. Brady was standing by the first of the trees, waiting.

"There's more brambles in the woods, for a ways," he said. "It never gets as bad as that was, though."

"That was pretty damn bad enough," I growled. The front of me was filthy and my hair was a mess of thorn-caught twigs. "Whatever got you to crawl in here the first time?"

"I don't know," Brady said. He turned away and started working through the fringe of what I first took to be sapling versions of the huge old glowering monsters of bark and limb that rose up above us. Inside, beyond them, was a hushed curtain of cool gloom. Some of the trees were giant oaks; that much I could identify. Others had to be beeches and ash trees; here and there, along the outward line of them, I could see maples--enormous towering methuselaha of that clan,

untouched by road salt and car exhaust (though it came to me that the maples in our equally untouched yard weren't half as lush).

The saplings weren't their children, however. I pushed branches aside to follow Brady and searing pain stabbed into my palms. I shrieked in panic, thinking I'd knocked loose some hornets. It was the trees. Thornapples, eye-high and needle-ready. A thick grove of them, unyielding nasty things. I'd picked their thorns out of horse's eyes one too many times in years past. But ... I stared at them, looking for a way through. But these were "weed trees," or so farmers called them; didn't they only grow where woodland had been cleared, plowed, then let go?

Brady reappeared. "Put your arm up over your face, like this," he said, demonstrating. "They give if you just plow through. There's clear walking farther in." He turned around and put his arms up and plowed. The thorns



made loud scraping noises on his windbreaker.

Well, I'd come this far, so, thanking myself for having the sense to wear my tough old khaki gardening jacket, I put my hands up either sleeve, hid my face down in my crossed arms, bent over, and shoved. Miraculously, it worked fairly well. My scalp was poked and scraped some more, but after fifteen or twenty feet I broke free of the thorns and stepped out into the cool hush of the forest floor, where Brady was waiting.

I looked around us, predictably awed. In here the trees were spaced with that solemn air of polite graciousness that permeates all deep woods. A buzz of starlings and finches filtered down to us from the tops of the leaf canopy above us; other birds, including the first brown creeper I'd ever seen outside of Peterson's, twittered and flew about their business. A small woodpecker *brappppped*

somewhere off to our left. The smell of rotting leaf mold under our feet--centuries of it, I thought with a thrill--was deep and rich, and in the heavy, hushed air I could actually hear the crackling process of rot--whether by maggots or beetles, or earthworms, I couldn't tell.

Brady had been in here before, but he was standing open-mouthed, staring around him, as I was.

"Why didn't you tell us?" I whispered, finally.

Brady glared sideways at me. "You'll see," he said.

He offered no other comment. We walked on.

It might have been that I was so distracted by the birds and the forest plant life around us that I thought more time passed than it did; yet it seems to me now that we walked for hours through those gigantic trees. But the

sun didn't set; we were still walking in the dim filtered light of a late summer afternoon, so I have to think that it was my own disorientation that made our trek seem endless when in fact it must be that the moments only became fuller. I hadn't worn a watch or brought a compass; such elementary precautions hadn't occurred to me, in the midst of countryside trellised all around by highways and hamlets.

Brady and I didn't talk; he led, I followed, stopping here and there to stare at a cluster of glowing orange mushrooms, or ferns, or a swath of pale green moss. I was bent over touching an umbrella-shaped mushroom with a pale yellow cap, in fact, when Brady stepped up beside me and said, "We're here." His shoulder touched my arm and stayed there, something he'd never done before. I followed his gaze with my own, off to our right and slightly downhill, and there it

was.

A chill, then a jolt, thumped through my chest. It was a junkyard, all right; I could plainly see the beginnings of rusted-out car bodies and bashed-up washing machines and all the rest of it. What my eyes were riveted on, though, was between us and the front edge of junk; a thing squatting in the middle of the space where trees and fern undergrowth had pulled back to create an obvious entrance. It was an overstuffed chair, an old ratty brown upholstered chair with holes in its sides and stuffing falling out and the seat sagging toward oblivion beneath the dank cushion.

Sitting on that chair and facing us with wide, frozen grins and dead eyes was a Winnie-the-Pooh teddy bear and, next to it, a stuffed blue rabbit with a plastic human face. Tucked in over their laps was a faded old quilt on which the rabbit's blue paws rested quietly. They were scruffy and careworn



with use, and as familiar as a storybook--and utterly wrong, as out of place as dead bodies at a birthday party. In fact, I had the sudden idea that if we took another step toward them they would fly out of the chair and rip out our throats; that underneath the soft cuddly yellow and blue fur and smiling faces each had a set of teeth like serrated razors that could slash through muscle and bone and vein in an instant, an instant now, any second, any second.

Brady made a sound through his nose and I flinched. "Did you put those things there?" I whispered, looking down at him. He was mashing his lower lip between his teeth, his skin greenish-gray and tight across his face.

"Before--" he croaked, and licked his lips. "When I was here before--there was just one."

"Just one?" I repeated stupidly. From somewhere ahead of us, off in the junkyard someplace, a low moaning started up.

Wind--it was wind moving through the twisted metal shapes in there, I told myself, but that thought led to other thoughts, so I shut it away in a hurry.

"Just the Pooh bear," Brady was saying. "There was just the Pooh bear, by himself, just like the one I used to have."

I cleared my throat, forced myself to affect the logical mode the whole scene had to call for. "Well, there must be other kids playing in here, that's all," I said. The moaning sound rose and fell, far off, just the wind.

There wasn't any wind where we were standing, though. Brady tugged at my sleeve. "Come on," he said, his voice tight. "This way." He pulled me past the chair, where the stuffed creatures stayed mute and still, and we moved quickly, down a slight gravelly dip that could have been part of a delivery road once, or maybe part of a creekbed--and then we were in the junkyard, all at once, like walking

from one room into the other.

And it took the breath out of my lungs--it was huge, the biggest junkyard I'd ever seen. We were facing a peninsula of twisted wreckage and flotsam of every description with matching side-channels of it heaped up along either side, ten to fifteen feet high in places, mountains and canyons of junk that blocked even the ring of trees from view. Small narrow roadways snaked around each side of the central pile and disappeared around jagged corners. *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood*, my mind chirped, *And I took the one less ...*

"Nobody else plays here," Brady interjected.

"What?" I was confused with too many thoughts and images.

"You said some other kids must play in here, up by the chair. They don't." He shifted on his feet. "Nobody comes here."

"We're here, aren't we?" I reminded him. I looked up at the sky, suddenly remembering to check our time. Weirdly, even in this clearing of junk, the sky was slate-gray, rainy-day mute; it'd been sunny and cloudless when we left the house. Maybe it's smoke from junk fires, I told myself.

"You've gotta see something and then we've gotta get out of here," Brady said. He pointed down the left-hand corridor. "This way." He trudged off, making sure I was right behind him.

We rounded an avalanche of refrigerators that had tumbled from the top of the central pile, and I saw that the road turned sharply left again and broke up into crazy labyrinths of towering junk and matted, scummy growths of sumac and wild grapevine. I stopped, stunned. It *did* seem to go on forever; Brady was right about that. The surrounding trees had disappeared into the distance, into the sea of junk. How big was this mess? I was beginning to get angry about it, somewhere off in the back of my head. This had to be visible from the air, county officials had to know this was here--why hadn't Art and I been told about it before we bought our house? Images of poison goo seeping into our well water came to me all too vividly--images of rats, too (though, we hadn't seen one yet). Who had piled all this stuff in here--and why?

Brady was up ahead of me, gesturing. I sloshed through a small puddle, soaking my sneakers, and something else came to me. The road under our feet was completely unmarked by footprints or tracks of any kind--neither animal nor vehicle. And ... I stared carefully at the pile nearest me. Most of this stuff was household trash, or so it seemed; broken furniture, heaps of shattered cookware, soiled, rotten rugs, lots of appliances small and large. Some of it had nearly rusted away, some of it was fairly new--which meant that people were still bringing it in here, didn't it? But there were no tracks--no tracks at all, except our own.

That moaning, the moaning of that wind, that wind I couldn't feel, was still coming from somewhere, from somewhere off to my right--or maybe not; it seemed to shift as I strained to hear it. I hurried to catch up with Brady--and he was gone. Vanished. The roads were a twisted knot of tributaries--a maze, a trash maze, with each of the trash mounds just a little higher than I was tall. He could be anywhere; and for that matter--I whirled around. Behind me, the path we'd followed in had disappeared behind a ridge of spilled-out engine parts. I should mark it, I thought, my heart thudding, or we'll never get out of here. Quickly, nervous enough now so that I could hardly think, I backtracked and grabbed a cluster of broken gar-

den tools off the edge of the nearest pile and laid them on the ground one after the other from the point where I could see the main roadway. Then I turned to start yelling for Brady and nearly jumped out of my skin. He was right in front of me, standing ahead of a block of stuff that I swear hadn't been there a minute before. In a cute, fun playing-card maze at home on the kitchen table, it would have been where you'd just propped the Jack of Spades to make a blunt end.

"It's right around here," he said. I went, placing two filthy old weeding claws, a hand trowel, and a rake on the ground as I walked. Brady was waiting on the other side of a stained crib mattress.

"See?" he said, pointing. "This is my part." He reached up and stuck his hand into a crevice between a wrecked, slime-smearred Big Wheel and some twisted piece of yellow and blue plastic that I couldn't identify. When he brought his hand out, he was holding a tiny matchbox car that had once been bright red. "I tried to bring this out before," he said. His eyes were very large in his small, dark face. "They're all right here, right back where I found them the first time." He squeezed the little car. "Maybe it was playing a joke," he added.

"Who was?" I was coming to my senses a little, and I was looking, really looking, at the stuff Brady was picking through. It was mostly old toys, including at least a dozen stuffed animals all murky with ooze and filth--but there were a lot of clothes, too, I noticed. Little kids' clothes tossed here and there in wads. Shoes, too, mostly ruined by toe-holes. And a soggy gout of coloring books. And pencil stubs. And down at the opposite end, a nasty little pile of disposable diapers. And--

And no appliances, I heard myself think, as if in someone else's head. No appliances, no engine parts, no rusted-out car bodies, no *big* worn-out shoes, no *grown-up* sized shirt rags, no *adult*-type stuff here at all.

Just toys, and kids' clothes, and things from babyhood that wear out, get lost, get tossed ...

Brady was watching me. "My dad's part is just over there," he said. "There's something there you've gotta see." He hung back. "I'll wait here," he said.

"Let's just get out of here and go home," I said, reaching for his hand.

"No," he said, stepping away from me. "You've got to see it. I can't tell you, you won't believe it." He pointed. "It's just there, in my dad's part, just past that one with the lawn mowers on it." He looked up at me. "It's important, Aunt Joanne." It was the first time he'd called me by any name at all.

"Well," I said, relenting, "all right, I'll go look, but then we've got to get home or your

father will start worrying about us."

"No, he won't," Brady mumbled.

"Oh, don't be silly, of course he will," I said. "Now what is it that I'm supposed to be looking for over there?" I waited. "Well, what?"

Brady wouldn't answer. He was busy picking chips of red paint off the matchbox car. I'd seen that reaction before. You couldn't dynamite a response out of him if he didn't want to answer. A real chip off the old block in that department, yes indeed.

Well, piss on the both of them, then, I thought, with a sweet rush of anger, and I turned and marched down the road and around the upside-down lawn mower toward this pile of crap that Brady was making all the fuss about. The lawn mower he'd pointed out was the vanguard of an immense jumble of mowers of all sizes and shapes, riders and push types, power and (sticking out handle-first from the bottom) old-fashioned rotaries. Perched on the seat of an ancient rider was a fishing creel with a red and green bobber hanging out of it, one of those old wooden beauties that might have been hand-carved by somebody's great-grandfather.

In the midst of this creepy place full of useless trash and all this steaming fury I was straining against, that bobber seemed like a precious jewel, a found treasure of my own, waiting there for me to take it home. I grabbed it and yanked, and the line snapped with a dull *thunk*. "You're a beauty, all right," I said to the bobber, and stuffed it into my jacket pocket. There was a bad smell coming from the creel, or I would have opened it and looked for more.

That was when the moaning sound began again, so close to me that I yelped and jumped back, knocking the creel off the mower seat. It was coming from the next mound over, the one Brady'd said--I thought he'd said---was, was what? His father's "part," where I was supposed to go see whatever it was he wanted me to see. The moaning rose and fell, more like weeping, I thought now, than wind. It occurred to me for the first time that somebody might be hurt in there; that somebody might have broken an ankle climbing on the trash and was crying in pain, or was stuck, or something; maybe it was an animal. Was this what Brady wanted to show me?

Well, why didn't he just say so, I grumbled, hurrying toward the sound, imagining how we'd have to run home and call the state police, and get their medical helicopter in here to airlift this person out--if they could fly in through the haze, or smoke, or whatever it was.

This pile of stuff was much bigger than its neighbors. I noticed the tools right away, the ones Brady had mentioned, and sure

enough, there was a red-handled hammer with its peen buried in the mud. There was something else, too, an oddly familiar gray oval shape skewered sideways by a crush of scrap wood. It was, in fact, a gray kitchen table exactly like the one that had been in our house when we bought it, the one Art had thrown on his truck and hauled away. I stared at it, confused, my skin gone cold with goose bumps. There was a diagonal gouge across the top of this table in front of me, exactly like the gouge on the table we'd discarded. Exactly. Had Art thrown it out in here, then? Instead of in the county landfill, over by Groton, where he said he'd taken it? But ... I couldn't get my thoughts together. That *had* to be our old table; yet it couldn't be. How could Art have gotten the truck in here?

A shuddering little sigh floated down from the top of the pile, standing my neck hairs on end, and I shouted, "I'm here!" too loudly, though my voice sounded dead in the junk, flat and dead and buried. Then I thought I heard something moving around up there, shifting in the junk, and my skin and my guts were screaming to run, though I denied it. Something was going on here, something was all wrong and cracked; my head was stuffed with chaotic signals, which must explain why I doggedly climbed against my will up that twisted mess of rust and rot; it was dangerous as hell, and disgusting--near the top was a maggoty dead cat, all puffed up and oozing stink (*and hadn't Art accidentally backed over a cat a couple of weeks ago, at the house where his crew was building a garage, isn't that what he said?*)--and then I stood up straight and saw what Brady had sent me to see.

There, a few paces away, someone was indeed half-sunken in the trash, someone feebly waving arms and legs and whimpering like a wounded calf, up and down, up and down, a liquid bawling bleat, despair without end, amen.

I took a careful step. Later I realized that from my perch I could hear more sounds just like it coming from all over the junkyard. It's one of the many things I don't want to live with, knowing. I took another step, my body aching with the need not to do so. "Are you hurt?" I called out, stupidly, and then something gave way under my feet and I staggered forward, thrashing to keep my balance, hit my knees against a cardboard box full of soggy books, and came down, hard, on my left hand.

My face was right over the face of the whimperer.

It was my own face.

It was *me*.

It was me; myself, or a version of me--I caught my breath, realizing I'd screamed.

Then for a second I thought it must be a life-sized doll replica of me--thrown out here as a joke, an elaborate practical joke Brady and Art had cooked up to scare the hell out of me. I was gasping and wheezing; my chest hurt; they'd succeeded. I ran my eyes up and down the doll's body. It was naked and unformed, like a doll is--just skin where the genitals should be, little bumps to suggest breasts, not even a belly button. I managed to convince myself it was a doll for at least two more seconds, until it picked its arms up and started waving them again. And moaning. Its mouth--I couldn't stop from looking at the mouth. It was a perfect round O. Some of its reddish-blond hair, just the color of my hair, had plastered itself across the cheek and stuck in the mouth. Arms waved feebly, like grass--not like arms, like grass, soft, unformed. Unable to stop myself, I reached out and touched its right arm.

It was warm, like flesh, my flesh. And not only that ...

Not only that, but so help me, in the same instant that my fingers closed on its arm, *I felt someone touch me, felt someone's fingers on my own arm.* And ... I don't know how, I don't know at all, but at the same time, I could feel that ... thing *as it felt me touch it,* endless mirror images of sensation and touching, spreading out and out like sunlight winking off a million shards of glass.

And then it turned its head and I met its eyes, and it ... *recognized me.*

It *recognized me.* I saw it. Blue eyes, focusing on my face. And it sobbed, and tears ran back into its hair and slobber drooled out of its mouth, and I heard a choking noise from inside that perfect O, and it reached out to me and its throat convulsed in pitiful entreaty.

It was trying to speak.

It was trying to beg me to help it.

That was it--that was when I broke and ran. I screamed and screamed, peals of screams tearing loose from me as I plunged headlong across the top of that junkpile and down the side, pitching crazily on footholds of refuse, crashing down on my knees in the gravel at the bottom, scrambling to my feet and running top speed back to Brady, who watched me pound towards him with a look like death on his pinched face; shoving him, screaming, "Run!" and then we were running madly back down the pathway, both of us panicked beyond our senses. The garden tools I'd laid out like bread crumbs behind us were gone, but I didn't stop to think about it--maybe that was what saved me, got me out of there. Nothing could have stopped me at that point, nothing--I could still hear that *thing* back there, the *thing* tossed out with all the rest of Art's junk, the *thing* that was me, nearly me, almost me, becoming me ... and

helpless, as helpless and repulsive as a worm dying in the rain.

"Don't stop!" Brady skreeked, gasping. I grabbed his jacket sleeve and we ran, the two of us, up the main path and the gravelly bank past the rotting overstuffed chair, the chair that was now turned around to face us; and if the Pooh bear and the blue human-faced rabbit greeted our passage with wide grins that showed sharp, white teeth, and if they seemed to rear up on their hind legs as we approached, and if they lunged at us, hurtling through the air in frenzied glee, thumping against us like maddened, bloated dead things--if all that happened, we shook them off us without looking and kept on running, Brady and I, adrenalin shooting through us like fire, breath whistling fire in our lungs; ran and ran until we came to the ring of brambles at the edge of the trees, where we slowed only long enough to pull our jackets up over our heads and barge like headless horsemen into the little field.

"The florabunda's right there," I gasped, "we're almost out." Brady nodded, unable to speak, his face livid. We were across the field in a shot, throwing ourselves on the ground and crawling. My jacket tore, my hair caught; I yanked hard, not feeling the hunks ripping from my scalp.

I pushed out, free, into absolute darkness, and a cacophony of shouting.

It was Art, calling my name and Brady's. I was blind; I stumbled to my feet, tearing loose from the last of the thorns. "I'm here! Here!" I screamed, struggling to open my eyes. Then I realized they were already wide open.

It was night. Pitch black dark.

And yet, inside the ... back in there, it had been daylight. A hazy, twilight afternoon.

That went on forever.

"Joanne!" Art shouted. "My God, Joanne, where have you been? Where's Brady? I've been calling everybody I could think of, trying to find you, and then I saw your note--"

"What time is it?" I gulped air, trying to stop shaking, calm down, get my breath. My knees in aftershock were turning to water. I looked around for Brady; he'd been right behind me, crawling through the brush.

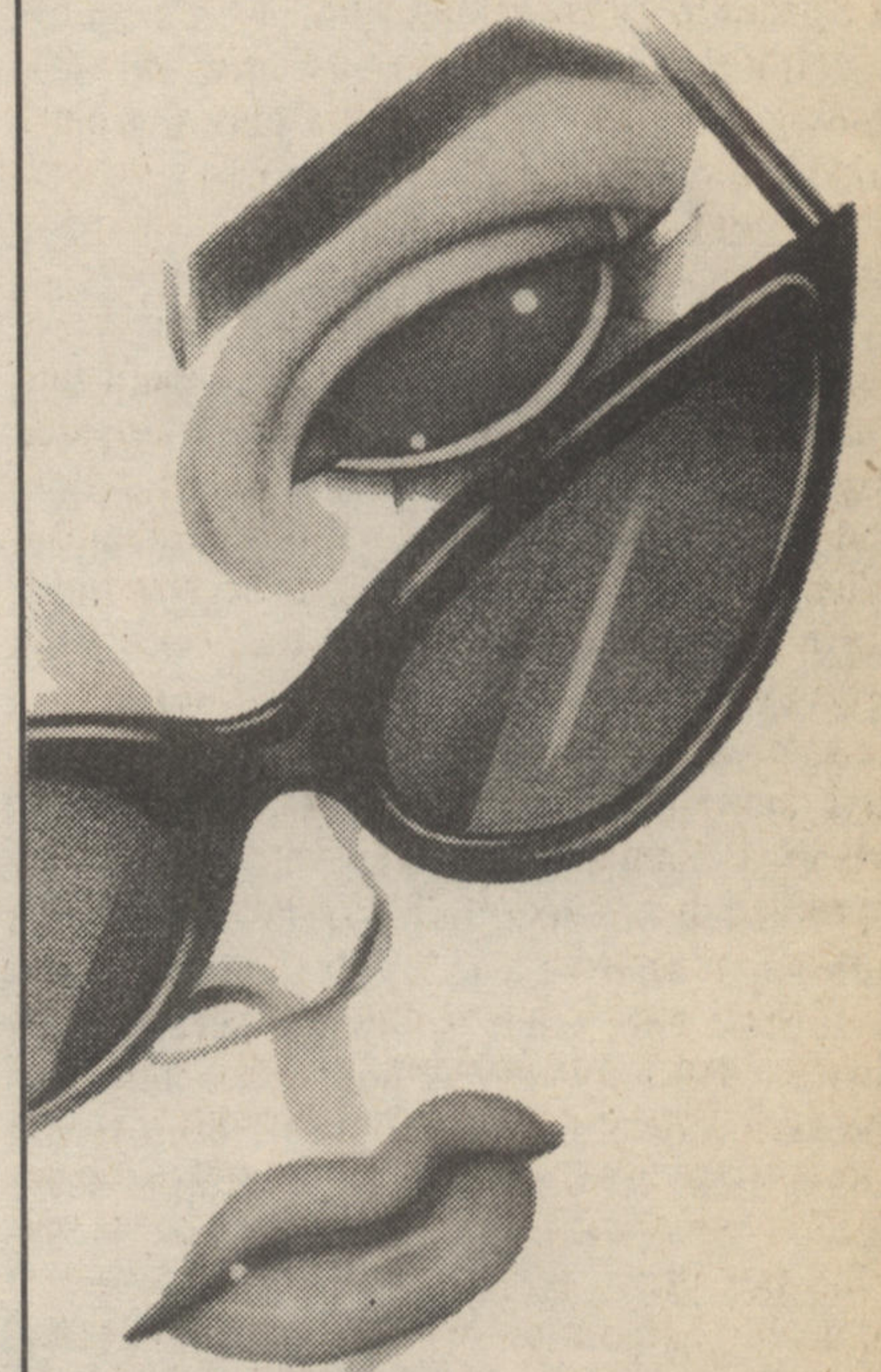
"It's after midnight!" Art bellowed. "I've been trying to get in there to go looking for you, I thought maybe you'd been hurt--I couldn't get in. Where the hell's Brady?"

"He was right--" I stopped. That was when I remembered; when it came to me what I'd done.

I reached into my jacket pocket and closed my hand around the bobber I'd taken off that old fishing creel. That I'd taken away from the junkyard.

Brady had only been able to get one thing

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out, just one at a time. His cue ball. Everything else had ...

Gone back.

Everything.

"He's--" my voice rose into a shriek.

Art grabbed my arms and shook me. "He's where? Where is he, Joanne? Is he still back in there, in the *dark*?"

"No." My knees gave out and I slumped down onto the road. "No, he's not in the dark, he's ..." I shook off Art's grasp, remembering what I'd seen; what I'd seen thrown away on top of all the junk that once had been Art's.

I'd taken out a stupid fishing bobber. And in exchange, Brady had stayed. Gone back. *Been kept.*

"Go get him!" I screamed, though Art was already headed for the florabunda, that virtually impenetrable fence of thorns that had grown up--not by accident, I knew now--around that place, that damned place. "Go back, all the way, keep going, into the junkyard, he's in there!" Cursing, Art backed away from the florabunda and I yelled, "Crawl! Crawl under it!" and he did.

That was six days ago.

I called the state police at 3 o'clock that morning, when it was evident that Art and Brady weren't going to come out on their own. God only knows how much time has passed inside, how long they've been trying to get back. The troopers showed up at dawn

with their special canine rescue squad and went into the woods in teams. They used chain saws on the florabunda.

They never found the junkyard. Fifty men and a dozen dogs went back and forth through those old woods for nearly a week and they never found a single junk car, let alone the vast, endless world of debris that I insisted was in there.

All they ever found, aside from poison ivy and a plague of deer ticks, was placed in my hand by the rescue team's captain, who by then was avoiding my eyes and speaking to me as though I weren't really there.

It was a little matchbox car, an old red one, with most of the paint chipped away. The captain said that one of his men had found it right near the road when they first cut through the florabunda. He asked me if it were Brady's and I said something incoherent and after a few minutes the captain excused himself and went back to his men.

They're still flying overhead with their search helicopter, but the trooper who interviewed me said that after a week, the teams would give up the active search and call it a missing persons case. "We'll proceed with a complete investigation, however," he said, and went on to ask me a lot of questions about Art and me, and my first husband, and other things. He was the one who finally called Brady's mother. She'll probably be here by morning.

That's why I stayed up all last night writing this. I'm going back into the woods, to the junkyard, to look for them myself. Somehow I don't think I'll have any trouble finding it again.

I can't imagine what *things* are coming to life out there, half-formed and mewling and pawing the air as the intentions of the living--or whatever we are to whatever we get rid of all our lives--coalesce, or intensify, or however it is that our creations come into being. I was on Art's trashpile, and I should have seen that coming, I suppose; what makes me sick is to think of the inchoate form that might have been out there somewhere in the discards of my own personal dungheap--was it small, and dark-eyed, and too often a bother; was I ever once aware, as Brady himself was so obviously aware, of how stupid we can be about what we concentrate on, how appallingly eager we are to throw one another way with both hands?

I'll leave these notes on the kitchen table, along with this damned wooden bobber, and the cue ball, and Brady's little red car. Three things, three people. Maybe it adds up, maybe it doesn't. Maybe it's bait, for all I know. Even if they're still alive, they may not be in a form that I recognize. The blue rabbit with the plastic face was a toy I had once, as a child, after all.



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SUSAN M. WATKINS



THS: First, maybe to start off it would be best if you could introduce yourself. Give us a little background about Susan M. Watkins.

WATKINS: Presently, I'm 44, live out in the country with four fat cats, my 19-year-old son, Sean, and my companion, Tom Dark, a rock n' roll musician. I grew up an only child in my grandfather's country-gentleman farmhouse in the hamlet of Webbs Mills, N.Y., south of Elmira, that supposedly fabled land of Mark Twain. My parents were an odd mix of utter wackiness and gruesome ordinariness, and I lived a typically sweet, ordinary American childhood of that time and place (the 50's, early 60's). Or at least on the outside, I did. Being alone most of the time means that you spend endless hours in self-meditation, and this I did. We had a large and eclectic library, of which I was free to pick anything I felt like to read, and I learned to read at age four-and-a-half. My mother often told me the story of how I wrote a 6th grade book report on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and she waited, cowering, by the phone, for days in anticipation of arrest by the local school board, though nobody ever complained. I remember only that I thought it was neat and creepy to be doing all that rolling around on the floor of a greenhouse. But the point is, I was free to think what I liked.

My mother claimed to be a communist and both parents gave even less of a damn about religion than they did about what their daughter might be grabbing off the shelves of the home reading room. So my environment was astonishingly unrepressed, in certain terms, as compared with that of my contemporaries who had religious notions of evil to contend with. This is what I consider the gift of my childhood -- freedom within myself to think absolutely anything. I started writing stories at the age of nine, and the first one was a horror story, too -- about a pet alligator that eats its rotten human owner. I had a pet alligator at the time. I never quite looked him in the eye again afterwards.

Anyway, to get on with it, I ended up a graduate of Syracuse University's journalism school and from there did newspaper work for a while, most memorably a stint on the *Martha's Vineyard Gazette* under the fine journalistic hand of Henry Beetle Hough, of the old school of compassionate, humanistic reporting. I did a long apprenticeship in

sending out stories to magazines with no success. In 1974 I became co-editor of the Dundee, N.Y., weekly *Observer*, and ran the thing with a woman friend, getting into all kinds of trouble with it. We won New York State Press Association Awards, too. I've lived around here ever since. I almost had a fantasy novel published in 1973, courtesy of Charles Platt, who was then science fiction editor at Avon. I'm glad it wasn't. It was titled, *The Mediumship of Zachary LaRue*, and it stunk.

THS: Even beyond your strong journalistic background, I know that you've also established yourself as an author of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in the more mainstream marketplace. Plus, you've had two non-fiction books (*Conversations With Seth* and *Dreaming Myself, Dreaming A Town*) published. I guess the question that comes quickest to mind is what was it that brought you to the horror genre?

WATKINS: I suppose it's safe to say, as with most writers of horror, that I was always in it, despite the mainstream work I've done. As a child, I had vivid, terrifying nightmare-type dreams and many, many dreams in which I was wide "awake"--the state loosely and somewhat idiotically referred to now days as "lucid dreaming." (In my opinion, all dreams are "lucid," just as being awake is always being awake, even when you're daydreaming, and people seem eager these days to look at so-called lucidity in dreams as a Badge of Consciousness, but I digress.) I also had many visions, I mean while awake, and other "paranormal" experiences, all of which I remember quite well. I saw my great-grandmother and talked with her after she died, for example -- this when I was three - that kind of thing, which isn't all that unusual, either, incidentally.

One of the more terrifying experiences I ever had was waking up in the night to hear stealthy footsteps coming up the stairs outside my half-closed bedroom door -- seeing the door swing open -- and seeing my boxer dog in the doorway, standing on his hind legs, dressed in a tuxedo with a human body. Whether I was "wake" or "asleep" didn't matter one little bitty bit, lemme tell you. I get the creeps right now, thinking about it. Then I had numerous dreams throughout my childhood and early teen years about our house turning into a stomach and trying to digest me, or the house turning into a werewolf and opening up its fang-filled mouth just as I'm trying to walk in the front door, or the house regurgitating a horde of mechanical rats that chase me down the driveway ... this all despite the fact that I loved the place; it was a beautiful house, and it's where the family cemetery is today. Nonetheless, when my parents died and I inherited the house, I sold it precisely because I could not bring myself to spend even one night inside it by myself.

So really, where else can you go from there but here? I've always written horror stories. I have desk drawers full of them, most of them amateurish attempts to scream out loud. I just plain love scaring the shit out of myself, as you can see. I never once thought of myself as a victim of any of these dreams, by the way. Horrified or not, I loved my dreams and my dream life. (*Heroes* was a dream I had last summer; I woke up from it crying.) Sometimes I have lengthy dream-conversations with "the Committee," as they call themselves; a group of people sitting around a table who discuss my experiences and give me advice on how to handle them.

Mostly, they say, "Write about it." Ain't the mind great?

THS: In that same vein, then, I found your short story, "Mole," to be

especially eerie. Did the inspiration for that one come from a dream?

WATKINS: No. One of my numerous ex-husbands was a third-generation dairy farmer and horse breeder, who ran one of the cleanest, most humane, most intelligent operations I saw in the entire six years we were together. He had a hundred cows and about twenty-five horses, all of them fat and healthy and kindhearted. I'm saying this to make plain that this was the best of the best, farming-wise. The local doctor prescribed Roy's raw milk to patients for medicinal purposes -- that's the kind of "best" I mean.

And every year, Roy would go out with a tractor and a five-hundred-gallon drum full of 2,4-D and spray the roadsides and the dairy barn foundations out of a fire hose "to make it neat." He'd drive up and down the main road blasting this stuff out in a swath that very quickly turned everything very, very dead. He told me that sometimes the birds would drop dead off the overhead phone wires when he did this -- and this was a "biodegradable herbicide?" He didn't seem to make any connection at all between cause and effect. I'm not blaming him in any way; this was part of a whole psychology of farming up until only very recently, and of course it still prevails. And as I slammed all the windows in the house shut and hid in the closet while he did this, I kept thinking, if Roy does this sort of thing on *his* farm, what in *hell* goes on everywhere else? I shoved the possibilities out of my head until the day I saw a cow have a "mole."

Yep, there really is such a thing -- only, of course, "moles," or fiber tumors, born to cows (and humans, too -- that's what Queen "Bloody" Mary gave birth to after eleven months, remember) don't whimper and move around. But I touched it, and it was warm, and Holstein black-and-white, just a lump, and I felt miserably sorry for it. It had a twin bull calf brother, too -- a great big fella. Twins interest me anyway, and my husband was a twin himself, which struck me as even *more* interesting, since there are all sorts of farm invectives about twins and their "usefulness." The story fell into my head just like that, plop, maybe like a "mole" itself, last spring. Sometimes stories take a while to get born, but that's where it came from. The hired man narrator of that story, and his boss, are directly taken from life. My husband's hired man was just such a sweet fellow, and his family the same.

Actually, I started that story out writing about mutant flowers growing from Australian seeds, which I'd received from a mail-order catalogue that morning. Halfway down the first page, the mole popped out of the Universe and landed in my mental lap. Maybe someday my ex will read it and quit with the 2,4-D already, if somebody doesn't ban the stuff first.

THS: *You've spoken of some personal fears in your childhood and in your dreams ... do you have any other personal fears which you hope to explore in your writing someday?*

WATKINS: Yes, yes, and yes. And I love to bring them out, too. When I want to write something scary, I wait until dark, turn all the lights in the house off except one by my computer, turn my back to the workroom door, think about how all the doors and windows are unlocked, and then I start typing. Of course the minute I make noise with the keyboard, things start to creep up on me from behind. EeeeeEEK! This is no joke to me at the time. I guess, like most writers, I just have a primitive mind.

When I moved into my present home in the summer of 1986, I spent weeks out here alone, six miles from any town, without any furniture, and no neighboring lights visible at all, unless you want to count those across the lake, ten miles away. I'd lived in the village of Dundee for thirteen years, and while isolation in the midst of town is one thing, complete isolation in the midst of complete isolation is another story altogether.

My only companion at the time was a pit bull terrier. Got that? A PIT BULL terrier. The first night we spent at the house, we both

crowded into my sleeping bag, listening to this ... *thing* ... that was SCREAMING out in the nearby creek gully. I'm not kidding. No dream. Screaming! And then howling. And then ... sort of ... sobbing. Later, I found out that this was a big dopey tom turkey yodeling his mating call, but when I noticed that my pit bull was peeing in fear and trying to crawl under the sofa, I figured that I was done for. Everything I'd ever whimpered over as a child in the night came rushing back. See, it wasn't the robbers and rapists stalking up the driveway that worried me. It was the Thing in the creek with nineteen eyes that would ooze through the screen and dissolved my screaming flesh that worried me. None of my friends quite get this. They think I must be putting them on. I'm not.

As a result, I started writing a scare novel about shape-changers -- with a twist, though I'm not telling -- called *The Lorenii*; shape-changers being the closest describable thing that I can put a name to in what scares me the most.

I'm presently writing a story that involves my mother's long, slow death from liver cancer, in 1985. Not that the death itself was much of a scare -- that prospect bothers me not at all, for myself -- but it was the nature of what she wanted from me during that time that was horrifying. I get cold fingers, literally, clacking it out on the processor. I think it's partly an exorcism, of course. One day she said to me, "My death is coming for me," though I don't think she even heard herself say it. That afternoon a flock of crows surrounded the house and marched around out there, *watching*. This is reflected in a poem I wrote for a chapter in my new book, *Dreaming Myself, Dreaming A Town*; it's about those eager, patient crows. *Jee-zus*.

Ecological disaster fascinates me, too; though that's more conventional in scare, I suppose. I either make it into a tale or I cry about it. The closest I ever came to suicide was when I heard the "news" on TV one day in 1980 that there were only five great blue whales left in the world's oceans. In a way, I suppose all this scare comes from my fundamental belief, which I do try to purge, that human beings are the scabs of the planet.

THS: *You previously mentioned that you were raised and have spent most of your life living in either a rural or a small-town setting. Does this background play a significant role in your writing? Is that where you feel most comfortable when creating?*

WATKINS: Oh, yes, the small-town background is part and parcel of my psychological make-up. I love the practical, shit-covered-overalls stance of people in small towns, even though it can be lonely living there if your purposes are elsewhere, as mine were. Still, I discovered during the beginnings of *DM,DT* that I wanted my work to mean something to the people-people of the world, and I wanted affirmation from those around me who knew the taste and feel of dirt and sweat. I think that's Stephen King's great gift, of course; and it's why he *connects* with so many people even when his writing bloats, as it has in his later work. He really captures small-town America as nobody else has, and I mean writers in *all* fields, ever.

And really, small towns are all I know. I'm not sophisticated or big-time in any manner of speaking; I'm really quite a hick myself in a lot of ways. I've never hung around "real" writers, such as the Breadloaf community might offer, and I suppose it might do my writing some good if I did. I'd rather not. Writers mostly bore me when they talk among themselves, I'm afraid. This isn't exactly something I'm proud of. Still, I respect people who can fix tractors far more than people who snoot around about "lit-er-ah-tyoor." I have much the same opinion about high priests of the "new age." I mean, gag me with a spoon.

THS: *Now that you've brought up the work of Stephen King, I'm curious to know if your own work has been influenced by the leaders of the horror field, writers like Stephen King or Dean R. Koontz or Robert*

R. McCammon? Or have you been influenced mostly from other directions?

WATKINS: From a very early age, I read and re-read the Greats of science fiction and fantasy almost to the exclusion of everything else, the main exception being *Pogo*. I clearly remember running across the Lewis Padgett story, "Mimsy Were The Borogoves," and feeling the physical sensation of about five-thousand doors opening up inside my brain. There was another story, "Star Bright," whose author I can't recall, that involves a young girl's discovery of the Mobius strip, which I'd discovered myself, alone in my room one day, when I was six. The notions of parallel worlds in these stories -- probable universes -- especially set me on fire. Arthur C. Clark gave me the equivalent of an LSD trip with *Childhood's End*, which I ran across in college. Vonnegut was also a big influence, particularly with his early *Cat's Cradle*. These days, I re-read Straub's *Ghost Story*, one of the greatest scare books ever written, about once a year; along with King's *The Stand* and Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House*, which still makes me sweat. I'm not that big a fan of slash-and-gore horror, though my favorite movie is John Carpenter's *The Thing*; and *Salem's Lot* kept my bedroom lights on for weeks. If I ever write a piece of scare work as fine as Shirley Jackson's stuff, I'll die with a smile on my kisser, and elsewhere.

I have to say that the biggest influences on my actual writing -- I mean, outside of the aforementioned influences on my already-thing-oriented psyche -- came from my friend Jane Roberts and her lifetime body of work, which can be loosely labeled as the Seth material. Jane gave my peculiar notions a framework, and her intellectual adroitness in exploring the psyche certainly gave my dream life its first forum. She was the first one who ever said to me that I "really had IT" as far as writing went; she told me to work my ass off and get to it. And so I did.

I always felt that I had two sets of parents -- my biological parents; and Jane and her husband Rob Butts, who were my parents-of-creative

endeavors. Beyond all of that, and my declarations about literature to the contrary, I was greatly influenced by the works of the late John Gardner. He was my teacher of metaphor. I was always a bit miffed that the only time I met him, not long before his death in 1982, he made some wonderful, extremely revelatory remarks about a piece of my fiction but remembered me for the mesembryanthemums I was growing on the window sill.

THS: *Do you read much horror?*

WATKINS: No, I'm ashamed to say, not all that much. I do always grab the horror anthologies out of the library -- Charles Grant is a big favorite in the Watkins Glen area -- and I read those, but until I discovered *The Horror Show*, I didn't read much contemporary straight horror. I think if I had, I wouldn't have written the stories I've done lately -- I would have been discouraged by the sense that I wasn't very original, seeing all the wonderful stuff that's out there.

I usually read myself to sleep with the Thompson and Morgan seed catalogue.

THS: *I'm curious, since most of the writers I come in contact with have been raised on horror, and here you are, fresh from outside the field ... so, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the horror genre? What do you like most about it. And least?*

WATKINS: What I like least about the genre I'll just say first off: There is far too much dit-wit writing in it. And I'm talking about the Greats, who seem to have become infected with self-congratulatory Ho Hum. The last story I read by a Very, Very Great in the field sounded as though he'd snorted 159 grams of Hoot and then whacked off via the typewriter without benefit of an editor. And it made me really mad; we all deserve better, and so does the genre. Also, though this is mostly true of the straight science fiction world, there is too much in-reference and name-dropping. If I read one more column by a Famous Sci-Fi Writer that's made up of first-name kudos for all of His Friends, I'm

*Some thought he was an angel,
but there was no escaping the power ...
the bloodshed ...
the horror.*

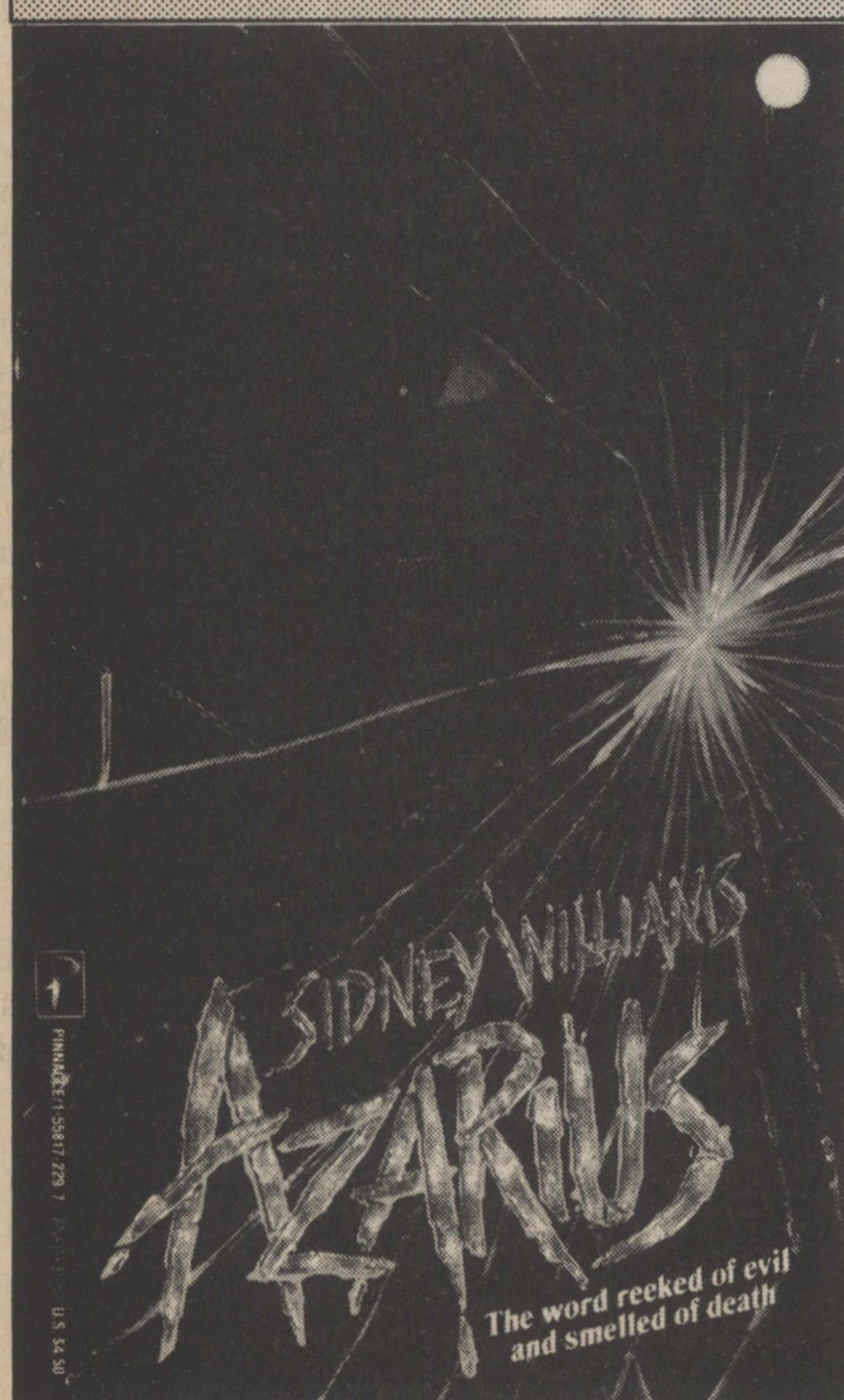
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going to scream and jump in the trash compactor.

In that vein, it seems to me there's also too much going back and forth over the same old bodies, though god knows I'm as guilty of *that* as anyone. Sometimes *feelings* resist new metaphors. If the writing's good, old subjects turn brand-new.

What I like most about it is something you do NOT get in any other area of contemporary fiction -- again, here I'm sort of lumping horror, fantasy, and science fiction together -- and which you never have been able to find there, in my opinion: *Unfettered idea options*. Within the genre, you are not bound by stuffy old notions of what's possible; no professor of Creative Writing is going to pronounce your weird, fantastic ideas too "turgid" or "low" for Real People to read. Guts and night sweats and terrors don't need to be presented in a cleaned-up version of the "true" events. Like my friends who tend to barnyards, one's ideas can have manures all over their pants here and still be allowed in the restaurant at lunch time. Unhappily, mainstream science fiction has mostly lost this edge. Horror is coming into its own because science fiction has gotten so goddamn stale.

I discovered Dean Koontz two years ago and I still haven't managed to find everything he's written. What a thrill *his* work is!

THS: *On a bit of a different note, then, what kinds of works can we expect to see from you in the future? Both in and out of the genre.*

WATKINS: Well, as I said, I'm scaring the crap out of myself with this novel I'm working on. I'm also putting together another non-fiction book on dreams, which is on a much more intimate level than *DM,DT*. It's called *The Years of Dreaming Dangerously: Reckless Journeys Through A Safe Universe*. It's a day-by-day picky look at how dreams and awake-world events are permeated with the natural glue of precognition, a theme that I believe is unique to me, in the way I treat it -- with common sense, but without "scientific" proselytizing, either.

I'm also working in fits and starts on a very long horror-fantasy novel that springs from my years on the Dundee newspaper; the two main characters are women running a small-town press. Also, I'm planning a two-narrative fantasy novel about probably worlds with a very talented writer friend, Barbara Coultry, who was my roommate in college. We're going to hash that one out this July when we escape all distraction of the real world and flee to her family's camp in the Adirondacks.

And more stories for the horror market, I hope. It gives me great pleasure, incidentally, to tell certain "new age" types that I write horror stories. It scandalizes the hell out of 'em -- it's such an *unenlightened* thing to do, you see.

THS: *I want to switch gears on you one more time. I'd like to know what was the best advice you ever received in relation to writing. Have you been able to apply it?*

WATKINS: The best advice I ever received about writing came from Richard Bach, then of *Jonathan Living Seagull* fame. I ran into him in Jane Roberts' ESP class in Elmira, in 1972. My apartment had just been wiped out by the Great Flood that June and I was in a big fitz about whether or not to quit my type-setting job and actually "be" a writer. Richard listened to a few minutes of my whining and said, "Don't hassle it -- when the time comes to quit and go out on your own, you'll know it -- because you will have done it. And until then, it won't be the right time. But be true to what you love, because if you are, it will take care of you -- because that is the nature of love." Yeah, I quite my job -- the next day (the place was a flood-mud-smelly mess, anyway). And it *was* the right time. And it *did* take care of me. How it is that Bach went on to write the drivel he's produced since then is beyond me. Oh, well.

Anyway, the bit about being "true" to my love of writing has always been with me. It's like a continuous, reassuring impulse that un-

derlies everything I do. It's saved my beleaguered writer's fanny more than once from giving up, in the years when I was so broke it was a daily choice with pennies between coffee and kitty litter. And you know which comes first when *that* happens.

THS: *This is something I'd like to have each of the writers in this issue address: would you please develop your own question, ask it of yourself, and answer it here?*

WATKINS: Um, developing my own question for myself. Gee, and I was having so much fun letting you do it!

Well, I've had to interview writers in the past for my newspaper and such, and I have quite a few writer and/or artist friends, not to mention Tom, who's a rock and roll musician and composer as well as a fine writer-about-dreams himself. And I don't know, it seems a common theme running among people who seriously pursue writing is that they'll spontaneously combust if they don't -- that they are simply driven stark raving mad if they don't. I've tried too many times to be a, gag, "housewife," or whatever, "instead," just because it might seem respectable or practical -- this being a tricky setup you can fall into in small towns, I think, more than other places; it's a drawback, though not without its education. And trying to deny your characteristics is a curse that humans have granted themselves with their particular type of consciousness -- different from the animals, say, whose creativity *seems* invisible. So I guess my question is something about how come, when writing (to speak in terms of this metaphor, though this is more universal a thing than one profession) brings such complete ecstasy, such joy and wonder, such absolute connection with one's understanding of purpose -- then how come most of us fight with it for so much of our lives?

And having come up with that, I have to say that I don't have an answer, at least not in black-and-white terms. I suppose anyone with any modicum of sensitivity must wrestle at some point with the feeling that human beings are pretty scummy characters, so why try? Yet I also believe that only by letting go, and leaping unarmed into that good old joyous void of creative wonder, can any one of us begin to write new messages on the genetic code of experience. I wrote the junkpile story gripped by the fear that one day I'd look back on everything I'd ever done and regret all of it, everything; and that I'd see what a mess I'd made of things, and want to die for good, forfeit my soul, like the bad guys in the two-dimensional glass from *Superman II*. The things that keep me from coming to that point is the rush of joy I get from what I do best. Within that, scaring you and me both half out of our wits is the most fun I have with *or* without my clothes on. Any cultural rules about what we *should* be doing or thinking are the real horrors, after all.

THS: *Seems like such a shame to have to end here, but I think that covers most everything I had hoped you'd address. Any parting comments?*

WATKINS: Just that I'd like to say how pleased and grateful I am to have this Rising Stars issue of *The Horror Show* spotlight me with such regard. David Silva and his readers have given me a kind of recognition that is very precious to me, and which I will never take for granted. I promise. Thank you. And thanks to Tom, who typed this patiently.

She was kneeling at the edge of the bushes with a trowel and seven bags of early season tulip bulbs and John Fitzgerald Kennedy was coming at her from the other side of her own house.

HEROES

SUSAN M. WATKINS

At first, Eileen didn't recognize JFK at all. Oh, sure, he had the same wind-shocked hair and those Irish good looks, but Eileen, after all, had not been expecting him to step around the corner of her house in his pin-striped suit and tie and come striding towards her down the flagstone sidewalk. For a long moment Eileen thought he must be one of those damn Jehovah's Witnesses--who else would be wearing a business suit out in her yard, six miles outside of town?--when it suddenly came to her who it was.

His nose is bigger than it looks in photos, was Eileen's first thought. Then shock waves went through her guts and skin, paralyzing her. She was kneeling at the edge of the bushes with a trowel and seven bags of early season tulip bulbs and John Fitzgerald Kennedy was coming at her from the other side of her own house.

She felt, rather than heard, the high whine escaping from her nose and throat. He was almost on her now, his footsteps thumping smartly on the flat shale rocks. Helplessly, she thought of that scene in *The Right Stuff*, of him knighting the astronauts--no, not knighting them--he'd dropped the medal and said something clever--she couldn't remember what the word was. She strained to cringe back into the evergreens, but her body wouldn't move.

He was ten feet away, seven, six. She saw that his eyes were fixed on a point somewhere beyond the end of the garage, off into the woods that stood between the house and the country dirt road. He wasn't looking at her at all. Swiftly, his footsteps carried him right past her and onto the wooden steps that led down to the driveway.

Eileen twisted on her kneecaps, staring up at his face, then the back of his head. He trotted nimbly down the steps and disappeared around the front of the garage. She stayed rigid in her crouch, knees grinding into the flagstone grit. The back of his head ...

The back of his head was missing.

Well, doesn't that stand to reason? she heard herself thinking. After all, that's how he ...

Twenty-five years ago last ...

She heard footsteps thudding back at the



far corner of the house, getting louder by the second.

This time, she managed to shove herself back into the bushes against the raised foundation wall. Branches of juniper snapped off and dug through her Oshkosh jeans into her backside, but she kept pistoning her feet against the ground until she had pushed herself right over one bush and into the line of crushed cinders next to the wall. She was gasping open-mouthed, her breath coming like sobs, when Kennedy walked by her the second time and down the steps, his footsteps jaunty and purposeful. He hadn't noticed her legs, gone rigid with fear, sticking across the bare dirt in front of the bushes, or the ridiculous bright green plastic gardening clogs she wore over gray tube socks, or even the fact that she was there at all.

But then ...

The whole back of his *skull* was missing.

But it was worse than that. Worse than a mess of brains leaking out of a bullet hole would have been. Worse than blood gushing out, or hunks of skull hanging by threads of skin, or a shattered pulp of meat and seeds, or ...

Stop it.

There'd been nothing at all. Nothing but a gaping black hole.

She'd just caught a glimpse, just a fleeting second's fraction of it, before he'd gone *thut-thut thut-thut* down the wooden steps; but that was plenty. It had been like staring into the kind of dark where you know there's no hope of light, like being shut inside a closet, or an old freezer, or (*don't*) waking up inside your own coffin and staring into the dark until ...

There was an unnatural silence in the yard; not even the jays were screeching, and his footsteps were moving along the opposite side of the house, about to come around a third time.

She exploded out of the bushes in a panic-fueled plunge that landed her flat on her face in the grass beyond the flagstones, her cheek skidding hard and all of her weight jammed into her neck and shoulders. Her legs were working frantically, of their own mind, trying to run, to push her upright and get away. She heard herself squealing and grunting uncontrollably into the grass. Somehow, her arms wouldn't work right; the

tough, leaf-littered lawn was scouring her face, and her ears seemed filled with blood.

Suddenly, her body found its unity and she scrambled upright, running for the back door. He'd be walking past any second now, any *second*. She ripped the door open and jumped into the foyer, slamming the solid inside door shut behind her. For an instant she feared that he'd see the screen door swaying closed in its slow arc and come in after her; but then, he hadn't reacted to her when she'd been in full view. Maybe he was blind, she thought frantically; maybe he wasn't even real; maybe she'd just imagined ...

Footsteps clicked by on the walk.

Her knees collapsed. She sat down hard on the carpet, which was now tracked up with garden dirt and grass from her own shoes. As if from far away, she noticed the trowel in the grip of her right hand, which was badly scraped and pocked with cinders. She held up her other hand and looked at the palm. A juniper splinter had plunged down into the pad at the base of her thumb, running toward her wrist like a dark pointing finger. Cinders and dirt had raked her flesh. She was still panting hard through her mouth, and inside her skull was a high keening sound like singing wire.

That wasn't all. Now that she was inside the house, Eileen could hear his footsteps out front, too. He'd already passed the sliding glass doors and was thumping across the lawn underneath the bedroom windows. He was *circling*. He was *circling the house*.

She forced herself to her feet and up the stairs. Cliff was in his office, trudging through his company's quarterly Estimateds. He'd been in a foul mood for weeks. Things weren't going so hot at the old tractor parts store, that was for sure; but Eileen could not remember a time in their seven-year marriage when things had ever gone well, in her husband's opinion. Right then, however, she didn't care how busy he was. She barged into his office without knocking, slamming the door back against the wall. A framed Certificate of Merit from the Allis-Chalmers Corporation, commemorating Cliff as Supplier of the Year 1982, crashed to the floor and broke, tinkling glass shards across the rug.

Down below, footsteps thunked past under the half-open office window.

"Cliff--"

"Eileen, what the--" He stared at her, jumped up from his desk chair. "What *happened*? Did you fall--" He stared at her torn, filthy clothes and the trowel, clods of loam still stuck to it, in his wife's hand. "Did you fall off the stepladder? What?"

"No, I--I had to get away ... I had to get ... it's ..."

She looked down at herself. Her jeans

leg was ripped open and she could see scraped, bleeding skin in there--her thigh was bleeding. All at one, she was beginning to hurt. "Listen!" she hissed, pointing to the window behind his desk.

"What?" Cliff said. "Listen to what? What the hell happened?"

"Shh!" Eileen pointed insistently, scowling at him. "Listen! Did you hear it?"

"Listen to--hear what? What's the matter?" He reached out and grabbed her wrist. "My god, woman, look at this splinter! What have you--Christ almighty, Eileen! You're a mess!" He stepped away from her, gesturing down at the carpet. "You've made a hell of a mess of yourself *and* the rug."

Eileen backed guiltily out of the office. "Never mind, I'll clean it up, forget it. I just--fell down." She waited, listening, but the footsteps didn't return. "I guess he--" She looked at her husband. "--left."

"Who left? Was someone here? Did somebody hurt you?"

"No," Eileen said. "Nobody hurt me."

"Well, what happened?" Cliff repeated. "Come on, Eileen, what's going on here? What the hell did you do to yourself?"

"I'm sorry," Eileen mumbled, turning away. "Really, I'm okay. I just fell down. I'll clean up the mess."

"Well ..." He followed her down the hallway to the bathroom, picking up twigs and dirt clods from the rug. "You'd better take your shoes off," he said. "You're tracking all over the place." She could see that his mind was already back on his business. He wasn't even going to press her about who'd been outside.

Which was just as well.

She sat on the edge of the tub for half an hour, picking the splinter into jagged bloody pieces with tweezers and a hatpin she'd found in the old sewing cabinet that had been her mother's. When she'd dug out all the woody matter she could stand to touch, she doused the wound with hydrogen peroxide and drew herself a hot bath. Later, dressed in clean tee shirt and bluejeans (the only other pants she owned, besides the now-ruined coveralls, that fit without sawing her in half), she went over the rug with a carpet sweeper. She didn't want to turn on the vacuum cleaner and drown out any sound that might sneak up on her from outside, any sound at all. So far, though, there hadn't been any, not since she'd come inside the house.

Not since she'd tried to get Cliff to hear it.

She thought carefully about that fact. She was fairly sure she hadn't gone crazy unbeknownst even to herself, but facts was facts, she mused. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th and dead President of the United States, had come out of nowhere and had been walking

around and around her house. She'd seen him with her own eyes, and that was a fact. It was also patently insane to think so, and that was a fact.

Maybe she'd been dreaming, or having hallucinations. Except that the splinter and those scrapes weren't any dream. She'd never taken drugs in her life and she was perfectly healthy, if a bit tubby. Well, more than a bit. But that was another kettle of fish. The fact also was that she knew her own mind. She did not surprise herself with ghosts and goulies.

Somebody was playing a joke on her.

Zick-zuck, zick-zuck. The carpet sweeper ticked back and forth over the rug. That was it, of course. Someone was playing an elaborate, crazy joke. Just who that might be was a mystery, but it was the only logical solution. It certainly wouldn't be Cliff. A silo had a better sense of humor than Cliff did. He certainly wouldn't go to all the trouble of getting somebody who looked like JFK to walk around and around the house just to scare the hell out of her. So who would? And why Kennedy? He was long gone, an artifact of history. Eileen had been nineteen years old when Kennedy was shot, all those lost years ago in college. Sure, she could remember the time and place when she'd heard about the assassination; who couldn't? She'd been walking up the long set of stairs toward her dormitory when she saw another girl, someone she vaguely recognized, walking downhill toward her, carrying a radio. Eileen had heard the announcer's words clear as sunlight; and the smell of the pine trees along the walkway had suddenly thickened and filled the air, and the other girl had turned and looked at her and said, "Thy Will be done," though Eileen didn't have any idea what the girl was talking about. Later, Eileen and her roommates had started crying about it, without knowing they were going to do so, standing together in the communal bathroom where the cold green tile was the color of surgical gowns and all of them were far away from home.

Well, who cared about it now--it all meant damn little in the scheme of things over the years, didn't it?

Zick, zuck. So if this was a joke, who was at the bottom of it? Hardly her college-days friends, who were just occasional pen-pals now, scattered across time and tide, as she was. And who in this workaday farm region would bother? Nobody. She knew that the neighbors saw her as the fat, spoiled wife of the farm supply store manager, living up there on the hill in the fancy new split-level with the three-car garage. They should only know. She hadn't, after all, developed her gardening hobby because the rest of her life was so damn fascinating. Cliff didn't care



if she ripped up all ten acres of land with a team of mules and planted skunk cabbages--as long as she kept out of his hair while he poured over business matters late at night and weekends.

Late at night and weekends.

Eileen felt sick to her stomach.

What if *it* came back while Cliff was gone? While she was alone? Or the next time she went outside? She was *not* crazy. She had seen ... something.

She stopped her sweeping and contemplated Cliff's closed office door. She imagined walking in there again and telling her husband that she'd seen John F. Kennedy walking around outside their house. She imagined the look he'd give her.

She imagined that she might as well keep her mouth shut.

Eileen carried the carpet sweeper downstairs and flumphed down on the living room sofa, forced herself not to start crying over nothing. What she wanted right now was something to eat. Maybe some ice cream, or the rest of that bag of candy corn she'd hidden behind the cereal boxes. She could hear Cliff's computer printer grinding away, running off interminable reams of

financial statements. He'd be in there until the wee hours, working and worrying.

It was then that she saw the face in the front window. A glimpse, really, just at the edge of her vision; a face peering into her house and ducking back out of sight the instant she spotted it.

Worse, even as she flinched with shock, her heart whamming against her ribs, she realized the face had *registered*. It was familiar.

It was ...

No, it wasn't. Probably it was one of the Elgin kids from up the road, come to sell her another batch of Christmas cards or something.

Upstairs, the computer printer grated back and forth; she could hear Cliff tearing the pages loose and pulling the perforated edges off; all noises of the solid, practical world.

Therefore, it must be the Elgin kids outside.

She got up and went over to the sliding glass doors, shoved them open, and stepped out onto the front patio.

Kennedy was standing six feet away, in front of the wood pile, facing her, his hands folded in a gesture of simple repose. His eyes were as wide and blank as a doll's.

A breeze riffled up from the woodlot and fluffed his brocaded tie. And then he blinked, once, and looked directly at her.

"Hello, Eileen," he said, and Eileen's only thought, unbidden and alien in its unbearable sweetness, was that she, too, had been remembered through all of these long years.

Then, slowly, he turned his back to her, his hand still folded in that quintessential statesman's pose.

"Look," he said to her. "Here we are."

Eileen looked.

The inside of his head was filled with stars.

Cliff took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd been at this for hours; his desk clock said 10:30 already. He decided to call it quits for the night and go see what sort of boiled potato mess his wife had put together for dinner this time. God, how he hated her cooking. All you had to do was look at her and see what was wrong with it--bland and fat and slopped up with gravy. He shut off his computer, headed for the office door. At least he worked hard enough to keep the stuff off his waistline, but Eileen was lazier than--

He stopped dead in his tracks, the door half open.

The house was in complete darkness. His office could have been floating in the vastness of space, so stark was the contrast between its bright pool of yellow light and the looming black wall outside his door.

"What?" he called out, though he knew

he'd heard only silence. "Eileen, where are you?" He fumbled for the wall switch, found it; the hallway leaped into place, looking oddly shabby and flat, like a B-movie backdrop. Well, maybe she'd fallen asleep early. It certainly wouldn't be the first time. Being married to Eileen was all around about as exciting as being married to a piece of furniture.

He realized that he was easing his feet down on the carpet with a sniper's care.

"Eileen." His voice sank dully into the wallpaper. How many hours ago had she come into his office, all scraped up and bleeding? He wasn't sure. Maybe she'd really hurt herself. "Aw, jeeze, Eileen," he said aloud. He went into their bedroom and turned on the vanity lamp. She wasn't there.

He hurried downstairs, turning lights on ahead of himself. The old-fashioned carpet sweeper was leaning up against the sofa arm, mute and composed. The glass door was wide open. A small flock of leaves had scuttled inside, where it rustled in dry whispers.

"Eileen?" Cliff asked. He walked to the doors and switched on the patio floodlights. Suddenly illuminated, each object stood by itself, rooted and waiting. He stepped outside.

"Eileen?" he called again, softly, though he knew she was gone. "Hey, Eileen, where are you?"

Footsteps crunched across the driveway, off to his left.

"Oh, there you are," Cliff said, his voice small and tight, and then Marilyn Monroe stepped around the corner of the house, into the circle of light, her hips swaying against the red sequined sheath that hid nothing of her, nothing at all.

"You--" was all that Cliff said.

Marilyn smiled, her eyes half-closed, soft and inviting and utterly blank. "Hello, Cliff," she said. "We've come back now. All of us." Her lips parted, full and moist and red with desire.

"Look," she whispered. Against his will, he looked.

He went to her, then, as unable to stop himself as if he were clouds running before the moon. She opened her arms to guide him.

Why, I have entered a sea of stars, he thought, as he plunged headlong into darkness. *At last, I am swimming in a sea of stars.*

Much later, toward morning, a cadre of field mice discovered the open patio door. The only human sounds, now, were far off on the wind, numberless footsteps moving east along the twilight road, heading for the distant heartsore cities.



The Black List

CHARLES de LINT

DEAD LINES

John Skipp & Craig Spector
(Bantam, January 1988, 309 pages, \$3.95)

The bad boys of splatterpunk are back with yet another offering--their fourth novel, though it isn't strictly a novel as much of it is made of short stories, some previously published (though not credited as such), some new. But nor is it the usual "cobbled-together" sort of a novel one might expect from this kind of a thing since there's a strong overall storyline and the short pieces--presented as works by an author who is one of the characters--serve as far more than filler.

In fact, if you're unfamiliar with either of these gentlemen's work, and not sure you like this "to the limits" stuff anyway, might I still recommend that you read "Not With A Whimper" and "Gentlemen"--easily two of the finest stories I read last year in their initial appearances (though, as I write this, I can't for the life of me remember where exactly it was that I read them). They're both cases of the authors reining in the excesses somewhat--well, maybe not completely in "Gentlemen"--in lieu of some very moving material. And ditto goes for "Got To Sleep."

Yeah, yeah, I hear you saying. But what about the book itself?

Okay. It opens with a disillusioned author killing himself. The women that end up sharing the apartment where the nasty deed took place start having these nightmares and ...

I know this sounds facile, but you really do have to read the book, to appreciate how it was all put together. There's still some sloppy prose (a complaint I've had with all of their books), but the short stories included are very tight, and if the cuts between them and the main narrative get a little disjointed--it's that kind of a storyline. The staccato, "what's really real" aspect, in this case, is integral to the plot.

"PLACEBO"

Andrew Vachss
(*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, March 1989, 4 pages, \$2.00)

From time to time I'm going to point my finger at some out-of-genre material that I think is worth your time. The Vachss story here is real short, but it serves as an interesting little introduction to a man who's been producing some of the finest hard-boiled, and horrific, mystery fiction in awhile, of which I'd particularly recommend the first, *Flood*.

Paranoia runs deep, as they say, in his principle character Burke, and the New York City that Vachss shows us is as weird and alien as any made-up civilization in the sf/fantasy genre. Maybe weirder.

And this short-short is a real powerhouse. Although Burke isn't mentioned by name, it's obviously a slice from his past as he goes about helping a five-year-old retarded boy deal with his night fears. If you don't want to shell out the \$2.00, at least give this a try at your local library.

(They do carry *Ellery Queen*, don't they?)

FADE

Robert Cormier
(*Delacorte Press*, September 1988, 310 pages, \$15.95 hardcover)

Robert Cormier, author of *I Am The Cheese* and *The Chocolate War* has turned to adult concerns with his latest novel, *Fade*. It's a reworking of the "Invisible Man" theme, a reworking that, happily, is as fresh as the classic idea that it uses as it's springboard was when it first appeared.

The Moreaux family has a gift--or a curse, if you will--that's passed on from uncle to nephew: the ability to become invisible, to *fade*. The major drawback of this ability is that it not only uses up one's life more

quickly, but it wakes a whispering voice inside the fader that eggs him on to commit increasingly vicious acts. And the fade itself can't always be controlled.

Paul Moreaux, the young French Canadian boy whom we watch grow up in the first half of the book, has to learn to deal with this--and also with the responsibility of educating the next in line who's cursed to become fader. If he can find him.

What makes the book so outstanding, isn't just the marvel of the fade, but rather a combination of it and the otherwise very realistic story of a poor boy in the depression, growing up with the dream of becoming a writer. Cormier has a gift for character, for pacing--and for continually surprising the reader. Because of this, *Fade* slips back and forth between a novel that has both a kind of Mark Twain warmth and eye for detail, and the best aspects of a thriller.

But Cormier's handling of the fade is fascinating--especially in the ambiguity he lends to the ability. For, interspersed with Moreaux's story are sections from other characters' points of view, characters who are able to prove quite conclusively, it would seem, that the fade is merely a figment of Moreaux's highly-charged imagination.

Was it real? Readers are left to decide that for themselves in a manner that leaves one questioning realities, rather than feeling that the author has merely taken the easy route out.

Fade is a superb novel that starts out fascinating and then turns mighty grim. And, dare I say it, it's destined to become a classic.

EDEN'S EYES

Sean Costello
(*Pocket Books*, 278 pages, \$3.95, paperback)

Pardon a touch of Canadian chauvinism here, but I feel that among the few genre writers



ing scene in the book, the one that lasts longest in the mind, is when the donor's organs are first being harvested. This simple hospital scene, complete with the morbid speculations of the anesthetist on duty, is easily one of the most powerful--horrific and thought-provoking--that I've read in a very long time.

Don't miss this terrific debut.

NIGHTEYES

Garfield Reeves-Stevens
(*Foundation*, April 1989, 432 pages, \$18.95 hardcover)

And speaking of Canadian horror authors, Garfield Reeves-Stevens, he of *Bloodshift* and *Children of the Shroud* fame, has a fascinating new novel just out that's part horror, part science-fiction, and all thriller.

Ever since John Fuller wrote up the story of Barney and Betty Hill in his classic *The Interrupted Journey* (1966), the idea of UFO abductions has captured the imagination of the reading public. So much so that *Communion* by Whitley Streiber, a recent "non-fiction" account of the author's own similar experience, went straight onto the bestseller lists upon publication.

It's not difficult to understand why. Tales of these kinds of abductions can be traced all the way back to folktales of mortals who strayed, or were taken away, into Faerie and seem to point to something that fascinates us all, believers and non-believers alike: the possibility that we are not alone.

Reeves-Stevens has made this fascination the central theme of his new novel *Nighteyes* and played it out to its end, explaining not only the reason behind the abductions, but giving plausible reasons for everything from fairies to the monsters children fear are living in their closets.

And happily, he does it in a fictional sense, so that we can enjoy his extrapolations as an intellectual exercise, without letting their implausibilities get in the way of our appreciation of his suspenseful storyline. For this is a thriller--make no bones about it; a taut interplay between the victims who have been continually abducted since childhood, the covert activities of various U.S. government agencies, and of course the creatures themselves.

The only weakness the novel has is in its explanation as to what the creatures are and the reason for their existence--but this isn't Reeves-Stevens' fault. It's inherent in the material itself, because no matter what explanation he could have come up with, it wouldn't have been able to match the promise offered by the mystery before it is solved.

We don't get truths here, just speculations and a roller-coaster of a ride--but they're both still well-worth the price of admission. Is it horror or science fiction? Who cares, so long as it's a good read.

LIFEBLOOD

Lee Duigon
(*Pinnacle*, May 1988, 432 pages, \$3.95 paperback)

Lee Duigon's first novel came out last summer, but it's still worth my pointing it out to you and your tracking it down even though, uh-huh, it's another one of them there vampire novels.

Do we need any more of them? Probably not. But Duigon has come up with some nice twists on the old tried and true material. As Garfield Reeves-Stevens (yeah, him again) did in his *Bloodshift* (Virgo Press, 1981), Duigon posits some well-considered, logical explanations behind the folklore that has grown up around the creatures, and his vampire is as matter-of-fact a blood-sucker as you're likely to meet--and not a pleasant individual at all. No psychoanalyzing here, thanks.

But its the supporting cast that makes this book sing. The police chief of the little yuppie township of Millboro, the retired school teacher who likes to pry into the lives of his neighbors just to satisfy his own curiosity, the vampire's matronly companion who has to keep nagging our villain into cleaning up his act and seriously start killing off their enemies instead of experimenting with them ...

The quality of the prose slips here and there, in other places the plot could have been tightened some, but mostly *Lifeblood* just cooks along quite nicely. Even the most jaded of readers should have some fun with it and that's a lot more than you can say about ninety percent of this stuff.

Duigon appears to have a bright future, if this book's any indication--one that will be worth our keeping our eyes on.

BEYOND THE OCCULT

Colin Wilson
(*Bantam*, 1988, 381 pages, UK hardcover)

A question I often get asked is: where do I go to find decent research sources (like there was no such thing as a public library--but let's not get to catty, here).

For specific books, one can often point to certain resources that were utilized, but there's also the general research that one does on an ongoing basis that sit there in the back

that we have, there are some who would do any country proud. We've got Vancouver's William Gibson for sf, and Toronto's Guy Gavrial Kay for high fantasy, and now we've got Sudbury's Sean Costello for horror.

Karen Lockhart has been blind since birth. But now, with new medical techniques, she has become the first Canadian recipient of an eye transplant operation. Suddenly she can see and her world is filled with new wonders. Unfortunately--hey, this *is* a thriller--the donor of those same eyes was one weird monster of a human being. About the only good thing he did in life was get himself killed in a barroom brawl because then his harvested organs could make a few peoples' lives better.

But what if he wanted those organs back? We start to find out as doctors involved in the case, and then the donor recipients, begin to be stalked ...

That's all I'm going to give you of the plot, except I'll add that nothing is exactly what it seems in this near-future thriller.

A practicing anesthetist, Costello sets his first novel firmly in the medical field--but this isn't Robin Cook country. Costello has a way with words that literally keeps one riveted to his book from the first page of *Eden's Eyes* and a sense of character that would do a far more experienced author proud. Particularly appealing is the relationship between Karen and her best friend, the brassy Cass, while his depiction of the donor's crazy mother is so well executed that I still get the creeps thinking about her.

But, perhaps not so oddly, the most rivet-

of your head and come bubbling up from your subconscious only when needed (there's an odd kind of synchronicity that works then, that requires far more space than we have here to explore properly). This ongoing research includes newspapers and news magazines, journals like *Scientific American* and *National Geographic* and the like, and of course non-fiction books.

It's important to keep up on what's going on--even if the source material doesn't, at first glance, appear to relate to your particular field of endeavor--because you can never tell just what the source of inspiration is going to be. It's also important to know the history of various fields of study.

For the horror writer and fantasist, the fields of hermetic study, earth mysteries and all those other activities generally lumped under the heading "the occult" are of particular importance. But there's so much garbage written on these subjects, that the novice is easily bewildered in his or her first tentative explorations into the subject matter. So where do you go to cut through the crap?

Might I recommend Colin Wilson?

Since the beginning of his career Wilson has made a study of "the Outsider" in society--the man or woman who has a spark of genius (what Wilson calls "Faculty X") that sets them apart from the general run of humanity and drives them to become either a monster or a prodigy. Because, he avers, the balance between the two is very thinly held; one can very easily slide either way.

Some of those with this Faculty X--something that we all have to a greater or lesser degree--become magicians. Or at least they consider themselves to be such.

Besides Wilson's exhaustive investigations into the criminal mind and that of the genius, since 1968 he has been studying the occult. He's published, or contributed to, numerous books on the subject, but surely his finest work in the field are in his three fascinating volumes of history and theoretical considerations of the paranormal: *The Occult* (1971), *Mysteries* (1978), and now his latest book on the subject, *Beyond the Occult*.

Taken together, these books form a very solid background on the material--a background that should prove invaluable to both the student of the subject, as well as the author who utilizes paranormal elements in his or her fiction. I'm not saying you should necessarily believe in what Wilson writes about, but I do think that the history of the subject that he provides will give one a very good working background in the field. And it's certainly worth your while to consider the theories that he presents on the various aspects of this Faculty X of ours.

Even more useful to those who have a

deeper interest in the subject, are his lists of recommended reading at the end of each volume--books that range from folktales and myths to modern physics--and naturally, each volume has a comprehensive index.

[Late addendum: recent correspondence with Colin Wilson has informed me that the North American title of *Beyond the Occult* will be his original title for the book: *The Visionaries*.]

ETERNAL BLISS

Christopher Fahy

(*Zebra, December 1988, 287 pages, \$3.95 paperback*)

With so many books coming out each month--many by new writers and all with almost interchangeable covers--it's easy to miss out on a good read. That's what columns like this are for, and why we listen to the recommendations of our friends. We may miss out on the book during its brief lifespan on the newsstand, but once we do hear about it, at least we can still go search it out in a secondhand book shop or from one of the many fine mail-order dealers who service our field.

A good read is exactly what Christopher Fahy's second novel, *Eternal Bliss* is--and thanks to Ed Gorman for sending me a copy. It's a fascinating study of a disturbed mind--not the usual knife-or-ax-wielding maniac we get in so many books with similar cover copy to this particular one. There's violence, it's true, but most of it's psychological.

Bliss Marshall is an extremely successful teen model and B-movie actress. Alan Swan is--I hate to use this term, but what else is there?--her biggest fan. And he wants her all for his own. So he kidnaps her from the university where she's studying and holds her captive on a remote island off the Maine coast where he tries to teach her to be "real."

What makes the character of Swan so disturbing is that, for all his obvious psychological problems, so much of the rhetoric that he spouts makes sense. For instance, when he speaks of our potential as human beings, or of pollution--both of the environment and our own bodies and minds--his words ring all too true. Swan's problem is that he takes every thing just those few steps too far.

Being the kind of thriller that this is, to talk much more about the plot would only spoil things for the reader, so let me just say that Fahy has a strong sense of what makes people tick, an enviably lean and almost invisible prose style, and he doesn't cheat. From the start, all the pieces are there that lead to the book's inevitable resolution--and what a fascinating trip it is that he takes us

upon to get there.

IN BRIEF

OKTOBER

Stephen Gallagher

(*New English Library, 1988, 256 pages, hardcover*)

In the best tradition of the international thriller and horror fields, Gallagher, author of the fine *Valley of Lights*, has created another blend of genres that shouldn't disappoint the dedicated reader of either. Is it still paranoia when everybody really is after you? Gallagher answers that question with style, insight and a riveting sense of suspense.

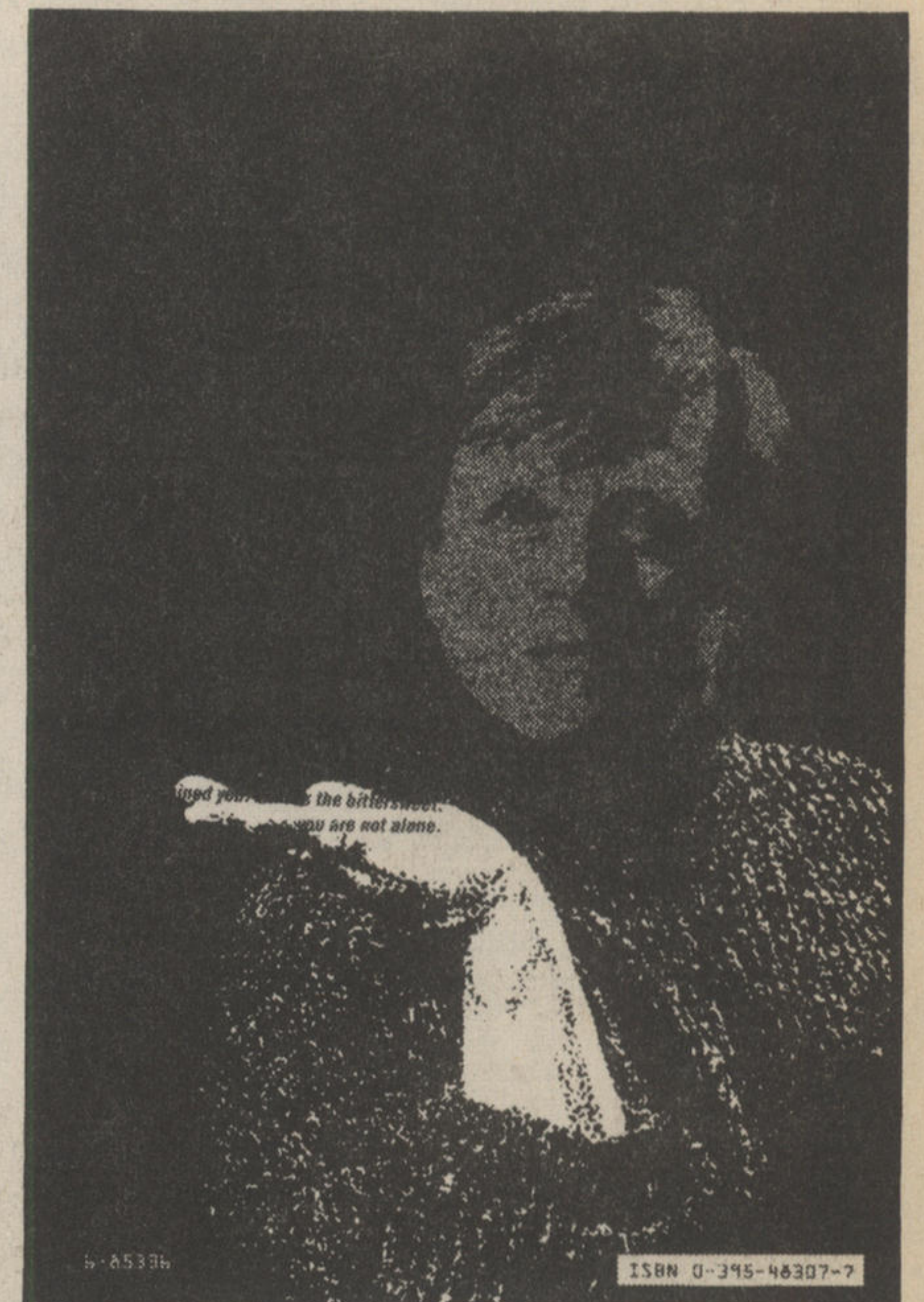
PULPHOUSE, ISSUE ONE

Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Editor

(*Pulphouse Publishing, Fall 1988, 267 pages, \$15.95 hardcover*)

The debut issue of this hardcover quarterly "magazine" has some good stories--even great ones, particularly Kate Wilhelm's "The Loiterer" and Don Webb's "Souvenirs From A Damnation." The production is wonderful. No illustrations, but the paper feels good, the book has weight, its binding stitched rather than glued. There's even some non-fiction.

This is definitely a case of how the small press can put the big NYC guns to shame, because not only does this look great and read well, but it's affordable as well.



ANGRY CANDY

Harlan Ellison

(*Houghton Mifflin, 1988, 324 pages, \$18.95 hardcover*)

This new collection brings together be-

tween the boards much of Ellison's fiction from 1980 up to the present. There's a fine introduction--a moving introduction. When I remember "Quiet Lies the Locust Tells" that Ellison did for *Stalking the Nightmare*, I sometimes wonder if some of his best writing doesn't appear in his introductions.

But there's more than just an intro; most of the stories are fine examples of Ellison's best work, including one of my long-time favorites, "Laugh Track." When it comes to our contemporary writers, when he's working at the top of his form, they really don't get much better than Ellison.

ODDKINS

Dean R. Koontz
(Warner Books, 1988, 183 pages, \$17.95 hardcover)

This won't be for everyone. It's a warmly told, delightful romp of a children's story (for children of *all* ages, I hasten to add) that proves the old guy's got still more facets to him than he's shown us to date. Who could have imagined that the author of *Phantoms* or *Lightning* could turn around and relate the adventures of a motley crew of plush toys as they set out on a quest to save children from the "bad toys" that are rising up at the Devil's call upon the death of a good toymaker?

And it's not just that Koontz sat down and wrote this change-of-pace story, but that he wrote it so *well*.

CABAL

Clive Barker
(Poseidon Press, 1988, 377 pages, \$18.95 hardcover)

This short novel has Barker's usual

flashes of powerful imagery and some very effective concepts, but unfortunately it reads like a first draft. The plot hasn't been thought all the way through. Motivations are stereotypical. The book reads like the opening gambit of a series, or an unfinished book. And worse, the research is abysmal. Canada has very strict gun laws and its law enforcement agencies, particularly in the area that Barker has set his book, simply don't operate the way he's laid them out. His source for the latter seems to be B-movies set in the American southwest, not contemporary Canada.

Set against obvious errors, the more exaggerated elements of the book--such as the preposterously large graveyard out in the middle of nowhere--lose their effect as well. Where one might be able to give the author poetic license if all else in the book was tight, here these elements simply jar.

HAUNTED

James Herbert
(Hodder & Stoughton, 1988, 224 pages, hardcover)

While the book doesn't start off with the usual punch that readers might expect from the author of *The Rats*, this story of English "ghostbusters" is engrossing from page one, delivered in Herbert's usual concise prose, and it comes to a real bang-up finish.

LORI

Robert Bloch
(TOR, June 1989, 288 pages, \$16.95 hardcover)

Here's the good news: Robert Bloch is back with a new novel. And the bad news?

There isn't any; *Lori's* as fine and taut a thriller as anything Bloch has produced in the past.

It's particularly satisfying to read a book this good from someone who has worked in the field for as long as Bloch has. Hitchcock too often gets the credit for seminal influences like *Psycho*--but don't forget, it was Bloch who wrote the novel on which the film was based. *Not* a novelization based on the film.

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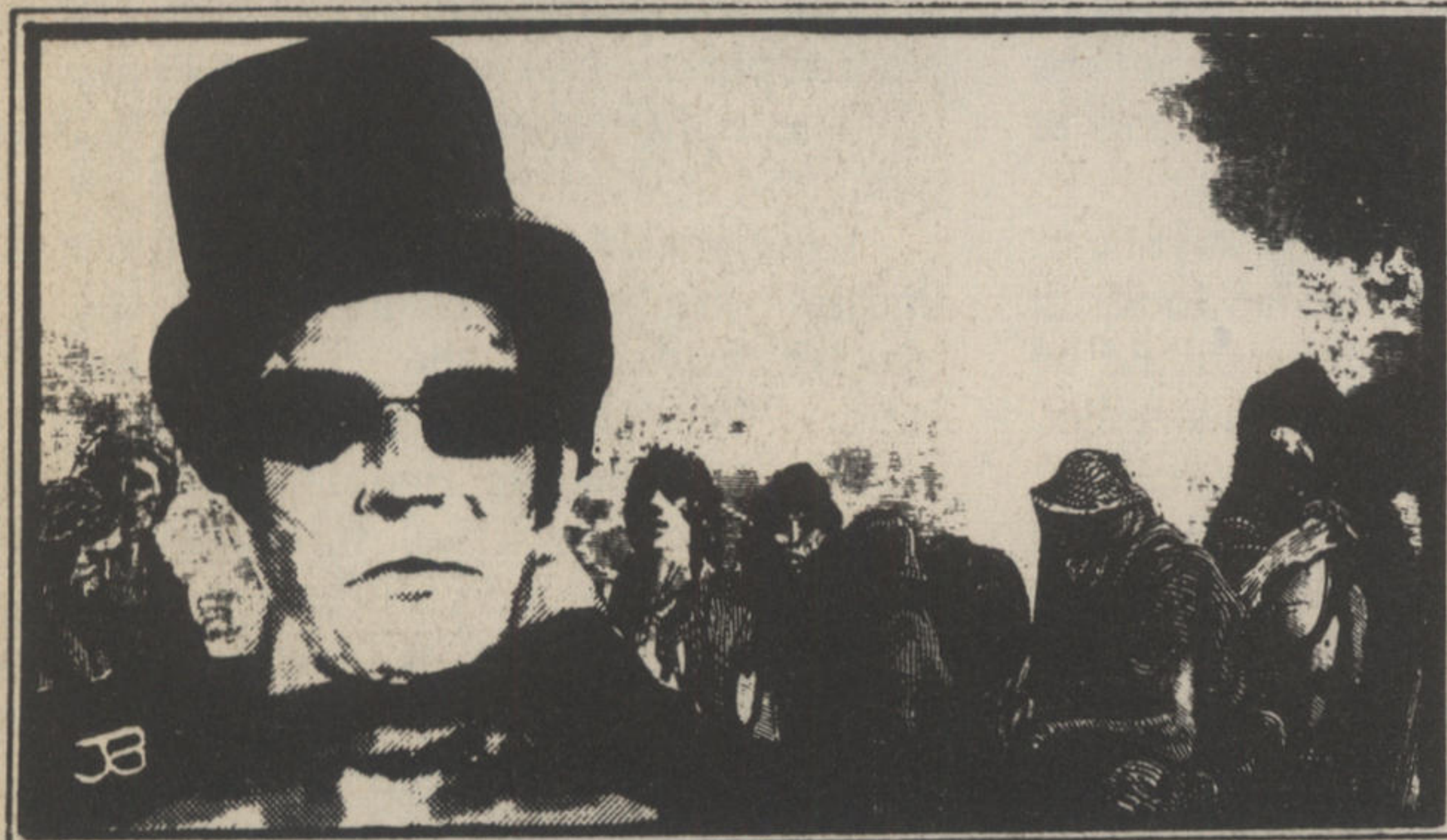
THE WOLF'S HOUR

Robert R. McCammon
(Pocket, March 1989, 603 pages, \$4.05 paperback)

It's a Hammer film, it's James Bond, it's any one of a hundred World War II invasion movies all rolled into one package. And best of all, it's fun. Sure, like *They Thirst* and *Stinger*, it's got its cliches, but McCammon lifts the novel above what some might perceive as its limitations through the sheer smoothness of his writing and the wonderful games he plays with those old cliches.

McCammon is that rare breed of writer who is able to combine the excitement of the pulps with that strong sense of relevant characterization found in contemporary fiction, infusing the whole with a flavor that's entirely his own. To ignore him is to miss out on some of the best of the Good Stuff.

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*I must be in the dream again,
and if it is a dream then it always begins the same way:
just me, prowling the nighttime streets, searching for something ...*

RECURRING NIGHTMARE

G. L. RAISOR

A faint, persistent beeping pursues me. It evokes unease. I must be in the dream again, and if it is a dream then it always begins the same way: just me, prowling the nighttime streets, searching for something ... I don't know what ... expiation of my sins, perhaps?

What have I done that I need repent?

The chill dampness that climbs inside my clothes is very real. A newspaper driven by the wind, rolls down the street and presses against a door before traveling on, a wandering prodigal who will not be admitted. Automobiles pass in the distance. The night stretches ahead. It seems endless.

My hands ache from the cold. I want to go home, but I can't remember where it is or how to get there. A frantic search of my clothes reveals no wallet, no form of ID at all. Over and over, I tell myself this is a dream.

The words bring no comfort.

I am in a part of the city unknown to me and I have no idea how I came to be here. Shards of glass lay hidden in the weeds, staring out at me with glittering, unfriendly eyes. Everything that emerges from the night seems deformed, nightmarish. Sounds get lost. Alleys, intersected by gutted and decayed buildings, parade by. A man staggers out of one, muttering vague threats to some unseen companion as he brushes past me. A child, a boy of about five, watches me from a window until I'm out of sight. Something is wrong with him, I'm certain of it, and yet I can't fathom what it is. At first I think the child is blind, but that cannot be. His eyes looked right into mine and his smile was filled with secret knowledge.

I walk on, drawn along the street by something I cannot understand.

A crowd has gathered up ahead and I wander closer, not really wanting to, yet unable to stop myself. I pause and watch from a distance. A man is sprawled beneath the wheels of a rusty blue van, his chest laboring as he clings to life. He is old and worn down by the years. When I peer at his face, I see a bloody ruin. His hand sticks out from beneath the sheet that has become his shroud. It lies with palm upturned, as if beseeching someone to take hold of it

-- to say this is a mistake.

There will be no one to take his hand. Onlookers ring the body, looking down with



faces devoid of all expression. The scene is a frozen still life that the police, anonymous guardians of death in rain gear, continue to wave traffic around. Off to the side, still another cop is taking a statement from the woman who drives the van. He looks bored. The woman repeatedly wrings her hands as if trying to wipe them free of guilt. A small white poodle, with blood-red ribbons on its ears, stares up at her and whines for attention. After a moment, the van driver slumps and her shoulders heave in rapid stitches.

The cop, unmoved, continues writing his report.

Two paramedics arrive and the ambulance wallows the crumpled form. Sirens rend the darkness as they pull away. The show is over for tonight.

Not a single word is uttered by anyone in the crowd. A man in a gray sedan looks at his watch and frowns. Something should be said. A man's life, even if he is a derelict, shouldn't pass without notice. My eyes drift over the crowd, looking for a shred of humanity. Nothing. In the back, barely visible, is an old man in shapeless, rumpled clothes. He seems to be listening. Something about him is wrong. He simply doesn't belong. Even though he wears dark glasses, I'm sure his eyes are fixed on me.

I stare back.

He nods and smiles ...

Everything dissolves behind the curtain

of rain as I take my leave. Soon, all I can see are pulsing lights from the police cars. After a few seconds, they too disappear.

The image of the injured man lingers in my mind as I hurry to cross the street. The rain hasn't slackened. Wet neon flashes DON'T WALK DON'T WALK DON'T WALK. Rows of cars are lined up, waiting for the light to change. Pale blank faces stare back at me while windshield wipers sluice away the rain.

The faces appear.

They disappear.

They appear.

Not one identifiable emotion can I detect. Not happiness. Not anger. Not anything.

The sight makes me far colder than the rain.

I hurry along, unable to outdistance my unease, my steps echoing down concrete byways frosted by the glow of mercury lamps. The green of a park swims into view and the cannibalistic rumblings of the city seem far away as I follow a path into the woods. On either side, shadows scurry along in the undergrowth. As I stare directly at them, they mimic the darkness that clings so closely to the trees. The sounds I hear are unplaceable. They must come from the steady, monotonous dripping of rain from overhead branches -- not footsteps keeping pace.

Finally, the path deposits me by a railroad

yard. It is old, abandoned. Boxcars sit on rusted tracks, going nowhere. When I pass by, they seem to follow into the drizzle like dogs abandoned by their masters. Seeping through the dark, the slap of water on rocks carries. A finger of smoke beckons to me from beneath a crumbling trestle that spans the river.

I have no choice but to go.

Concealed by shadow I watch as a group of men cluster around a trash-barrel fire, trying to warm themselves against the chill that blows in off the water. The wind is restless tonight, whipping the flame, and it gutters a moment before leaping out of the barrel and shooting skyward. Reflected in the river, the tongue of fire strides across the water on elongated red stilts. It is a beautiful and eerie sight.

The men continue staring out at the water, unmoving, as though waiting. I believe they are waiting for me.

Rising up out of the river mist, the ancient and massive trestle congeals the blackness about itself. My eyes shy away. Deep within the cave-like interior, their shadows -- chased by the fire -- hover and fling themselves about it in abandon.

These men are the reason I have come, but I am afraid to approach any closer; I am frozen. A touch from behind, soft as a whisper, and I whirl around. It is an old man. His clothes are dark and shapeless, his skin is dead white. He tilts his head up as if listening for something.

For an instant, that persistent beeping sound returns.

We regard each other and I watch the fire dance in the dark glasses that hide his eyes. When he runs a hand across his wide bloodless gash of a mouth, I'm reminded of a praying mantis regarding his meal. He appears old and frail but I am afraid of him.

I step back into the light and ...

and ... their heads swivel toward me in unison as though they were a being controlled by a single will.

All of them are wearing dark glasses.

They shamle over to stand with the first old man. I back away from them. A clatter of rocks and more of them materialize from beneath the girders. An undercurrent of some kind ripples among them so quickly I am unable to decipher it. They shuffle closer, circling me, and I can't move without touching one of them. Their rank, animal-like smell fills my nostrils.

Hands touch me. At first they are barely felt -- a kind of wet, cold, spidery probing. My mind numb with fear, my flesh crawling, I push them away. They return. And more hands join the first. Their touch becomes rougher and more insistent as they gather still closer.

As we struggle -- not a word is spoken by any of them. Only my breathing and the hungry sucking of the mud from our macabre dance disturbs the silence of the night. Desperately, I push at their wasted flesh. Some go down but, grimly, the rest close ranks and surge forward. They are trying to hold me here by the river.

I tear free of their grasp and stagger toward the open park. The ground rushes up. Expecting to feel the touch of mud, seconds pass before I react to searing heat. I have fallen over the barrel containing their fire! The embers hiss like scalded cats as they spill onto the wet earth. Some of them land on me. Scrambling up, I beat at my smoldering clothes. And the night is showered with temporary brightness -- long enough to catch a glimpse of something just within the light's reach. I have only a vague impression of a man, tall and gaunt, standing at the edge of the river. He is looking at me, but he is too far away for me to read his expression.

Wrenching my gaze away, I look around and the silent men are there. Their gray, emotionless faces turn toward me. They wait patiently.

"What do you want? Just tell me what you want!"

My voice gives them movement. Their hands grope jerkily, like insects suddenly released from beneath a rock. They stumble toward me. "Please," I sob, "what do you want?"

No answer.

I turn and run, and only an echo of that constant, maddening beeping sound tracks me into the night.

I'm back on skid row, and my footsteps thud down the street like heavy, irregular heartbeats. Two old vagrants are standing on the corner talking. The shabby, stooped men hear me and turn.

Both of them are wearing dark glasses--

I keep running, and the city stretches out in a haze of neon that is too bright in the rain-mirrored pavement. Several bag ladies scream at a wino lying across the sidewalk. A man with a cup of pencils for sale sits motionless in a doorway. He has no legs. People stare at me, their expressions unreadable. I don't understand this. Everything is confused. What is happening to me? Please ... what is happening to me?

-- Finally I can run no farther and I sag against a building. My head touches the bricks, feeling the wetness.

A hand touches me. "Scuse me, buddy. Could you spare a little change for a man down on his luck?"

My eyes dart upward ...

past the smiling yellow teeth.

Until they come to rest on the dark

glasses, but they're not on the derelict; they're on me. It's my reflection in a plate glass window that I see. I turn away from the sight. The alleys swallow up my pleas and spit them back at me. Their tone is mocking.

The scream of tires biting into the pavement yanks me around. Frozen to the spot, I can only watch as the vehicle moves closer. It skids sideways, nearly swapping ends before righting itself. The driver, now just a rapid blur, continues wrestling with the wheel ... and I know she's not going to miss me after all.

The van fishtails one last time and darkness topples onto me.

I am lying on the street and people stare down at me. They have no expression. I look past them, and there is a police officer talking to a woman who is constantly wringing her hands. A small white poodle, with red ribbons on his ears, looks up forlornly at her. A man in dark glasses nods and smiles in my direction.

Someone pulls a sheet over my face and strong hands lift me. A door slams and I scream.

Darkness smothers all around.

Until I hear the rhythmic beeping ... regular and monotonous ... it is oddly soothing as I float on a haze of warm brightness. A disembodied voice cries out, full of rage and yet tinged with sadness, "... massive internal injuries. Can't stop the bleeding. Give me some suction here. Damn it, nurse, hurry! We're going to lose him ..."

But I know the struggle is useless.

The voice fades a piece at a time, and the faint sloshing of water against rocks fills in the emptiness. I turn and gaze at the moon-painted scene. Nothing has changed from the last time I was here. The barrel that earlier contained a fire lies on its side, blackened and empty. The smell of ashes floats on the wind and it carries the scent of death.

I have returned to the river.

The men in dark glasses silently emerge, shadows without shadows, from beneath the trestle. Slowly, oh so slowly, they approach -- slower than in the worst nightmare. And even though I try to escape, I understand there can be no escape. Several take my arm and lead me, unresisting, down to the river. We stand at the water's edge and listen until, finally, the beeping subsides into silence. A creaking of wood carries from the dark as though there is a boat out there. Something is coming across the river ...

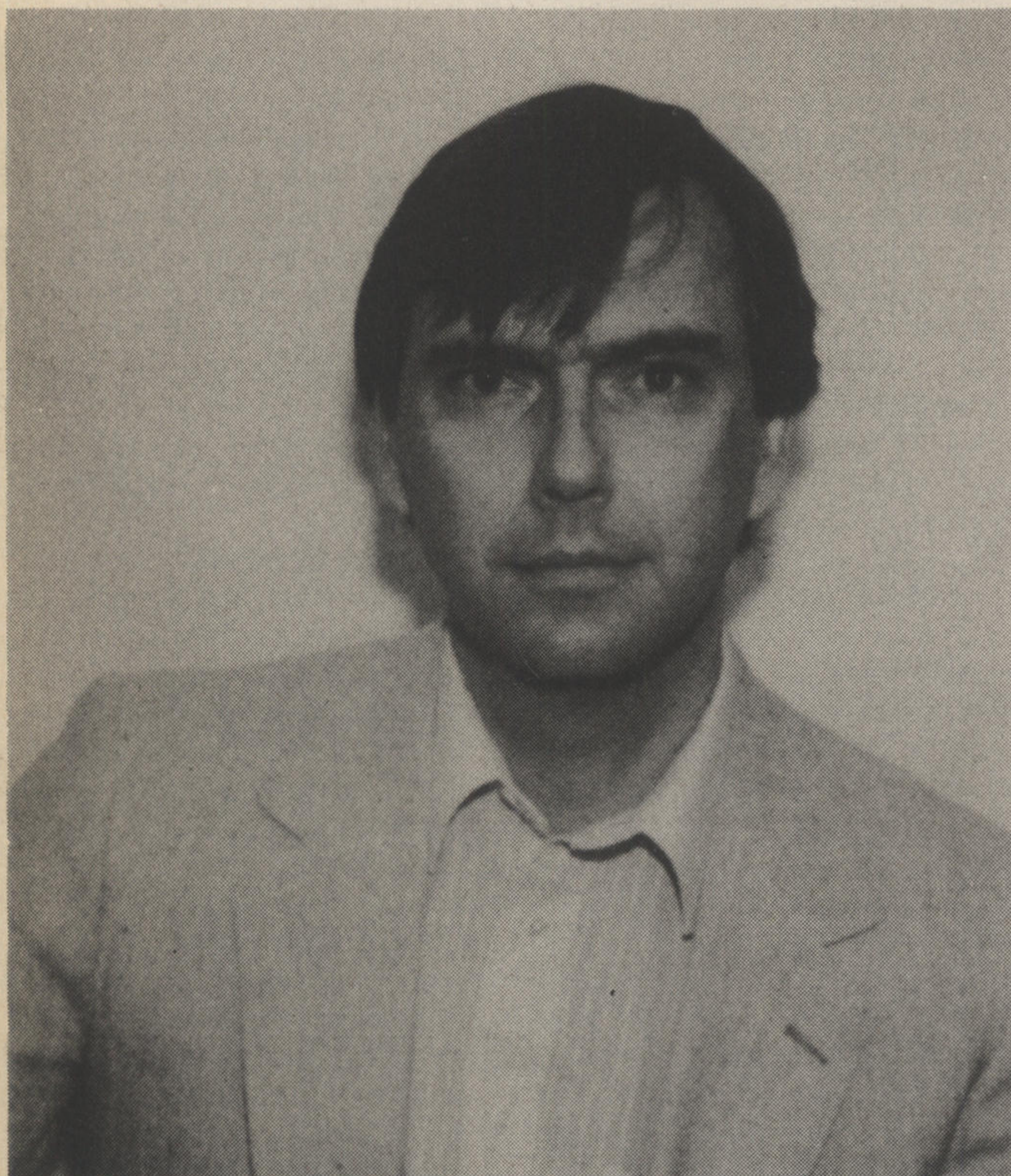
... coming for us.

We stand together in the mist and wait.



You have greedy publishers who try to capitalize on the horror genre by putting out a lot of bad fiction. When you do that, you don't have to be a genius to see a bust coming.

G. L. RAISOR



THS: *Well, I've got to start traditionally: why don't you tell us a little bit about the personal side of your life: your family, your "other" career, etc.?*

RAISOR: Well, my "other career" is in computers and I don't think most people would find that very interesting, so we'll bypass that topic. My family consists of my wife, Debbie, and my son, Jason, who are very patient with the amount of time I spend at the keyboard. In fact, whatever career I have in writing I owe to Debbie. She listened very patiently to all my excuses for not getting started. But being a practical girl she bought an old Royal typewriter for six bucks and kicked me where writers spend most of their time -- no, it wasn't in the head. So I guess you could say I owe it all to her size six. Jason has recently taken a great deal of interest in my work. Last year he won an art scholarship and it is one of my fondest hopes that some day he'll illustrate a story of mine.

THS: *I had an opportunity to meet you and Debbie at a convention a year or so ago. That was the first convention you'd ever attended, I believe. What was your feelings about that particular experience? Did you find it worth your time and expense as a writer?*

RAISOR: It was strange, to say the least. There were moments of ex-

hilaration and long, long stretches of boredom. I didn't find it worth my time as a writer, but as a fan it was, to say the least, interesting. It was fun to put faces with names. The most fun I had was listening to the writers read their own work. John Skipp and Craig Spector put on a show that had to be heard to be believed. These two guys are show stoppers. Richard C. Matheson and Chet Williamson had the audience on the edge of their chairs. And then there was Joe R. Lansdale. He read his own "The Night They Missed The Horror Show," and he had everyone laughing one second and gasping the next. It was pure magic. If you ever attend a convention, make sure you sit in on the readings. There's nothing like them.

THS: *Besides the convention, I know you do quite a bit of networking over the phone. You won't hesitate to call an editor or a writer whose work you respect, and try to build a working relationship. Have you found this approach to be helpful? Have you ever encountered an editor who was less than receptive?*

RAISOR: Networking is somewhat of a misnomer and it sounds vaguely Yuppie, which next to Nazis and people who drive around with personalized license plates, is the group I most hate. BS'ing is closer to the mark. Usually I call a writer if they have done something that knocks my socks off. Talking to an editor can be helpful, I guess, but it won't help you sell a bad story. Most editors are very friendly and helpful. Even George Scithers over at *Weird Tales*, a renowned curmudgeon, nearly talked my leg off when I asked him what his magazine was about.

THS: *You've been writing short stories for several years now, almost exclusively in the horror genre. Have you written any favorites?*

RAISOR: Out of the twenty some odd stories I've done, I sort of like "Night Rats" which appeared here last spring, and "Cheapskate" from the late *Night Cry* holds a place in my heart, but I've got to say a story I just finished for Dark Harvest's *Razored Saddles* didn't turn out half bad, if I do say so myself. It's a science fiction western, very bizarre.

THS: *Any plans for a novel?*

RAISOR: I've been planning on it for the last several years and about two months ago I actually wrote the first chapter. It didn't hurt nearly as much as I thought it would.

THS: *I'm curious if you have any publishing nightmare stories you'd like to share with us?*

RAISOR: Just one. If you should ever decide to edit an anthology, Don't!. It's the hardest, most thankless job there is. And that's the good part.

THS: *Does the writing ever get easier? I know your wife, Debbie, often encourages your work. After a number of short stories, some well-received and some quietly disappearing, has your faith in your work held up? Or do you still find it something of an enigma every time you sit down to write?*

RAISOR: Yes and no. Let me explain. The writing gets easier, but I

get tougher on it -- so it all evens out. I guess my faith has held up since I seem to be selling, though I still tend to be a trifle insecure about anything I write. The word enema also springs to mind.

THS: *I know Joe R. Lansdale has been very supportive of your work. What's the best advice he's shared with you? Have you acted on it yet?*

RAISOR: Joe has been supportive of me and a lot of other writers, bringing out the best we have in us. As an editor he has given homes to stories that wouldn't have found a home, otherwise. He's always there with an encouraging word. I can't say enough about this guy, both as a writer and as a friend. The best advice he ever gave me: write a book, write a book, write a book. Have I acted on it? I'm writing a book.

THS: *You've also dabbled in science fiction and westerns, I believe. Is that a natural development as your writing skills and interests grow? Do you think you'll stay involved in the horror field or move on to try other things?*

RAISOR: Everything I do has an element of horror in it, even science fiction and westerns. I've always loved a good story, no matter what genre it's in. I may try other things from time to time, but horror has always held my heart in its scaly little hands. A personal observation -- I think there's a lot of great horror short stories being written. And, with a few exceptions, a lot of crap in the novels.

THS: *If you hang out at the bookstore long enough, over time you'll begin to see something that looks like a cycle of horror publishing. First a big boom, then a drop off, then another big boom. As a writer, do you feel the genre is cyclical? And does that affect the way you write or what you write?*

RAISOR: I think self-fulfilling prophecy is a better way to describe the

cycle of horror publishing. (We must pause a moment while crusading writer/reader shuffles into spotlight with soapbox in hand. He climbs onto soapbox. We hear the audience groan.) You have greedy publishers who try to capitalize on the horror genre by putting out a lot of bad fiction. When you do that, you don't have to be a genius to see a bust coming. The bad writers get weeded out, the good ones stay in and make the genre popular once more, then the whole thing starts over again. Since I've long ago gotten used to living in poverty, the cycle has little effect on me. (Writer picks up soapbox and disappears into back room, amid barely veiled threats. A week later his remains are found beneath a stack of paperbacks with nifty, eye-catching covers that were found to be completely devoid of any content once opened.)

THS: *Here's something I'm doing with all the writers in this issue: please ask a question of yourself and answer it for the readers.*

RAISOR: What are your plans for the future? Write a book. And try not to contribute to the bust cycle of horror publishing.

THS: *Any parting comments?*

RAISOR: Speaking for myself, I'm going to miss *The Horror Show*. I had my first story published here back in '85 when a fledgling editor gave a fledgling writer a chance. The fledgling writer is grateful. I just want to say thanks, Dave. It's been swell. We all wish you the best of luck in your own writing career.

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*The little girl buried her face
in the material of Sherry's sweater.
"Is Daddy really going to read me a story before I go to bed?"*

THE NIGHT CALLER

G. L. RAISOR

Sherry Elder's descent into madness began on a Thursday.

It was eight o'clock in the evening and she was stacking the dinner dishes. For Sherry and her daughter, Amy, there would be no escape.

It began, quite simply, when she answered the phone.

"Hello," she said, cupping the receiver to her ear as she examined a water-spotted glass. Dead silence greeted her. She pushed back hair that was beginning to show the first signs of gray and waited for the caller to speak. "Hello," she repeated, impatience in her voice.

A crackling came this time, and beneath that the faintest suggestion of breathing.

"Who is this?" she demanded.

The labored breathing grew louder and suddenly the connection was broken. Sherry replaced the phone and leaned her head against the wall. Unease settled in her stomach as she listened to the winter rain that whispered against the window. Outside, a car slowed and then drove on by.

"Was it a wrong number, Mommy?"

Startled, Sherry looked down at her daughter. "Yes it was." With a conscious effort she brightened. "Speaking of numbers, I think we should give your dad a call."

Amy glanced at the phone and then fixed her mother with an incredulous expression that only a five-year-old can muster. "You know we're not supposed to bother Daddy at work ... less it's real important."

Sherry sighed and shadows filled her eyes.

Amy picked up on the fear in her mom's face. "Is Daddy coming home soon?"

"I don't know, sweetheart," Sherry answered distractedly, "Michael's got a lot of downed phone lines to fix."

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Hey! Don't you know too much worrying can cause wrinkles?" Without warning, she reached down and scooped up Amy. Laughing, Sherry began spinning around and around. Amy's long blond hair floated outward and her screams of mock-fear filled the room.

Amy threw her arms around Sherry's



neck. "Mommy ... I wish Daddy didn't work so much."

"You do, huh? Well, that makes two of us."

The little girl buried her face in the material of Sherry's sweater. "Is Daddy *really* going to read me a story before I go to bed?"

"Of course he is. Daddy said he would be home by nine and he would never lie to his favorite girl on her birthday."

As she put Amy on the couch, Sherry thought she heard the phone ring ... once. But there was a storm coming, so she couldn't be sure of what she heard. Maybe it was only her imagination.

Later in the night, a sound awoke Sherry.

It was faint, unidentifiable. She sat up in bed, wide awake, and looked around the darkened room. Something was out of kilter. When she had gone to sleep, all the lights were on. Now they were off. The storm had passed, but it had taken the electricity with it. She tried to identify what had pulled her awake. Whatever it was had come from inside the house. Her eyes darted to the clock and she saw it had stopped at 11:23.

The sounds came again. From the kitchen this time.

With a groan, she felt across the bed for Michael.

And found it empty.

Silently, she slipped from the bed and padded down the hallway to Amy's room.

And it too was empty.

The house was different tonight, quiet. Without electricity there was none of the background noises she had grown used to. The silence was oppressive. She leaned against the wall and listened as the scraping sound again drifted from the darkness. Something heavy was being dragged across the floor, and she felt a little trickle of fear.

Where was Amy?

Sherry groped her way into the kitchen, trying to control the shivering that seized her. Her eyes searched the room, trying to locate her daughter. And when she found Amy, it took her a moment to comprehend what she saw: Amy was perched on a chair with the phone pressed to her ear, eyes tightly closed.

The small voice was filled with happiness. "Daddy, that's my favorite."

At the sound of Amy's voice, Sherry felt relief so intense she thought her knees would buckle. What she had heard was Amy dragging a chair over to the phone so she could talk to her dad. Yet something felt wrong.

"My God, she's walking in her sleep," Sherry whispered to herself. Gently, ever so gently, she reached out and eased the phone from the tiny hand. "We've got to get you back to bed, young lady." Out of habit, Sherry placed the warm plastic against her own ear ...

... and stiffened as the now familiar crackling bubbled up.

Then came the breathing, ragged and guttural. Revulsion and fear distorted her face as she tried to pull the receiver away. But she was too slow.

"--time--" crawled from out of the static, the faint words driving slivers of ice deep into her chest.

"Who is this?" Sherry asked in a fierce, low voice.

The phone went silent.

With nerveless fingers she hung up. "Take it easy. Just stay calm." But that wasn't so easy in the face of one simple fact; even though she had heard a voice speak on the phone, she didn't remember hearing the phone ring.

She was quite certain of that.

Pushing down the fright that threatened to overwhelm her, she carried Amy back to bed. She went to the kitchen, took a deep breath and reached for the phone.

It rang.

On the fourth ring she found the courage to pick it up and say hello.

"Mrs. Elder?" a sad-voiced man asked.

She made a noise that he took for affirmation.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news ..." The voice paused, and quite suddenly she could hear Michael and Amy talking to each other, their last conversation before Michael

left for work. She knew the voices were only in her head, but each word was distinct and she could make them out quite clearly. Their voices bounced back and forth in a crazy counterpoint that was, somehow, more real than the words coming from the phone.

The anonymous man continued on, telling her things that couldn't possibly be true. Her life was shattering into fragments that she could never put back into any kind of order. She was helpless as the voices warred for her attention.

("... Daddy'll read you a special story before bedtime, sweetheart.")

"Michael Elder has been involved in an accident."

("You promise, Daddy?")

"He touched a power line."

("I promise, Amy.")

"They're rushing him over to County. Do you want us to send someone around to take you?"

"No, I have a car," she heard herself say. When the voice finally went away, Sherry laid her face against the coolness of the kitchen table for a second and tried to blot out all thought. But her mind kept playing back the two words from Amy's phone call. Over and over. The words that had so painfully emerged from the static were beginning to make sense.

Sitting in the oasis of light that spilled through the window, she attempted one last time to convince herself that it was all some kind of mistake, and for a moment, she was almost able to believe.

Almost.

She clutched her car keys and rose to get Amy. At that instant the electricity came back on, filling the room with a sudden brightness that hurt her eyes. The television she had left on for company roared with static, but beneath that was another sound. A phone ringing. Sherry stared at it a long moment before she picked it up and listened. Her eyes filled with dull acceptance when the crackling came again, the crackling that sounded like what?

High voltage ripping through flesh?
Michael's flesh?

Haltingly a voice began, "Once ..." then stronger, "upon ... a time ..."

"Michael, stop it," she begged as tears trickled down. "You don't have to read her any more bedtime stories. It's okay, you don't have to--" The static rose and fell.

"... there were three bears," the voice continued on in an unrelenting monotone, as if it were a recording that would not -- could not -- stop until it reached its appointed end.

Sherry slammed the phone down and turned to find Amy staring at her with frightened eyes. "Who was that, Mommy?"

"Nobody, sweetheart," she said, dabbing

at her tears. "It was just a wrong number."

As the sleepy pajama-clad form ran over and climbed up onto her lap, the phone began to ring again. Sherry sat frozen in the chair, staring straight ahead. Waiting for it to stop. Praying for it to stop.

But over and over, with unceasing regularity it jangled, the sound seemed to grow louder with each ring.

"Mommy, aren't you going to answer?"

"No, I've had enough of phones to last a lifetime." She ripped the plug from the wall. The silence was deafening. Releasing a painful breath that she had been unaware of holding, she pulled Amy close. "Come on, kiddo, let's get you dressed. We've got to get out of here, right now. Daddy's waiting for us."

Before she could move, the phone began to ring.



your fondest dreams
your worst nightmares



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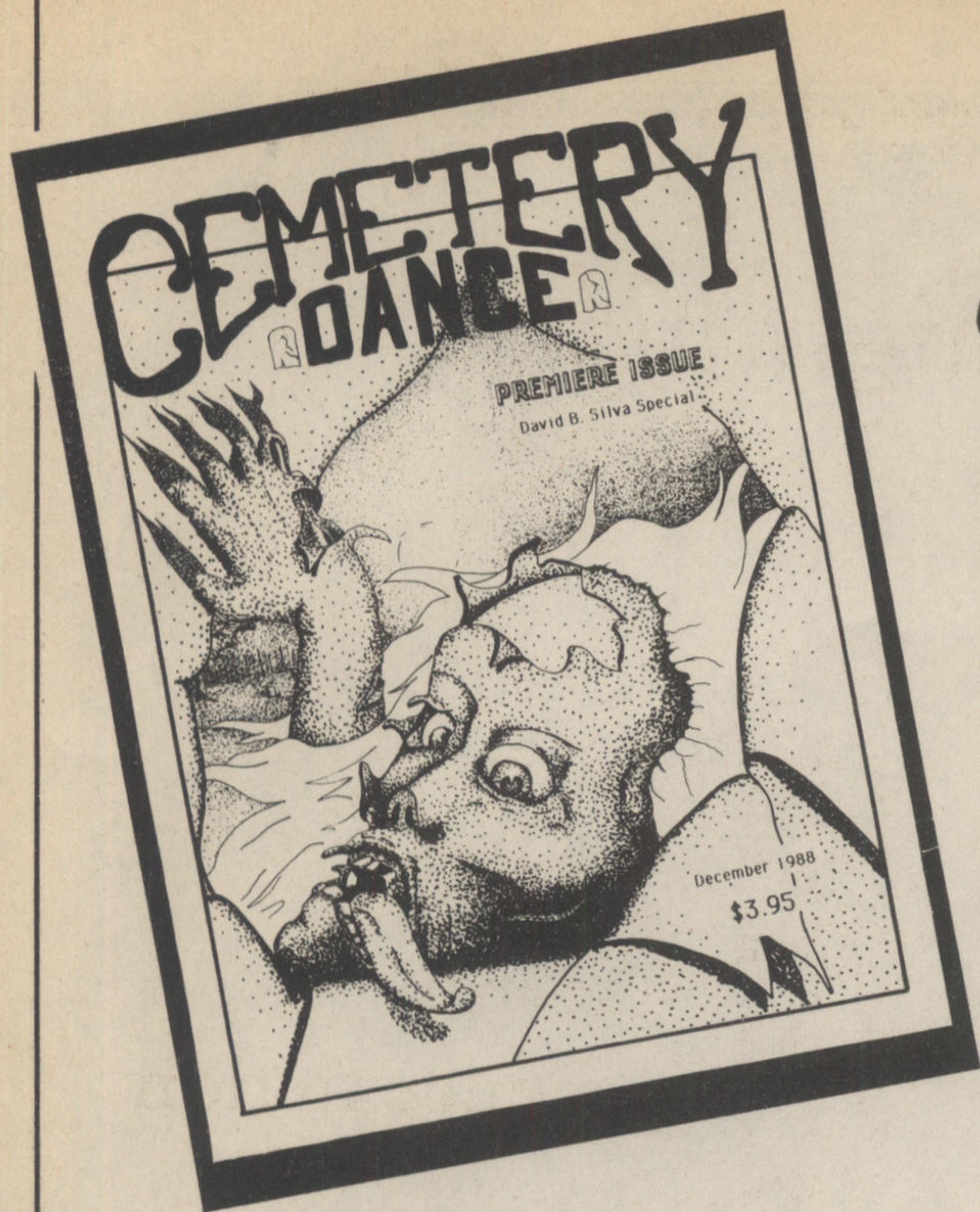
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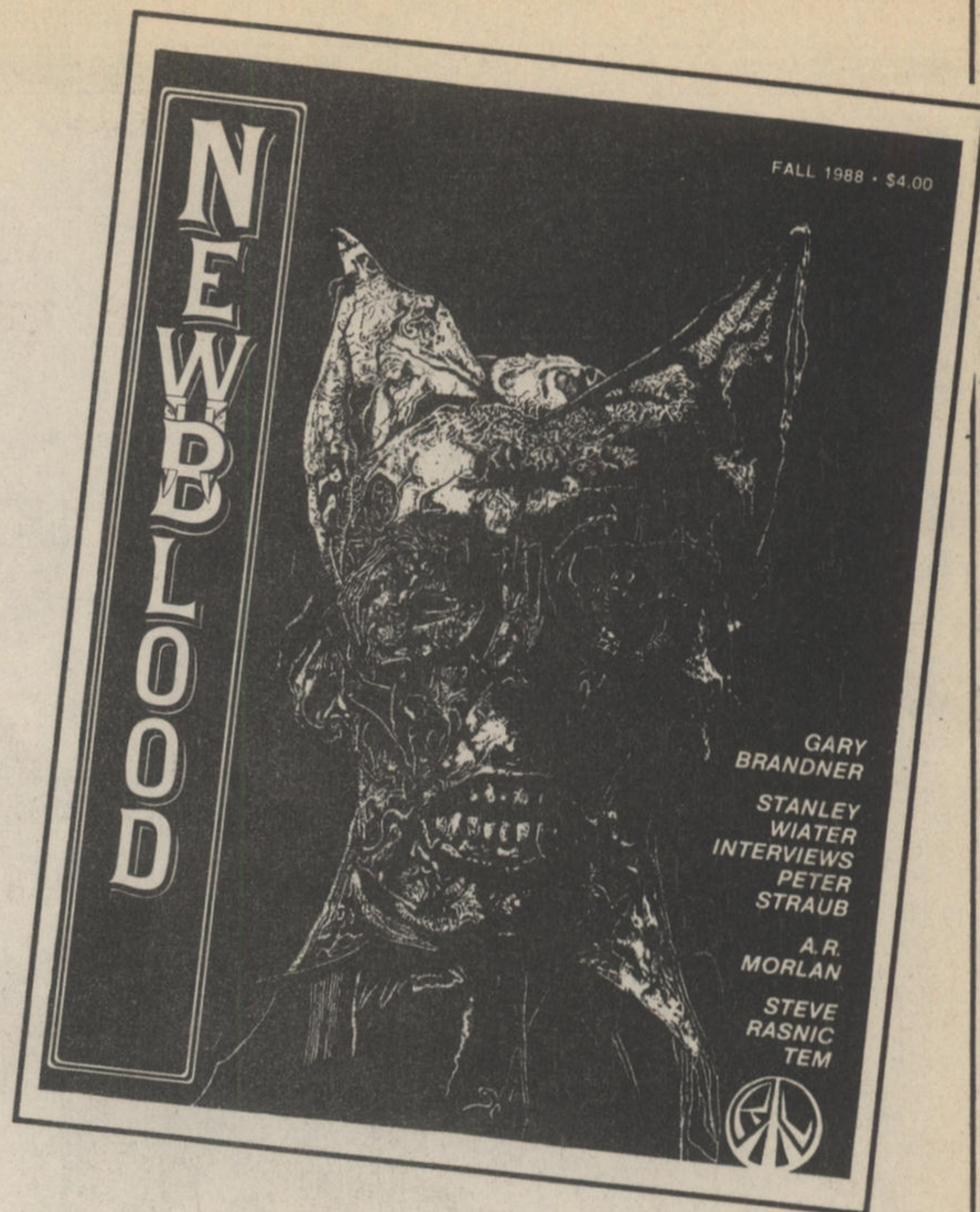
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Wild Cards!



Dean R. Koontz says of *Cemetery Dance*, "... a very fine piece of work!"
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But *why* is Mr. Silva so excited about *Cemetery Dance* and *New Blood*? The reasons are simple: Upcoming issues of *CD* include fiction by Joe R. Lansdale, Steve Rasnic Tem, Thomas F. Monteleone, and William Relling Jr.. Plus a brand new interview with Richard Christian Matheson, his first in 2 years! Additionally, each new issue of *CD* showcases the unique talents of a featured artist, *and* includes more pages and more features than any two genre magazines combined!

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When The Lights Go Down

MICHAEL ARTHUR BETTS

PUMPKIN HEAD	1989 Theater
FLY II	1989 Theater
LEVIATHAN	1989 Theater
PET SEMATARY	1989 Theater

I'm not going to give my final farewell to *The Horror Show* until the next issue. I do want to say, however, that I have had a love affair with this magazine spanning close to seven years and I'm going to miss working with Dave, and I will miss the relationship I've had with the fans of my column and the column in general. Thanks for all the letters and for taking the time to read my thoughts on horror cinema. It's been a real treat for me.

As we draw to the close of the 80s and of *The Horror Show*, I'm doing one last project that I'd like to do with you the reader. Following this column, you'll find a ballot of horror films I've nominated for the best of the 80s. If you're interested, please pick your favorites in each category and send them to: P.O. Box 865, Longmont, CO 80501. I'll run the results next issue. Again, thank you and let's go out with a BANG! On with the show.

PUMPKINHEAD

Pumpkinhead is one of those films that usually doesn't last long at

the theater. For whatever reasons movies such as *Pumpkinhead* have a short run and quickly end up on cassette. By the time this article is printed, the movie will already be out on tape.

I simply don't understand why. Maybe it's because in this film you won't find a guy with a mask on, slashing naked women. Also, there is no romanticized, sicko anti-hero spouting one liners before he takes the razor to somebody. And it's not a slickly produced, el-blando, high priced piece of Hollywood bologna. *Pumpkinhead* is simply an old fashioned monster movie artistically done with an underlying morality play thrown in for those of us who still think horror should have a conscience.

In some ways the theme is similar to Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (which is also reviewed in this issue). The pain of losing a loved one can sometimes make us do things we never would have dreamed of doing before.

In 1957, little Eddie Harley is at home with his parents. They live in the back country in a simple, old farm shack house. The boy's dad is acting strange this night. His mom tells him to say his prayers. Father has his shotgun and he's locking the horse in the barn. This night, something is coming and whole family is frightened. A stranger knocks on their door. "I didn't kill that girl," he screams. The father tells him to go away. As the man leaves, Eddie looks out the window and sees the silhouette of a strange creature going at the man.

We switch to modern day. Ed (Lance Henrickson) is now a single father still living in the old farm house with his boy. He also runs a

little grocery store. The boy and his father are very close. One day Ed leaves the boy at the store to run an errand. A group of vacationing teen-agers show up and accidentally run over the boy. The teen-agers panic, some run to the cabin where they were staying, some stay and others go for help.

Ed discovers what happened to his son. Totally distraught, he goes to the old woman named Hagus who knows how to summon the evil revenger known as Pumpkinhead. (The character of Pumpkinhead is based on a poem parents used, long ago, to scare their kids into being good: "Pumpkinhead will get you.") While the young people, who accidentally killed the child, are grappling with what has happened, Pumpkinhead is on his way.

Lance Henrickson, who plays the grieving parent, has never been better. He is one of horror's fine character actors. He played the caring robot in *Aliens* and was the burnt out head of the vampire family in *Near Dark*. Henrickson plays Ed as a thoughtful parent who realizes, too late, what a horror he has unleashed upon the group of frightened teen-agers. Even though this movie does have flaws, it's nice to see characters who try and understand the terrible things that have happened and come to grips with them. Even with plenty of dead teen-agers before the mayhem is over, few can argue that this is not a typical line them up and kill them movie.

The moody cinematography and lighting all add to the overall texture of the film. There's a real sense of backwoods eeriness throughout the proceedings. The creature effects are as good as you'll find in a modestly produced movie. The creature walks through the woods on its toes like a mutant ballet dancer. Finally, even though direction is good, the movie does sometimes fall into cliches and isn't always as frightening as it could have been. Still, I found *Pumpkinhead* to be entertaining, thoughtful, and imaginative. Not bad for a movie that received little backing and didn't break any box-office records. Rent it.



THE FLY II

I know that good horror sequels have been made. Just look at *Aliens*, *Evil Dead II*, *Dawn of the Dead*. These films and a scant handful of others managed to equal or better their predecessors. Unfortunately, there is such a glut of horror movie sequels that these are rare exceptions to the old rule "you can never go back."

The original *Fly* and Cronenberg's remake both covered the terror of a man's mutation into a terrifying new life form. So, if you are going to make a sequel, find an interesting new angle. *The Fly II* starts out with the original's theme and ends up deteriorating into a disgusting slaughter flick.

Victoria Quaife (Geena Davis's character in the original), dies giving birth to Seth Brundle's child, Martin. Martin is being kept as a research experiment for Bartok Laboratories, which is owned by villainous megalomaniac Anton Bartok (Lee Richardson). The kid grows quickly in mind and body and in just a few short years, he's a young man. In the process, he's poked and prodded by a bunch of unfeeling Bartok scientists and doctors. The filmmakers waste little time establishing the villains. The motivation for this, of course, is to turn the baddies into a bowl of fly vomit soup for the finale.

Bartok gives the accelerated genius, Martin (Eric Stoltz) the job of perfecting the molecule transfer machines his dad had so much trouble with. While working on the project, he meets a friendly employee, Beth (Daphne Zuniga). Stoltz and Zuniga are adequate actors but they are no Goldblum and Davis. Martin eventually discovers that he is deteriorating rapidly into the same creature that his father became and that Bartok is up to no good.

The movie does a weak retread of a woman in love with a man Mom definitely wouldn't approve of. There is an attempt to show the

pathos behind a human who has no control over the deterioration of his body. Probably the best subtext to this occurs when Martin befriends a dog that goes through the transporter with tragic results. When Martin discovers that Bartok kept the dog alive, he mercifully ends it's life. This is one of the few times the movie works.

Director Chris Walas, who did the effects in the original, tries to out gross the original by turning it into a monster on the loose epic. Thus forgetting the elements that made Cronenberg's version such a great film.



PET SEMATARY

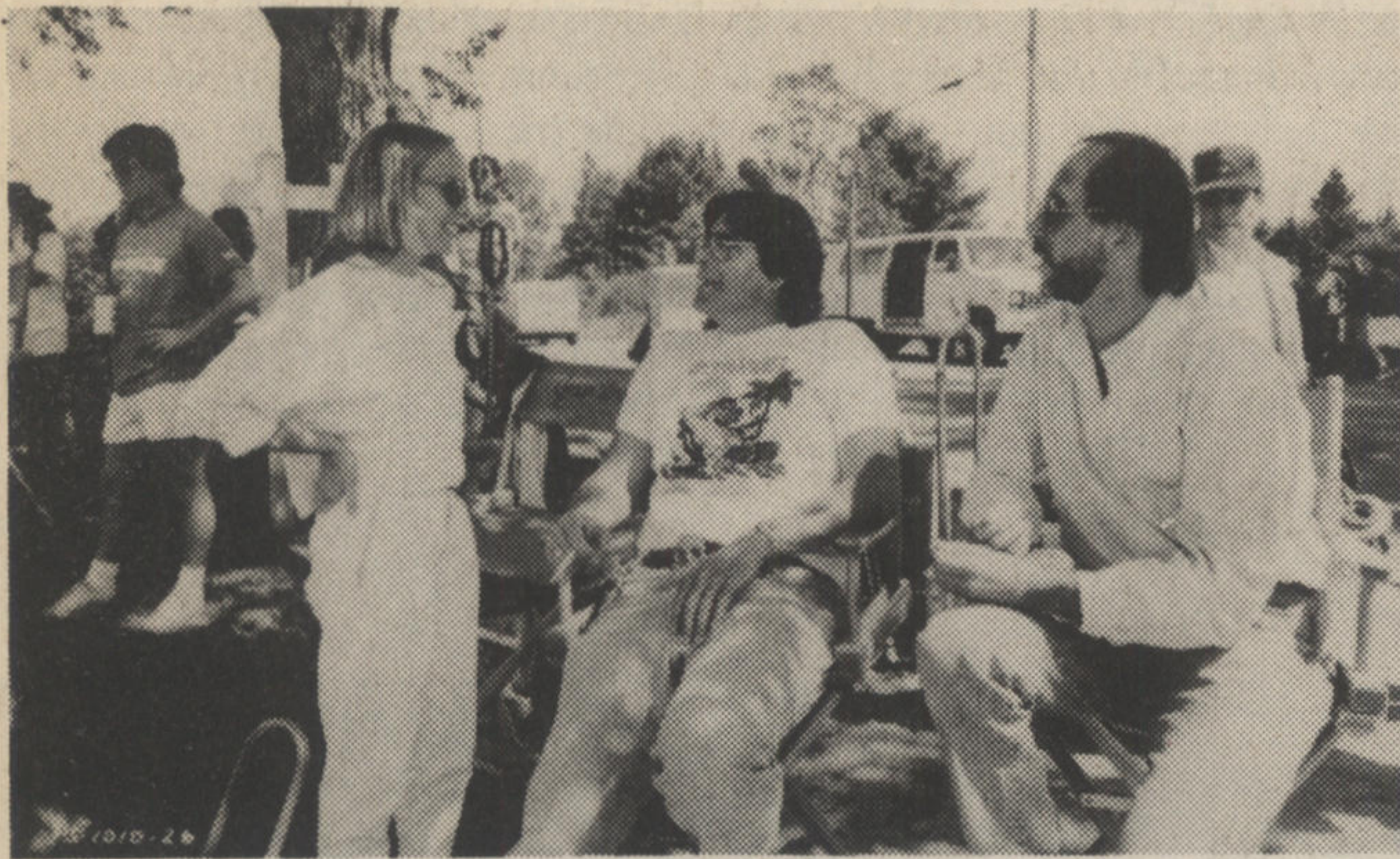
Oh boy. The long awaited screen adaptation of Stephen King's celebrated novel has finally been released. In its first week at the theaters, its box-office intake was record breaking. I was looking forward to seeing one of King's own adaptations, for the first time, of one of his famous books. No more excuses over the writing, this one was King's baby. So, what does he do? He adds things that weren't in the book and writes a screenplay that is arguably the worst of all the King book adaptations.

Remember when you read this review that, yes I have published short stories and I do read books but I am a film critic not a book reviewer. I think King is a great writer of books. For over a decade, Stephen King has elevated horror literature and brought many mainstream readers into the horror fan domain. I salute him for doing so. Some of his books have also been transformed into very good horror movies. *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, and *Salems Lot* (which also produced a sleeper called *Return To Salems Lot*) are all personal favorites. I also think that most of the other movies adapted from his books aren't that bad. This one ...

Chicago doctor, Louis Creed (Dale Midkiff) and his wife Rachel (Denis Crosby) have, along with their two children, moved to the small rural community of Ludlow in Maine. Their new surroundings seem blissful enough with one exception -- they live right next to the highway from hell. Semi-trucks bolt down this stretch of road like heat seeking missiles, wiping out the area pet population. In fact, so many of these creatures have eaten chrome that the local kids have put in a pet cemetery, spelled Pet Sematary.

The Creeds' neighbor, Jud Crandall, is played by Fred "Herman Munster" Gwynne. It's good to see him. Gwynne provides the only decent performance in the movie. Jud takes the family on a tour of the pet cemetery, which was built, as he says, "by broken hearted children."

Later, at the University Hospital, one of the students, named Victor Pascal, dies and tells Louis that he will come back to him. The now deceased Pascal returns to warn Louis about the place beyond the pet



cemetery. A place where the dead walk and the barrier was not meant to be crossed onto the ground beyond. This turns out to be an old Indian burial ground just beyond the pet cemetery. Pascal shows up throughout the film in a poor man's version of Griffin Dunne in *American Werewolf In London*.

The worst barrier that is crossed, in this movie, is the one between what should frighten us and what shouldn't. The best example is the subplot concerning Louis's wife, Rachel. One night, their daughter Ellie (Blaze Berdahl) asks her father what would happen if their cat, Church, died. He goes into a typically ambivalent rap on death, which Rachel overhears. Later Rachel decides to tell Louis about a death in her family. Here we get an awkwardly done flashback narrated in a way a high school creative writing student would do. It seems that Rachel had a sister who was severely disabled with a spinal disorder, and as a child, she was given a lot of responsibility to take care of her disabled sister. Now here is where the filmmakers really cross the line. The special effects geniuses get to show us the deformity of the poor girl so the audience can gasp at her in disgust. They don't even stop there. As the movie progresses the sister is used to shock the audience more as she vows revenge because Rachel allowed her to choke to death. There is no reason for this whole plot angle to be in the picture. The main thrust of the film should have involved the father's obsession with death and the afterlife.

There is also another subplot concerning Louis's bad relationship with his father-in-law, which is never explained. *Pet Sematary* doesn't seem to have a strong focus on much of anything.

Too bad, because the main storyline is a great idea, and the theme, which is closely related to that of the earlier-reviewed *Pumpkinhead*, is that one can lose their grip on reality when they lose a loved one. As Jud says, "sometimes dead is better." The most horrifying aspect of *Pet Sematary* should have been the idea of losing someone twice. Somehow King and company lost sight of this. Toward the end, there is a little dark humor mixed with terror that does provide some interest. What it takes to build up to those few moments, however, is lost in discontinuity and uninspired filmmaking. One final note, *Pet Sematary* was directed by Mary Lambert who directed Madonna's "Like A Prayer" video. She has little filmmaking experience and is best known for doing music videos.



LEVIATHAN

The only thing I despise worse than a badly done sequel is a badly done rip-off of another movie. A mediocre underwater version of *Alien*, called *Deep Star Six*, came out less than a year ago, and now, with *Leviathan*, we have a better produced but more blatantly sinful rip-off

of *Alien* and its many clones. Come on Hollywood! Wake up and stop smelling the profits. Can't you guys start putting your big bucks into more imaginative and entertaining cinema? This movie is about as exciting as a worm wrestling contest.

The crew of the Tri-Oceanic mining operation is anxiously awaiting its return to dry land. I can understand why. If I was stuck underwater with this group of Neanderthals, air-heads, burnt out physicians and unsociable geologists, I'd be scratching the walls to get out. The dialogue is high brow as one of the group inquires to one well-endowed crew member, "Did you trip over your tits?" Get with it writers, can't you find a new fetish. This isn't *Porky's Meets The Monster From The Deep*.

During one of their last mining operations, the crew discovers a sunken Russian vessel called "Leviathan." They bring some of the ship's paraphernalia back to the station. One of the items is a bottle of good Russian Vodka. Unfortunately, the Russians spiked the juice with a genetic altering organism. The Rhodes Scholar of the crew, named Six-Pack (Daniel Stern) sneaks some of the refreshing stuff and he soon turns into a hideous monster, or was he already a hideous monster before he drank the stuff? I get so confused. The mayhem soon follows and the hi-tech special effects gross out begins. Lick the blood off your lips you special effects fans, it's the same old material we've seen dozens of times before. Let's face it, when you don't have an original plot or good execution of same, how much do big time effects really matter.

Veteran actor, Richard Crenna, does what he can with the cliché material given him. As the operations geologist, Peter Weller seems to be walking through the film just enough that he can get his pay check at the end of the work day. *Leviathan* is adequately directed by George Cosmatos. The real problem is the familiarity of plot and the dumb script. If you want to see a really good movie, directed by Cosmatos and well acted by Peter Weller, I suggest you rent *Of Unknown Origin*. It's not a big budget film but it is original, something *Leviathan* is not.



THE 1980-1989 HORROR SHOW MOVIE AWARDS BALLOT

All ballots should be received no later than December 15, 1989. Mail ballots to: Michael Arthur Betts, P.O. Box 865, Longmont, CO 80501.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Predator</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>The Night of the Comet</i> | |

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Manhunter</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Stepfather</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>The Hitcher</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Dressed To Kill</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Psycho II</i> | |

BLOOD SUCKERS

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Fright Night</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Lost Boys</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Near Dark</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>The Hunger</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Return To Salem's Lot</i> | |

WOLFMEN

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>The Howling</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>A Company of Wolves</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>American Werewolf In London</i> |
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ZOMBIES

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Re-Animator</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Return of the Living Dead</i> | |

HORROR FROM HELL

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Pumpkinhead</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Nightmare on Elm Street</i> | |

BIZARRE/BLACK HUMOR

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| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Basket Case</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Toxic Avenger</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Hollywood Chain Saw Hookers</i> |
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COMEDY

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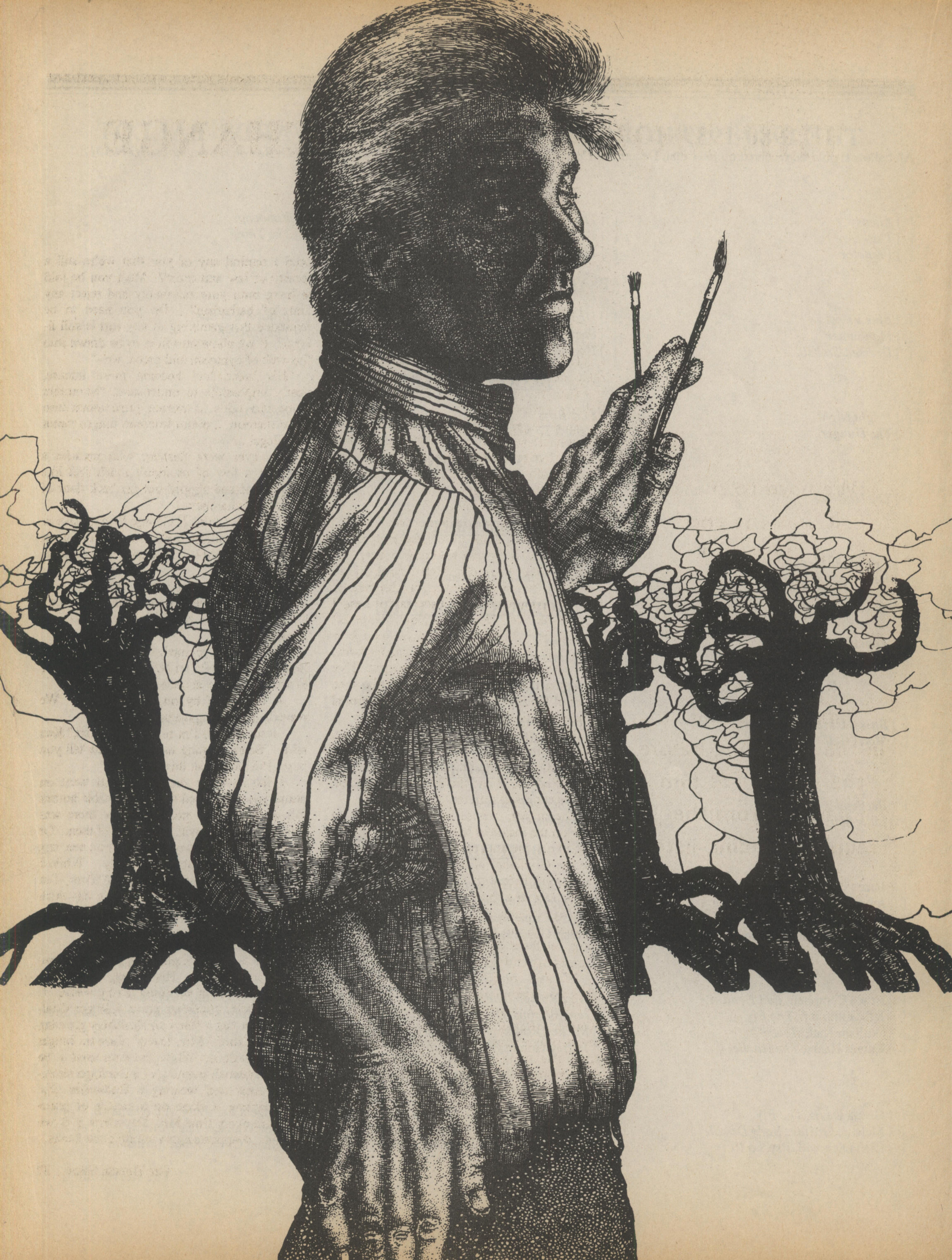
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| <input type="checkbox"/> John Carpenter, <i>The Thing</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> George A. Romero, <i>Monkeyshines</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Sam Raimi, <i>Evil Dead II</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> David Lynch, <i>Blue Velvet</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> David Cronenberg, <i>Dead Ringers</i> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brian De Palma, <i>Dressed To Kill</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Stuart Gordon, <i>Re-Animator</i> | |

ACTOR

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Bruce Campbell, <i>Evil Dead II</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Kurt Russell, <i>The Thing</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Terry O'Quinn, <i>Stepfather</i> |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> William Katt, <i>House</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Mickey Rourke, <i>Angel Heart</i> | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rutger Hauer, <i>The Hitcher</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Jeffrey Combs, <i>Re-Animator</i> | |

ACTRESS

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Diana Scarwid, <i>Psycho III</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Kelly Maroney, <i>Night of the Comet</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Glenn Close, <i>Fatal Attraction</i> |



THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

PAUL F. OLSON

I. The Circumstances

First the sun didn't set.

Then there was the day that all the deer showed up in town.

Then all the books in the local library became juvenile coloring books.

Then the river reversed itself and began flowing northward.

Then -- perhaps the cruelest cut of all -- that horrible week when our TVs would only play for five minutes every hour, reverting for the other fifty-five to blank snow.

Today the sky is green.

Yesterday it was pink.

I'm betting on yellow tomorrow.

We used to think it was the end of the world, but now I guess we know better. An author we had to read in high school, in the days long before the prudes got him banned from the required reading lists, said it best, I think. He said, "Hi Ho." Now that could mean a lot of things, but I always took it to mean that life just goes on, no matter what. That author's name was Kurt Vonnegut. I've been rereading his stuff lately, in the wee hours of the night. He's become my personal prophet in this new age.

There was a town meeting this morning, the first since those wild early days when Mrs. McCardle was stirring folks up with her talk of End Times and the Revelation to John. This meeting was different.

The mayor, whose beard had begun to grow on the *inside* of his cheeks, making him look like a late-autumn chipmunk and sound like the Godfather after a hit of really good acid, stood before the town council and the electorate with a chubby, paternal frown.

"My friends," he said. "I'm sorely troubled by the amount of wagering that's going on these days, this betting on all the changes in our world."

We said something. I'm not sure what, but it was appropriately noncommittal.

"Why, I understand that the line at Jerry Winkler's Rexall this morning was twenty-seven people long. What's more, I understand that none of those fine people were there to buy film or pick up a prescription. They were there because Jerry was giving good odds on maroon as a sky color tomorrow.

"Now, friends, the world has altered. But

need I remind any of you that we're still a society of law and order? Must you be told to hang onto your rationality and reject any hints of barbarism? Do you need to be reminded that gambling of any sort is still illegal? If we allow ourselves to be drawn into this web of cynicism and greed, we--"

His voice had become more intense, nearly impossible to understand: "Mmmmm mooormm odds ... mrrrom grrrummm mro grum maroon ... mmm frummm umgru mmm still illegal ..."

His eyes were flashing with preacher's fire, but a few of us didn't much feel like being saved and slipped out the back door of the council chambers.

"Whaddya think?" George Hoover said as we started walking uptown. "You think Winkler's right? Gonna be maroon tomorrow?"

I shrugged. "I've got ten bucks on yellow myself, at seven-to-one. But I can afford it. I won big on the falling trees pool last week."

Ken Tatum grunted. "You were damn lucky. Who would've believed all of Fisher's Woods would go at once like that?"

A bear rode by on a big Harley. We waved. The bear gave us the finger.

"Jesus Christ, I'm tired of this crap," Ken said. "Bears flipping us off. I gotta tell you boys, I'm sick of all this bushwah."

I left them at the corner and went on home, past what used to be respectable houses full of respectable people. Now there was something wrong with every one of them. Or maybe I shouldn't say *wrong*. You see, my values have been changing lately. While I used to have a rigid set of moral ideas, I'm finding it harder to believe there's any such thing as right or wrong left anymore.

Different, then.

I think that says it best.

Brian Forrester's place has portholes now instead of windows. His siding, which used to be a normal if not very flashy white, is now a vivid, shocking green. Roger Chalmers' place has a flurry of shrubbery growing out of the roof. Mrs. Davis' place no longer has a front door. Where the door used to be is an amateurish painting of a flamingo smoking a cigar and wearing a Budweiser cap. The painting is done on a swatch of green silk, and every time Mrs. Davis rips it down in anger, it appears again within a few hours.

We used to think
it was the end
of the world,
but now I guess
we know better.
An author
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in high school,
in the days long before
the prudes got him
banned from the
required reading lists,
said it best, I think.
He said, "Hi Ho."

But the worst ... sorry. The *most different* of all is poor Roy Hooper's house. No doors or windows. Just bright red siding. A steel roof of bright and glaring blue. None of us have seen Roy in the last two months. Our repeated attempts to get into his place have proved fruitless. That house of his is impregnable.

Different. Yessiree. If that's not different, I don't what is.

II. The Conjecture

My doorbell rang at two o'clock, but I didn't recognize it right away. It went ding-dong, the way it always used to go. But that was a bit of a surprise; for the last three weeks or so it had been chiming the Georgia Tech Fight Song.

I opened the door and saw Ken Tatum out there with Buddy Mills and Carl Brinkley. I hadn't see Carl lately and noticed right away that he had a nasty bruise underneath his left eye, no doubt from that violent, drunken bitch he's married to. The bruise wasn't really what I noticed, though. I mean, I saw it, but it was no big deal. Carl always has a shiner or a lump or a cut. What I noticed was that this particular bruise was a bright banana-yellow color, like gaudy clown make-up.

I nodded at everyone. "How do, gentlemen?"

"Not good, Elvin," Buddy said. "Can we come in?"

"Course you can." I stepped back from the door and ushered them through. "Let me get you all a beer."

I passed out cold Stroh's all around -- but when we opened the cans we found them full of fruit punch. Except for Ken, that is. He had come kind of cola.

"We gotta talk," Buddy said. "We've been hashin' this over all day and I ... that is, we think we got this thing knocked."

I figured he was talking about the changes, but the rest of it I didn't understand. "Just what do you mean by 'knocked'?" I asked.

"Well, y'know, Elvin. We got it knocked. Licked. Figgered out."

"Is that so?" I smiled. If I had a nickel for every time I'd heard that lately, I'd be wealthy. Especially since those nickels probably would have turned into gold pieces by now. "Tell me what you figured out."

Carl leaned forward, his shiner gleaming. "Jock Bartholomew," he said softly.

The name threw me. "Jock? What about him?"

Ken flashed a sad frown. "I'm disappointed in you, Elvin, truly I am. You're just about the smartest fella in town. Don't you

see the connection?"

I shook my head. "Afraid not."

"When did Bartholomew move here?"

"I don't know. Three, four months ago. April, I'd say."

"And when did all these changes start?"

"I remember *that* exactly," I said. "The middle of May. It was Mother's Day, the day the sun didn't go down."

Ken leaned back with a smug look. "Y'see?"

I was afraid I did, but something inside me wanted to play it ignorant a little longer. "What are you getting at?"

"Jesus!" Carl said. "It's Bartholomew! He's behind everything."

"Look at the evidence," Buddy told me. He pronounced it *ev-ee-dence*. "You ever known a stranger man than old Jock? He lives out there on the Blackwater Road, all by his lonesome. Hardly ever comes to town. When he does, he buys a lot of them natural foods and shit like that. And he even buys a lot of ..." He paused, and when he spoke again his voice was low and whispery. "... a lot of *books*, y'know, them paperbacks from over to the Rexall. And whenever anyone sees him out in the woods, he's joggin'. *Joggin'*, for Chrissakes!"

"Not only that," Ken added, "but what did he move here for, anyhow? That's what I wanna know. He don't know nobody in town."

"Well, that part's easy," I said. "That cabin belonged to his uncle. You fellas remember him. Pete Bracken. He used to go fishing with us. He used the place every summer for thirty years, and when he died last winter he left it to Jock."

"And how would you know that?" Carl said. "How would you know when none of us ever heard it?"

I shrugged. The fact that Jock and I had become good friends over the last few months wasn't such a big deal, but suddenly it didn't seem like the time to mention it. "Heard it around, I guess."

"Well," Ken said, "I don't care if he's related to the Goddamn Queen of England. It's too much to be coincidence. It--" He broke off suddenly, after taking a healthy swallow of his beer/cola. He coughed and grimaced and swallowed with great effort. "This crap just turned into vodka!"

Buddy grunted. "Y'see, Elvin? That bastard Bartholomew, he's got witchy powers. Why, I'll betcha he's listenin' in on us right now. He knows we're onto him, so he's gonna make it tough. Shit, everyone knows Ken can't hold his vodka."

I got up and paced across the room. This didn't make sense. For months we'd been living with the changes in our town. For months we'd accepted everything that came

our way with good grace and a fair measure of humor. Well, sure, there were the bad apples like old Mrs. McCardle, but they were the exceptions. The rest of us had learned to roll with the punches. Hi Ho, and all of that. Occasionally some fool would try to escape, but when the roads changed on him, circled around, and returned him to the town limits, that person would learn to go with the flow, just like the rest of us.

Then why the sudden reversal? I wondered. Why this new effort to pin blame?

I sighed, remembering the hints of growing anger I'd seen lately. A fist fight over last week's falling trees pool. Some bullet holes discovered in the WELCOME sign on the edge of town, which had just lately been reading $E = MC^2$. People claiming in soft voices to be fed up, like Ken this morning, saying, *I'm tired of this crap ... I'm sick of all this bushwah*.

I suppose everyone reaches a breaking point after awhile. In the final accounting, the best excuse for any of our actions is that we're only human. When we reach the point past which we can't or don't care to venture, well, then we want to strike back.

"What do you plan to do with this information?" I asked.

"Simple," Carl said. "We're gonna pay a visit to the bastard, make him 'fess up. Soon as he does that, we'll have Mike Weathers lock him in jail. Or meebe we'll go one better and just string him up ourselves."

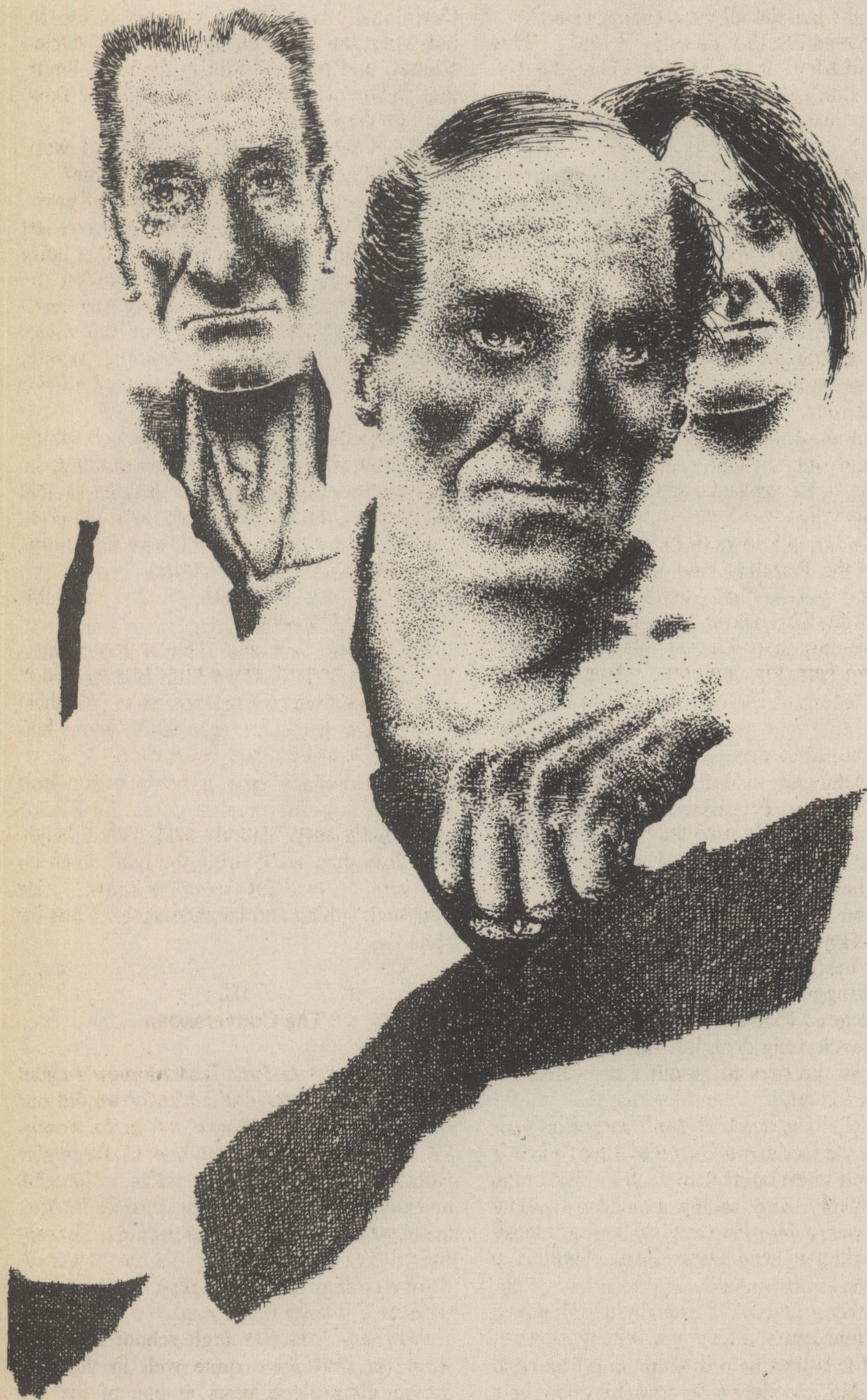
I frowned. "And if he tells you he's innocent?"

"That's easy," Buddy said with a laugh. "He does that, we'll string the lyin' witch up for sure. Just for spite, y'know." He hesitated, smiled and laughed again. "Just for spite."

III. The Conversation

I had been to Jock Bartholomew's cabin perhaps five times in all. Mostly we did our socializing when we'd meet out in the woods. I'd be cruising along on one of the walks Doctor Barker told me to take, or maybe heading off to one of my favorite fishing holes, and I'd run into him jogging. Except Jock didn't call it jogging. To him it was always *running*, and mister man, did he take it seriously? I hope to tell you.

He was a former high school track star who had also done quite well in the mile during his college years at one of the Ivy League schools. Although those days were long since past (he had spent the years in between bouncing around as a ranger for the National Park Service, a sometime high school teacher, a free-lance journalist, a photographer, a potter, and now a newborn



wilderness dweller and oil painter), he still lived for his long daily runs.

Even though I knew the Blackwater Road well, it still took me a fair amount of time to get to his cabin that day. I hadn't been there in at least a month, and there had been plenty of changes. No matter where I looked, I kept seeing things that made me stop and take a second glance.

There was the trailer that belonged to Joe and Ellen Friedrich. It used to be a regular old silver Airstream, but now its silvery hue was dull and reddish. After a moment I realized I was looking at what might be the world's only house trailer made out of brick.

Or then there was the grove of trees growing upside down, leafy crowns buried in the earth, roots waving in the air.

Or the little waterfall on the side of the road -- Drake Falls, we locals called it -- that was running backwards, the steady flow rising like a charmed snake out of the water pool, slithering ten feet straight up the rocks, and vanishing back into the woods.

Or the sign marking Buck Haven Road that now said BERLIN 140 km.

Or the squirrel that came up to me and asked -- in a fine French accent, too, I might add -- for directions to town. That made my mouth drop open in astonishment. And *that* made the little critter laugh. When I hurried off, I could swear I heard the beast singing "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" in a pleasant falsetto -- like Wayne Newton during his glory days, if you know what I mean.

I got to Jock's place an hour after leaving home. It's a trip that normally wouldn't take more than thirty, maybe thirty-five minutes.

"Elvin! It's good to see you! What brings you all the way out here?"

He had his easel set up near the cabin, and there he was, perched on his stool, trying to capture the big oak that stood at the northwest corner of his property.

"Howdy, Jock. It's nice to see you, too."

"You want a beer? I picked up a fresh case yesterday." He started to rise, but I waved him back down.

"We've got to talk," I said. "It's ... it's about the changes."

He grinned. "Ah, you've returned for some more of my crackpot Dartmouth philosophy." He put his brushes aside and made himself comfortable.

I ambled over and looked at his painting. It was fine, although that weird greenish sky that had been hanging over us all day had played hell with the tones. "Very nice," I said, absently. "And no, I'm afraid it's not philosophy I'm after today."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh?"

"No, it's ... something else. You know we've talked about the changes a lot. You mentioned the way it might be the last

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punishment of an angry God, or maybe just the -- what did you call it? The vivid manifestation of a universe gone mad? I'll tell you straight, Jock, that stuff's over my head, but in a crazy kind of way it made sense to me. I've got no trouble believing it could be either of those things, or any of a hundred others. And I liked the other thing you said, about how maybe it was all part of a test, a cosmic exam. Do you remember that? We were sitting at Pike Lake when you came up with that one. You said our humanity was being tested, and to pass we had to hold up under pressure."

"Yes," Jock said, smiling. "I remember."

"I think I liked that answer best of all. I mean, I don't know how to fight against an angry God, and I sure don't know anything about universes going crazy. But a test I can handle. I can take the pressure. I can fight the strain. That's a snap. I know how to keep on keeping on."

Jock looked troubled. Maybe he had picked up on the worried note in my voice. He might have seen something in my face. I'm not sure.

"Elvin," he said. "What's wrong?"

"It's some of the other fellas in town," I told him. "They don't care about God and tests and all that. All of a sudden they have their own ideas. They came to my place a little while ago to tell me they've got the changes all figured out."

"Yes?"

"Yes," I said.

And I told him.

As I talked about what Buddy and the others had said, Jock grew noticeably pale. At one point he picked up a paint brush and held it lightly between his thumb and index finger; I could see it trembling.

When I was finished he turned a sad-eyed gaze on me. He didn't say anything for a full minute. Then, softly, he said: "You don't believe them, do you?"

"Hell, no! Whatever else happens, we're still friends. And even if we weren't ... well, good Lord, I know nonsense when I hear it."

He sighed. "Thank you for that."

"You've got to understand something," I said, rushing on in a lame attempt to explain. "The way it is with outsiders and newcomers in a small town, they're just naturally under suspicion. And you don't act like most of the folks around here. Your reading and all that running you do, it's--"

"For godssakes, Elvin, I know all about that! I was prepared for it when I moved here. But if you ask me, there's a pretty big difference between second glances in the hardware store and accusing someone of witchcraft. What next? Assuming they don't string me up, as they so quaintly put it, what's their next move? I sold some paintings at that



little craft shop on Winthrop Street last week. Are they going to storm the place and rip those paintings off the wall? Burn them in the street?"

Truth to tell, I thought they very well might. I had seen those paintings. They were wonderful representations of the way the town looked with all the changes, the strange skies, the funny houses, even some of the people, like the mayor with his inside-out beard. It wasn't unrealistic to suppose that Buddy Mills and the others would interpret those pictures as admissions of guilt, Jock's way of bragging about the things he had done. But I didn't see any point in saying that, not then.

"That doesn't matter," I said. "What's important is to get you out of here, before they come rushing in all half-cocked and do something that can't be taken back."

He was trembling again. "What do you propose?"

"There's a road," I said. "I drove down it a few weeks ago, just for a look around. Things are pretty strange out there. I saw a house made out of something that looked like cotton candy and a car that I'm pretty sure had feet instead of wheels. But I kept driving and I got almost all the way to Dollarton before everything went topsy-turvy and I found myself back here. Dollarton, Jock. That's almost thirty miles away, and more than twice as far as you can get on any of the other roads. I think we ought to try going down there again."

"I don't like the idea of running," he said. "Perhaps if I met with your friends and explained--"

"Believe me, they're not in the mood for explanations. And if you tried any of your philosophy on them, they'd string you up for sure. Think for a minute. They want to hang you because things have gone wacky around

here. But that's not the real reason. When you boil it down, they're after you because you like to paint and jog. Men who take those things as lynching offenses can't be reasoned with. We've got to run. Later, if things ever calm down, we can come back and try talking sense to them."

He didn't say anything for a time, but finally nodded and allowed me to lead him into the cabin. He pulled a suitcase from under the cot on which he slept, and together we began packing whatever clothes we could find.

We had really only gotten started when we heard the mob coming down the Blackwater Road.

IV. The Confrontation

"Yo! Witch! C'mon out! We wanna talk to you!"

They were out there, ringing the cabin. Twenty or thirty strong, their babbling voices blended into a shrewish chorus, but I could hear Buddy Mills' voice cutting clearly above all the rest: *Yo! C'mon out!*

When I peeked through a chink in the cabin wall, I could see pale and angry faces. I could see hands clenched into fists. I could see sunlight glinting off gleaming rifle barrels.

I was amazed at how rapidly things had happened. One minute you have a couple of friends batting around a crazy idea, the next you're on the edge of something irrevocable. This morning things had been normal, or at least as normal as they had been for the last few months. We had been talking and laughing as buddies, watching armies of deer trot down the main street, ducking out of the way of motorcycle-riding bears, lining up at the Rexall to bet on the sky color. There had

been some baffled amusement in our voices, a touch of weariness, perhaps even a trace of fear. But there hadn't been anger. Not anger like this.

I suppose I had been deluding myself. I had been pretending that if I just kept moving straight ahead, if I waited for the mad universe to find its sanity once again, if I read enough Vonnegut and kept the faith ... well, I guess I had figured that if I did all of those things, I'd wake up some day and find everything back to normal. The bottom line? I had supposed that if I just kept laughing long enough and hard enough, that invisible cosmic comedian would tire and move on to find a new audience somewhere else.

What I hadn't noticed was that while I was busy laughing, a subtle line had been crossed. My friends, it seemed, had been nurturing something much darker than laughter.

"We're trapped," Jock whispered.

I shook my head. "No. I'm going out there. I'll talk to them. With any luck, that'll bring the ones out back around to the front. I'll keep them busy. You slip out the back way and head into the woods. Wait for me at Pike Lake. I'll meet you there later and show you that road to Dollarton."

"Elvin, they'll kill you."

"No, they won't. They won't much like that I'm here, and they'll hate me when I tell them I'm your friend. But they know me, they trust me ... or they used to, at any rate. I'll be able to stall them long enough for you to escape."

Jock sighed. He still looked pale, but who could blame him? Like all of us, his life had been turned upside down lately. But for him it was worse than that. Today his life had just been flipped over *again* -- and in a hell of a big way.

"All right," he said. "We'll try it."

Outside, Buddy Mills raised his voice above the crowd again: "Goddammit, witch! Get out here right now! You got five minutes before we blow our way in there!"

Jock hurried to finish packing. While he gathered his things together, I wandered around the cabin, looking at his books and canvases. I walked over to the fireplace and studied the collection of aging track trophies on the mantle. I picked one up and read the inscription:

Osborne High School Track Team
ALL AROUND CHAMPION
1963
JOCK THOMAS BARTHOLOMEW

It wasn't fair. The man liked to run. He liked to paint. He liked the solitude of the woods. He liked to read. As I did. All he wanted was the chance to start a new, quiet life in a new, quiet place.

A cosmic test. A cosmic joke. And in the grand tradition of mankind we had turned the joke back on ourselves.

Two minutes later Jock signaled that he was ready. I put the trophy down and pulled in a deep breath. I nodded. A moment later I went out to face the crowd.

I suppose you're thinking they tore me apart out there. But they didn't. Once they got over being stunned by my presence at the cabin, they seemed surprisingly ready to listen. At least in the beginning.

I told them honestly that Jock and I were friends. I also said that I thought what they were doing was small-minded and cruel and insane, and I told them that I'd come to warn Jock of their asinine intentions. After that I ventured off into the Land of Lies, stating that I'd found the cabin empty when I got there, that Jock had obviously run away some time earlier.

"I knew it," Carl Brinkley said. "That proves he's a witch. The bastard knew we was comin'. He got away before we could punish him."

I shook my head sadly. "He isn't a witch, Carl. He's a man, just like you and me."

"The hell he is," Buddy said. "Men like you and me don't make shrubs grow outta Roger Chalmers' roof. They don't make the fish in the river turn red and blue. They don't make the sky look like a Vegas neon sign. Or at least men like *me* don't." He gave me a long, steady stare. "I don't know about you anymore, Elvin."

The crowd gave a low, rumbling murmur.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. "What made you turn all of a sudden? This morning we were getting along fine. We sat together and laughed while Mayor Chipmunk scolded us for gambling. Nobody was talking about witches then."

"We're tired," somebody said. "We're decent people. We'll take the crap someone throws at us for a while. We'll stand for being pushed around a little. But eventually--"

"Eventually you push back," I said, remembering my very thoughts on that subject earlier. "I can understand that, believe me I can. Do you think *I* like what's been happening here? Watching my dog stand up on two legs and run away from me? Listening to my doorbell play that damn Ramblin' Wreck song? Trying to rescue poor Roy Hooper from that fortress he's trapped in? Do you think I've *enjoyed* that?"

"You've been laughin' a lot through all of it," Ken Tatum observed.

"So have you! Jesus, so have all of you! We had to laugh or go insane! That's what the betting was for, wasn't it? That's why we had the sky pools and the falling trees pool

and--"

"Just how *did* you win that tree pool, Elvin?" Buddy said softly, and the crowd murmured again.

Somewhere, two or three rows back in the throng, I heard the click of someone snapping off the safety on his gun. That was all it took. I bolted and ran. I scrambled around the side of the cabin and darted into the woods before they had even absorbed the fact that I was gone.

But once they absorbed it, they took on the chase with fierce enthusiasm.

V. The Consequences

I found Jock waiting at Pike Lake, just as we'd planned. We took to the woods together, running as fast as we could while the angry townspeople -- my old friends, I kept thinking -- followed. We ran up hills that hadn't been there before and past thick stands of pine that were coated with glistening sleeves of shining silver. We jumped over creeks of bright yellow water and scurried past animals that waved at us or swore in perfect English at being disturbed. On and on, farther and farther we ran, until the green sky darkened and the pinpricks of red and purple stars had appeared overhead.

The world had changed, I thought. Not right or wrong, not better or worse, just different. Perhaps we would get to Dollarton and find normality in control, or maybe we'd get there and find that it, too, had changed, that the whole world had been affected. Or maybe, just maybe, we'd never get there at all. We had to face that possibility, I knew, but we also had to keep going, keep trying.

After several long and painful hours even Jock, the expert runner, was fading. We tried to cheer each other on, but it was difficult. Our bodies ached and our lungs burned. No matter how fast we went or which direction we ran, the hunters stayed close behind.

The world had changed. Yes. And we all cope with change in our own ways. Some of us laugh. Some of us paint. Some of us run. Maybe somewhere there was someone writing new songs about all the differences. We read. We talk. And some gather in angry clusters to look for the solution.

Changes.

No matter how drastic the movement of the world, there are always a few things that resist it, some elements that cannot be altered. The spirit of man. The fate of the different.

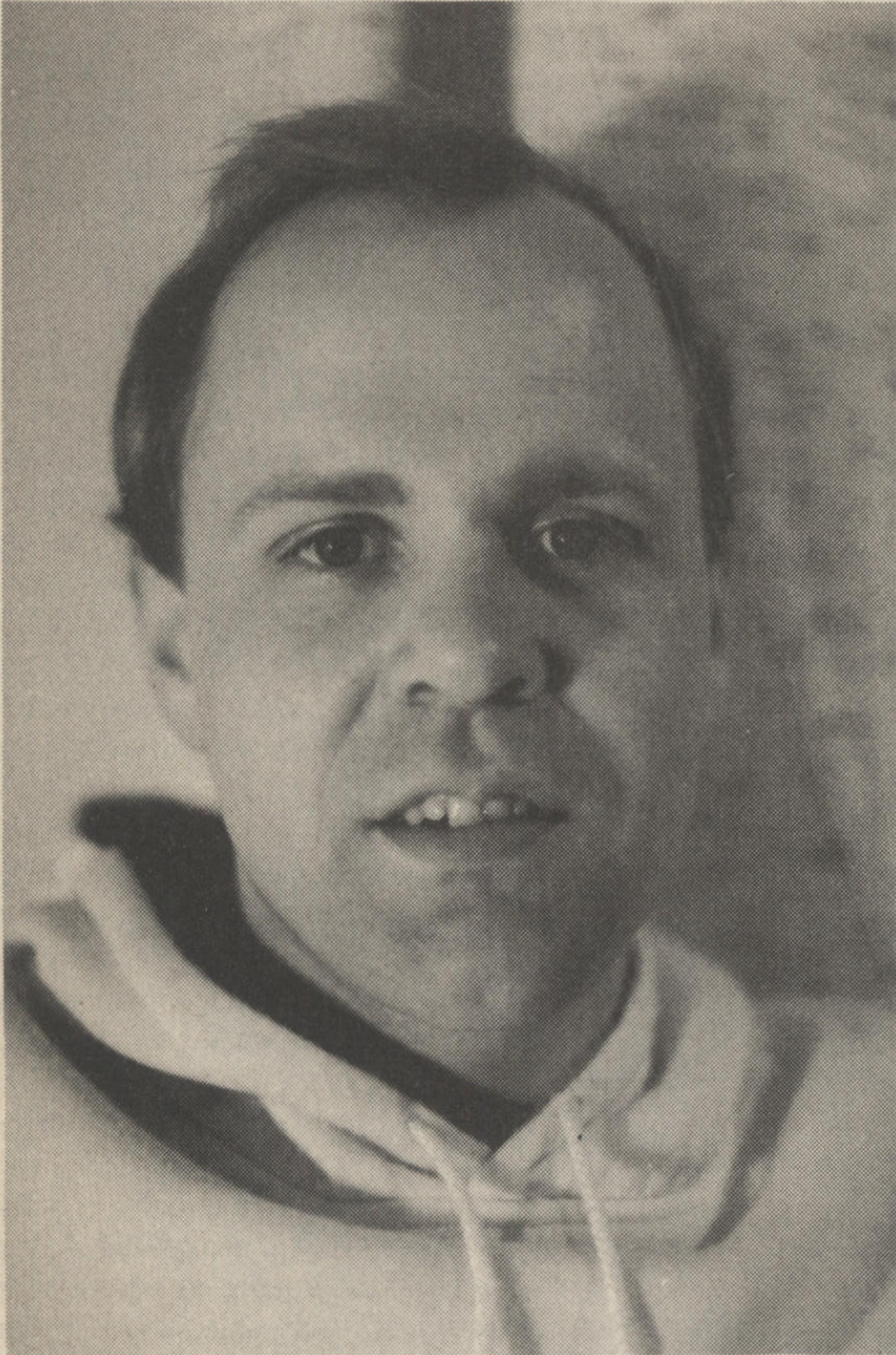
On and on, into the night.

Hi Ho.

The mob howled in the darkness like wolves.



PAUL F. OLSON



THS: *First, and most important, you're a new father. Congratulations. You want to tell us a little bit about that?*

OLSON: Thanks. You know, it was the middle of January when Erin and I got the big news -- that the baby we were so confidently preparing for was actually twins! Since then it's been a wild few months. Trying to squeeze more room out of an already overcrowded nursery; buying a second crib; arranging to borrow a second bassinet; extra tests; lots of extra doctors' appointments. This past winter just went by in a whirl.

Even in the end, there was that sense of crazy speed. After a couple of false starts, Erin finally went into the hospital at ten o'clock in the morning on March 18th. A couple of tests, a few conversations with doctors, and bang! The twins were born at 2:15 that afternoon. That's fast by most standards. They were delivered by C-section, and I was lucky enough to be there for the whole thing. It was wonderful.

So far we're all doing fine. Erin's recuperating quickly. The twins, Ingrid and Amanda, are thriving, and I think I'm proving that there's a certain amount of genetic parenting skill, or instinct, or something, in both the female *and* male. It's fun.

I'm also finding it rewarding to learn that I'm not quite as single-minded as I thought. Like many writers, I was always capable of great, even arrogant, one-dimensional-ness. While trying so hard not to create cardboard characters, we become cardboard characters ourselves. In the old days, you could give me six pages of solid writing a day and an en-

tertaining baseball game to watch at night ... give me that and enough Cheetos, and I was in heaven. Now I'm discovering all sorts of new adventures and enjoying them tremendously. My God, I'm a family man! And there really *is* life beyond the keyboard.

THS: *Have you had a chance yet to think about how the birth of the twins will impact on your writing? The impact on your time? The influence on story ideas, etc.?*

OLSON: Heh-heh-heh. Seriously, I haven't had much time to think about *anything*. This is ... what? March 27th? The girls are only nine-days old today, and we've only been home from the hospital for five days! That Ingrid and Amanda are going to have an impact on my writing goes almost without saying. All experience influences a writer's work, or at least it better.

The impact on my time is going to be tremendous. I've known that for weeks, and I've tried to prepare myself for it as best I can. When Erin goes back to work around the time this issue appears, I get to be a full-time writer/housedaddy. Life's going to get *very* interesting. Still, there are interruptions and there are interruptions. I'd sure as hell rather be interrupted for a five o'clock feeding or a seven-fifteen changing than by a call from a whining office equipment representative who wants to sell me the definitive diskette file system.

As for story ideas, well, those will come. It's too soon to go hunting for any right now. Perhaps I'll do the ultimate evil-twin-C-section-spawn-of-Satan-operating-room story. Or maybe not.

THS: *You've been writing since your teens, but most recently you've had your first novel purchased by NAL. It's a vampire novel, right?*

OLSON: All right, all right! I confess! You can take the hot coals away from my feet and loosen the thumbscrews a little. It's called *The Night Prophets*, and yes, it's a vampire novel.

THS: *Was it difficult to take on a tradition as strong to the horror genre as vampirism, or did the tradition make the process easier?*

OLSON: Writing it was easier, I think, because of the tradition, and because I wanted to do a vampire novel that was, in most ways, a *traditional* vampire story. I've always been a vampire fanatic, but frankly I'm sick to death of books that try to change the old myths. I'm tired of vampires who really can go out in the daytime or aren't afraid of garlic or have no reaction to a crucifix or drink holy water like wine. I'm tired of vampires who regret their actions and work out their guilt on psychiatrist's couches. I wanted old-fashioned vampires, albeit in a modern setting, and so it was fun to work within the strong framework provided by all the old myths.

THS: *You care to tell us a little more about the book?*

OLSON: In all honesty, I don't enjoy talking about my work. When a book or story is progress, I won't discuss it at all, even to family and close friends. Once it's done and sold, the talking is a little easier, but it's still uncomfortable for me to hash things over with others. NAL will be publishing the book this fall, and I guess I'm naive enough to hope that it will stand for itself once it appears. In the meantime, all I really want to say is this: it's about televangelists who are ... yep, you guessed it ... vampires. It's a novel custom-made to carry the typical disclaimer about similarities to persons living or dead. Or should I say, living or *undead*?

THS: *Okay, without getting into any details, how about your second novel? Does it also take on a genre tradition? And was it an easier book to write, knowing you had recently completed and sold your first book?*

OLSON: For starters, calling *The Night Prophets* and its follow-up a first and second book is inaccurate. I'd written at least five complete novels and countless portions of novels before *The Night Prophets* sold. I think I wrote something in the neighborhood of four million words before breaking through. But anyway, yes, the next book is finished and the one after that -- my third one that's really my eighth one -- is nearing the two-thirds-complete mark.

The writing of the "second" book wasn't really any easier, since I'd finished all but the last seventy-five pages or so before my agent sold *The Night Prophets*. I was doing it just like all the others, forging ahead on blind hope and goofy optimism, which is probably the only way to succeed in this business.

Does it take on a genre tradition? Yes, I suppose it does. The catch is, I'm not sure *what* genre. It's more science fiction than horror, I think, in that it deals with an alien presence. The only thing I know for sure is that it's not a western. I'm saving my westerns for later.

THS: *You've also done several stints as an editor. First, as the editor of the well-respected Horrorstruck magazine, then as co-editor of an anthology of original ghost stories called Post Mortem. Has being an editor influenced you as a writer? And if it has, can you tell us what that influence has been?*

OLSON: It hasn't influenced me in the standard way. By that I mean, not in the way that I now know how to differentiate good writing from bad, or that my grammar's gotten better, or anything like that. But it has taught me more about what goes on in editorial offices, and it's given me a larger appreciation for what an editor does. It's made me more patient in my dealings with editors -- and patience in that regard is something I think a lot of writers could use.

Perhaps the biggest thing I learned by being an editor is that it's just about the worst job you can take if you want time to write. I'm in the middle of an article right now, something I'm doing for the HWA Newsletter, about this topic. I started *Horrorstruck* in order to have more time to write, but instead ended up with less, far less. Of course, editing anthologies is different than doing a magazine. I hope to do more anthologies in the future, lots of them. The trick is to keep five words in the forefront of my brain: WRITING IS MY REAL WORK.

THS: *I know you've had a number of short stories published. Are you as comfortable writing short stories as you are writing novels?*

OLSON: No sir, no way, no how. Novels are fun. Short stories are *hard!* I think I have a handle on what a good novel is and what it takes to write one. I don't mean that I write good novels myself, but that I understand them. It's easy to set the goals -- dialogue, pacing, characterization -- and go after them, even if you end up failing. But I don't think I've ever really understood short stories. I know what I like, but I'm not sure why. Even when I do know, it's like a destination too far away and on the other side of too much difficult terrain to ever reach in one piece. I don't think I'll ever quite know how you create a wonderful story, how you take all the elements of a great novel and condense them from a sprawling 100,000 words down to three thousand.

Still, I keep battering my head against the wall. I keep telling myself that some day I'll finally write what I consider to be the perfect short story. It won't be like any of the other stories I've written in the past, none of which I'm all that comfortable with. It will be a gem of concision. It will be a delight. And when I'm done with it, I won't even try to market it. I'll just hit "Save," turn off my computer, and die a happy man.

THS: *What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses as a writer -- both in relation to short stories and in relation to novels, because I think we both agree there are marked differences in the two forms.*

OLSON: I'm not sure I have any real strengths as a short story writer. Well, narrative, maybe. People have told me that my short story narrative is strong, that I can keep them reading all the way to the end of even my weakest tales. You'd be surprised the numbers of letters I've gotten, saying, "Your story really sucked, I hated it, but it sure was a good read," or words to that effect.

Novels are a different animal, of course. I hope my narrative strengths are strong in that area, too. I once got a rejection letter for a novel that said I wrote in a commercially-viable, gripping, roller coaster style. I was thrilled to hear that, and didn't even care very much that the book was rejected. Beyond that, I'd have to say compassion is my biggest strength. I *feel* for what my characters go through. I try as hard as I can to translate that feeling to the page. It's my answer, I suppose, to the mountains of novels being published today where the writers actually seem to enjoy making their characters suffer, where death and agony are treated lightly. I can't murder my protagonists in awful ways and then dance on their graves. To even think of doing it disgusts me. I'm tired of the smarmy treatment of suffering in horror novels today, and I guess my strength is that I'm willing to fight back with sensitivity and tears.

THS: *Along a little bit different lines -- describe yourself as a writer.*

OLSON: A fast worker. Usually reliable. A little lazier now than I used to be, which is a frightening thing. Impatient. Always wanting to move on to something new, often to the detriment of my current project. A blind shambler (I type a sentence, and then a second, and a third, and so on, with no plot in mind, no characters, no direction whatsoever. If I'm lucky, I can do 100,000 words in that way before I run out of steam). Honest. Trustworthy. Loyal. And I always wear clean underwear when I sit down to work, in case I sprain a wrist typing and have to go to the hospital.

THS: *And what kind of goals have you set for yourself as a writer?*

OLSON: Sometimes I'll set goals about publishing certain things by certain dates, but those can be destructive when you fail to meet your self-imposed deadline. Of course you can keep moving the deadline back. That's a neat little trick that works like this: I once wanted to publish my first short story by the age of twenty-one. When that birthday came and went, I sheepishly decided the age of twenty-five would have to do. That one I ended up beating by two full years. A triumph! I wanted to publish a novel by twenty-five, missed, moved it to twenty-seven, still missed, and moved it to thirty. That one I finally made ... I guess. I sold my first novel at the age of twenty-nine, though it won't actually appear until seven or eight months *after* my thirtieth birthday.

Then there are the less-defined, more free-floating goals that I set all the time. I want to improve continually. I want only to work on things that matter to me, that make me happy. I want to try new things and keep from falling into ruts. I want to grow. That kind of thing. You have to set goals like that in this business, you absolutely have to. This is lonely work, with little feedback, little positive support, and far too many hard knocks. You've got to find ways to let yourself know that you're progressing. Otherwise you'll lose your mind.

THS: *How about this one then: what's the best advice you've ever received in relation to writing? And have you been able to apply it?*

OLSON: Concentrate on novels. The world is full of full-time novelists, just as the welfare lines are full of starving short story writers. That's all true, and I have been able to focus my energies toward novels

a bit more in the last few years. But as we talked about before, the lure of the perfect short story is a powerful magnet. It keeps pulling at me, particularly when the novel writing is temporarily bogged down. As difficult as short story writing is, it can sometimes be an escape. I've found that the best thing I can do is to work on the novels pretty much full-time, only turning to a shorter piece when the need to do so becomes overpowering.

The only other advice is the old saw about persistence, and boy, is that the truth. You've got to believe in yourself when nobody else does. You've got to keep heading up the mountain, even when the avalanches keep knocking you on your ass. If you don't have the stomach to swallow a lot of losses before you make your gains, then you're better off pumping gas. Somebody once told me that, in precisely those words. I suppose I knew it all along, but once in a while it pays to hear it from someone else. It's easier to take to heart that way.

THS: *For the most part, you've come up through the small press, having a number of short stories published there before moving on to your novels. I'm curious what your feelings are about the small press field.*

OLSON: I could answer this question twenty different ways on twenty different days. Ideally, I think the small press is a wonderful training ground, a stepping stone into the real world of big-time publishing. It's the minor leagues for artists and writers. It's a place to learn and grow, to make mistakes without damaging yourself too badly, to experiment, to test your wings. The small press is the place where we play before smaller crowds while teaching ourselves to read the signs, to lay down the perfect bunt, and with any luck at all, to send the perfect fastball over the plate for a textbook strike.

The danger is that the small press can become a deadly trap. It's real easy to let success in the pages of little magazines go to your head, to become content with that and stop looking for bigger and better things. Why risk rejection from Houghton Mifflin when you can collect another SPWAO writing award with such little effort? Even worse are the folks who take the risk, who attempt to interest the big boys in their stuff, but go running back to the small press safety net after one or two failures. These are the folks who let small press rule their lives, until it becomes a fantasy. Magazines with a circulation of a hundred copies are just as good as the big slicks, they think. Acceptance by the editor of *Zulu Horror Stories From Mars* is equally as valid as acceptance by an editor at Doubleday. Then they get wrapped up in those famous, ongoing small press disputes. Rather than concentrating on good writing, they join the debate over whether or not you should include a cover letter with your story, or if it's all right to handwrite your manuscripts instead of typing them. Gradually, the act of writing becomes less important than talking about it, and after that all hope is lost.

If I sound overly zealous about this, it's just because I've been on both sides of the fence. I've been a small press writer and editor, and I know. The small press is great -- as long as you don't pretend it's more than it is, as long as you always remember you're toiling in the minors and don't give up your shot at the bigs.

THS: *Do you have any publishing nightmare stories you'd like to share with the rest of us? It seems all new writers have one or two.*

OLSON: I've got a few, sure. No more than anyone else, I suppose, although I am capable of great bouts of self-pity when I convince myself that everyone else gets the gold and all I get is the shaft. I've had an agent who held onto my stuff for a full year, never once answering my letters and never submitting a thing. When she finally returned my work, it came back in the exact order I'd sent it to her, a novel partial and about ten short stories, nearly three hundred pages in all, each page neatly sun-faded across the upper right-hand corner from sitting in the same spot on her desk for so long. I've had the usual number of

magazines and anthologies buy my stuff and then go out of business before publication, sometimes before payment. I've had a big house buy something, tell my agent that they love me, and then refuse to return my phone calls for months. Once, nearly ten years ago, when I needed all the confidence boosts I could get, I was contacted by a writer who said he liked my style and would I collaborate with him on a short story? I wrote back, saying, sure, of course! To this day, I haven't heard from him. It destroyed me at the time, but in the back of my mind I'm always hoping I'll hear from him again someday. I mean, Jeez, I hate to blame him. You know how slow the post office can be sometimes.

THS: *This is something I'd like to have each of the writers in this issue address: would you please develop your own question, ask it of yourself and answer it here?*

OLSON: What a chance to make a fool of myself. I love it! Actually, I've got too many questions to ask. Why does so much modern horror seem so stagnant? Why does the field always seem on the verge of a boom that never quite comes? Why do so many good novelists want to be screenwriters, when even the best movies are clearly an inferior form when compared to prose? Why do people continue to read so-called splatterpunk? When are the Milwaukee Brewers going to win the American League East again?

I suppose, if I really had to narrow this all down to one question, it would be this: Horror literature is wonderful, escapist entertainment. But don't we have a responsibility to address larger issues, to probe the world at large, the world beyond demons and chain saws? Don't we have a responsibility, given our special knowledge of the darker side of things, to help bring a little light into the world? I ask this question because I really don't know the answer myself. In my own work, I do try to shed some light. I try to alternate between "good reads" and certain nobler goals. Even when I fail, I feel better for trying. I think Somebody Up There -- God, or whatever you want to call Her -- has given us horror writers a great gift. We've got the knack for examining things that make others turn away. We've got the courage to pick up the rocks and touch the slimy things beneath. It just seems to me that we owe the world more than bloody massacres, that we have to at least attempt to pay back a little of what we've been given.

Jesus, that sounds pompous. Especially from someone like me, who reads as many trashy novels as anyone. I still believe it. I just hope you won't hold it against me the next time you catch me reading one of Mickey Spillaine's books for the third time.

THS: *Well, I think we're pretty much at the end. Any parting comments?*

OLSON: Just this. It's not necessarily what I *want* my epitaph to read, but rather what I'm sure some wise person will write on my stone nevertheless. *Here lies Paul F. Olson. He died of strangulation. The poor fool could breath so well with one foot in his mouth that he tried to breath with two.*

HORROR WRITERS OF AMERICA

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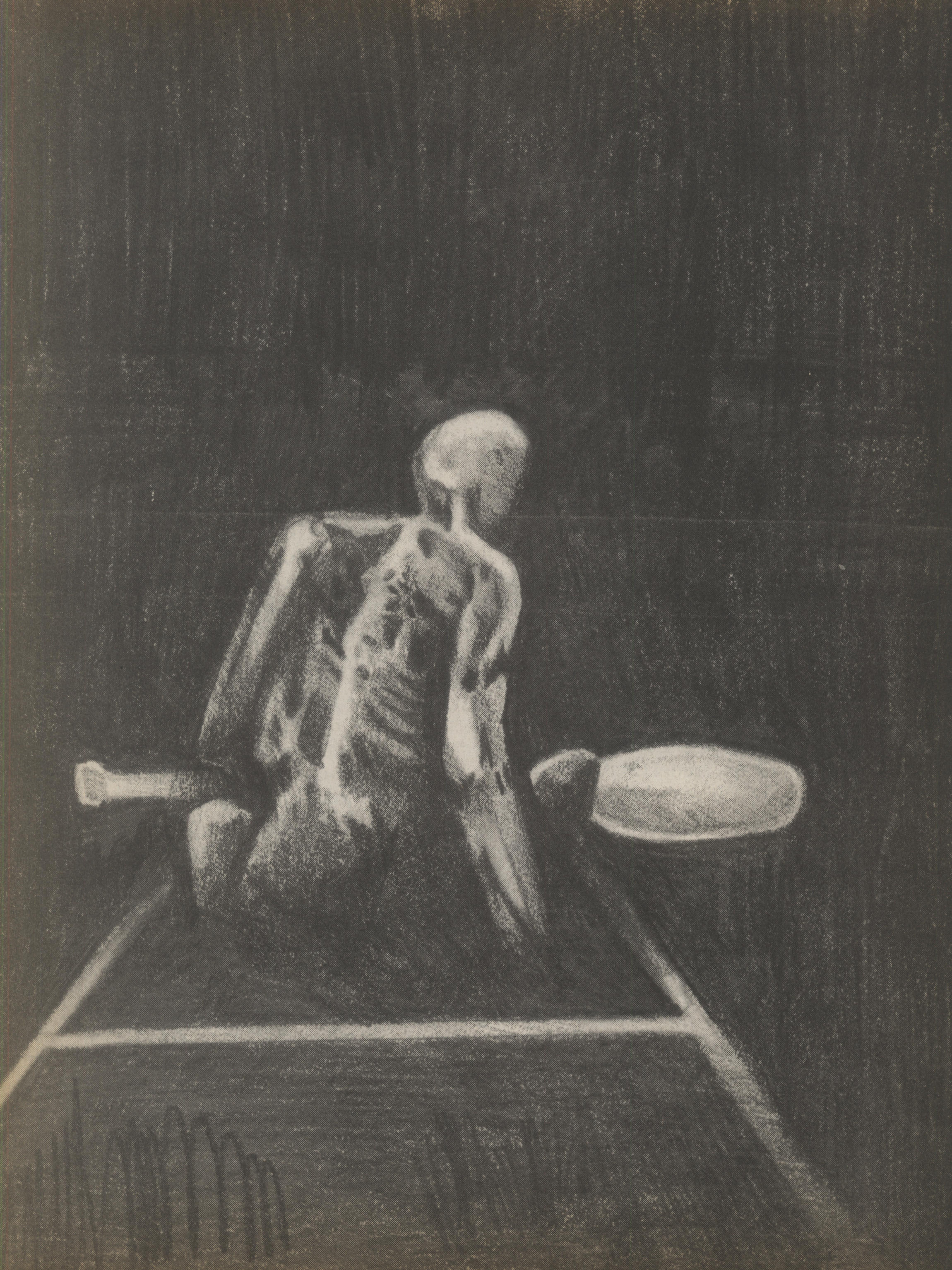
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"I'm a gamer." Those were the three words Art had scrawled on a piece of scrap paper and placed over his mirror. I'M A GAMER. They helped get him going every morning, and pushed him on when times were hard.

GUIDES

PAUL F. OLSON

Art Madigan had been living in Kelly's Corners his entire life. From his childhood on Truman Street in the town proper, he had succeeded to a cabin on Raymer Road, then to a trailer on County 630 (known locally as That Long and Dusty Stretch), and finally to his current living accommodations, a cabin on a large lot at Conley Lake. Since the quality and overall *worthwhileness* of your life in Kelly's Corners was based on how far out of town you lived, Art considered his own life to have been one of spectacular upward mobility.

He made a living the same way most of his friends did -- working at odd jobs, hauling trash, raking leaves, splitting wood, watching cabins for the summer people during the off-season. But he considered his true calling to be the same as his father's, and *his* father's before him. He considered himself a guide, and a damn good one. Nobody knew Conley Lake as well as he, or the other lakes in the area, either, for that matter. No one could find the walleye with such unerring accuracy. While the two fish and hunt shops in town offered "professional" guides with fancy bass boats and fish-finders and hourly rates, for a relatively humble forty dollars a day, Art could take even the greenest-horn out and come back with the limit every time.

Or so he had always thought. So he had staked his reputation--and even more importantly, his *ego*--on for the last thirty-nine years. But on the second Saturday in May something went wrong. On that day he went out with Mr. and Mrs. Bert Evans of Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, and what did they catch? Nothing. Not a walleye, not a perch, not even a goddamned sunfish.

"Perhaps we should try over there," Bert Evans said after more than three hours, pointing across the lake at the crooked finger of Big Walker Point.

Art laughed. "Only if you wanna catch rocks and stumps. Water's too shallow over there. With this bright sun, there ain't gonna be any walleye within a half-mile of the place."

Evans shrugged. "With all due respect, Mr. Madigan, there don't seem to be any here, either."

Art ignored the comment and kept on trolling, working the southern shore of the lake with everything he had. After another hour he pattered over to Merriam Bay and tried there, and then tried the unnamed inlet near Kramer's Rest-Ezy Resort. No luck. By three-thirty, the Evanses were growing noticeable cranky.

Art couldn't understand it. Six hours and not a catch? Not a strike? Not even a nibble? If nothing else, the little guys should have been pecking their leeches and worms away, and yet he'd only had to rebait twice, and then only because the bait had grown too pale and water-logged to be attractive to any sensible fish.

At the end of the day, as he was bidding goodbye to his customers (putting on a brave front that even he didn't believe), Bert Evans stopped him, and said, "I suppose you don't offer a money-back guarantee."

Art was startled. He had never thought of that; he'd never *needed* to think of it. "Sorry," he said, recovering his composure. "I can't do that. But I'll make you a deal. Come back any time and I'll take you out again for ... oh, let's say half-price."

The Evanses looked at each other and laughed. The sound of it was like the tail of a whip laid against Art's face, and it echoed in his head for a painfully long time afterward.

He had a sign taped off over his bathroom mirror. On it were three words which he had taken from a late night movie -- a black-and-white war film -- he'd first seen as a teenager. In the movie some toeheaded, freckle-faced private had just gotten shot in the chest. As he lay dying, his sergeant ran up to him and said something along the lines of, "Davis! Davis! Are you all right?" To which toeheaded Davis had replied, "Don't worry about me, Sarge. I'm gonna be fine. I'm a gamer." Those were the three words Art had scrawled on a piece of scrap paper and placed over his mirror. I'M A GAMER. They helped get him going every morning, and pushed him on when times were hard. They formed his credo, his entire system of belief.

Because he was a gamer, Art told himself repeatedly that his experience with Mr. and

Mrs. Evans had been a fluke, a bizarre one-shot, an aberration. But as the chilly mornings and pleasant afternoons of May faded into the heat and humidity of June, his confidence was shaken.

With the coming of Memorial Day, the tourist season started for real. He was busy every day with clients -- lone businessmen on vacation, groups of men on getaway weekends, couples, entire families -- taking them to Twin lake, White Lake, Bartlette Lake, Pine Stump Lake, but mostly to Conley Lake, for what he continually promised was the finest fishing in the north.

While reports from his friends and competitors told Art that the fishing was better than usual that year (on June 11th, a state-record walleye was taken in Merriam Bay), he and his customers were continually shut out. Day after day he started with high hopes, and day after day he came home empty-handed. He tried everything from his usual leeches and crawlers to minnows and hoppers and even a few dreaded artificial lures, but he couldn't buy a strike.

By the end of the month, as the word leaked out and gradually spread throughout the area, he noticed a marked decrease in the number of people calling for his service. On the Fourth of July he actually had no customers at all. For the first time in years he was able to go into town and watch the annual VFW festivities, although he did so moodily and found no pleasure in the parade, the afternoon barbecue, or that evening's fireworks display.

"I'm a gamer," he muttered to himself a week or so later, when he found himself without clients for the second time. "But this is ridiculous."

That day he went to the IGA and bought a bottle. That night he took his first drink in almost ten years. It tasted surprisingly, refreshingly good; not even his guilt and shame could ruin the smoky flavor of the whiskey or silence the words the liquor whispered to him: *It's gonna be all right, Art ol' man. Just wait'll next time, wait'll tomorrow. You'll take your limit by noon.*

That night he fell asleep early in front of the TV (Babe Winkleman, of all people, who

could catch a half-dozen fish in the time it took Art to get his outboard started). For a long time he dozed in and out, tossing feverishly, muttering drunkenly, but sometime past midnight slipped into a deep dream. In the dream he was chased along the shores of the lake by a pale, shambling creature with no face. The creature reached for him with gnarled, algae-encrusted hands, but providentially was too slow to catch him.

When he awoke in the morning, the couch was soaked with his own sweat. He couldn't help noticing it. What he *didn't* see was the series of puddles on the floor -- six or seven in all. They started at the cabin door, led across to the couch, and stopped there. They had begun to dry, and while most of them were just indistinct patches of wetness, one of two still held the perfect shape of a footprint.

The next night he didn't drink, but he did go to the Bear's Lair, the better of the two bars in Kelly's Corners. There, just as he knew he would, he found his old friend, Bill Raven. Bill was sitting at his usual table in the back, nursing his usual pitcher of beer. He seemed inordinately glad to see Art and tried to encourage him along several paths of conversation. Art, however, wanted to keep it short. In the Bear's Lair, a friendly talk between two friends could grow helter-skelter into a conversation with three men, and four, and five. Eventually, what you ended up with was an all-out bullshit session involving anywhere from ten to thirty of the town's loudest mouths.

"Look," Art said after a few minutes, "I gotta ask you somethin'."

Bill nodded. "Fire away."

"You 'member my dad, doncha?"

"Of course I do. I was a couple-three years behind him in school. We were pals. Say, you sure you don't want some of this beer?"

Art waved it away. "You 'member how he died, right?"

Bill's expression darkened. He lit one of his foul-smelling cigars and leaned back, shaking his head. "I'm getting old, Artie, I'll grant you. But I couldn't forget that. Helluva note. Helluva thing for your family. Helluva mess for the town."

"That it was," Art said. He had only been six at the time, but his mother had passed the story along like a heirloom. "I was wonderin' ... well, hell, Bill, I was wonderin' about what happened *before* he died."

"I don't know what you mean," Bill said, but his expression said otherwise. Not only did he know what Art was getting at, but he had already made the connection. It would have been hard not to. The jokes had been going around town for almost a month: *Yeah,*

old Artie's lost his touch. Artie used to have the fish jumpin' into his boat; now he couldn't catch 'em with a stick of dynamite and a net.

"I think you do," Art said now. "I'm talkin' about his bad luck."

"Hell, boy, that wasn't just bad luck. That was a curse. You think you're a good guide? You couldn't hold a candle to your daddy. When he started coming back dry every day, that wasn't just a funny stretch. Something happened to him. Something had changed. It was like he was ... I don't know ... almost like he was *doomed*. Doomed to live out what happened to your grandpap."

Art stopped breathing for a moment. He felt his heart stop beating, then lurch into action again. "What're you sayin'?" he asked in a choked, husky whisper.

"You know what I'm saying, Artie."

"Uh-uh. No sir. I don't getcha. Grandpa ran off with that Stuart woman, didn't he?" He laughed harshly. "Jesus, what am I askin' you for? I *know* he ran off."

Bill Raven didn't say anything for a very long time. He stared at Art with narrow, winter-chilled eyes. The gaze made Art shift and squirm uncomfortably; he felt as though Bill were trying to see into his brain, or worse, into his soul.

"You're not kidding, are you?" Bill said at last, after nearly a minute.

"Course I ain't. Why would I be kiddin'? Grandpa ran off with Hedda Stuart."

Bill shook his head, and murmured, "I can't believe you don't know. It's your own family, for godssakes. I can't believe no one ever told you."

"Told me *what*?"

Bill sighed. "Things were different in those days. People didn't want the truth. When your grandpap went out, his buddies took it on themselves to pull what you might call a cover-up. There were six or seven of them in on it -- my pop, Gunnar Seppala, Dave Atkinson, a couple of others. Hedda Stuart, well, she really *did* run off, just the day before. Except she ran off with a brush salesman, not your grandpap."

Art felt dizzy. The world seemed to be spinning much too fast, whirling away from him. He felt a powerful urge to grip his chair with both hands, as though to do otherwise was to risk being flung out into the vastness of space.

"What happened?" he said.

"He died." Bill sighed again. "Just like your daddy about fifteen years later. He ran into a dry spell, couldn't catch a fish for all the tea in Shanghai. His business shriveled up and blew away. He lost his hope. He lost his faith. He lost everything."

Art groaned inwardly. "And?"

"And what? I told you, it was just like

your daddy. He couldn't stand it anymore. Took his boat out one day and went overboard. They found the boat floating off Big Walker Point. Only thing in it was your grandpap's old hat. Back home they found a note. Like I said, in 1931 that was news you didn't spread. Lucky for my pop and the others, Hedda took her powder and made it easy on them." He hesitated, puffing his cigar thoughtfully and eyeing Art with a look of infinite sadness. "I still can't believe no one ever told you the truth."

Art pushed away from the table and got to his feet. Everything was still spinning, even faster than before. Although Bill called out to him, he never looked back. He simply stumbled out of the bar and hurried home.

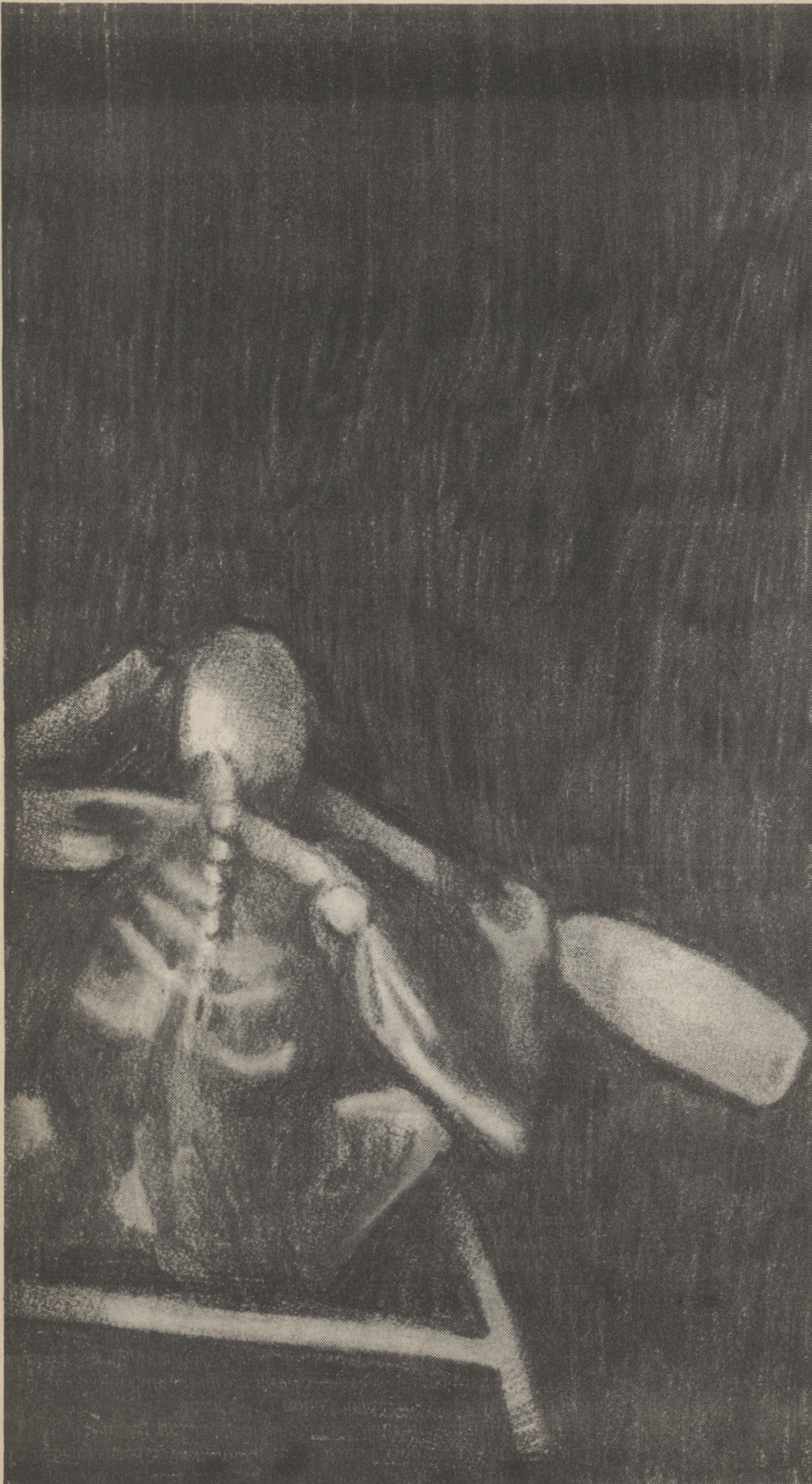
This time he noticed the wet footprints immediately. They formed a wide circle just inside the cabin door.

His first reaction to Bill Raven's story was to ignore it completely. His second reaction, several hours later, was to prove that it had been a lie. He spent the rest of the night and most of the next two days going through old family papers, searching for the truth. He had to cancel several customers to do so, but the irony in that act never occurred to him.

The papers were in several boxes marked variously FISHING and GUIDING and IMPORTANT RECORDS. There were old tax forms, customer receipts, maps of the area lakes, pamphlets and flyers, faded letters, and even an old fishing journal his father had kept for several years. He sifted through them repeatedly, but there was almost no evidence that his grandfather had even existed, let alone committed suicide. And as far as his father's journals were concerned, they stopped in 1953, a full two years before his dry spell and death.

He drank on and off during his search, but did so almost absently. He didn't feel the obsession, the compulsion that had driven him during that time some years ago when drinking had become a problem to him. In fact it was drinking that finally showed him the truth. It happened toward the end of that second day, after he'd been through the boxes at least nine times.

He had just finished his third whiskey and water in the last few hours, and as he tried to put the glass aside, the moisture beaded on its sides caused him to drop it. It landed with a thump in the open box at his feet. When he reached in to retrieve it, several papers were stuck to the bottom, and when he pulled the papers free he discovered two of them plastered together. The top form was an old receipt for gasoline that he'd already looked at a dozen times. But glued to the bottom of the receipt was a hand-written note he hadn't seen before. He unfolded it with trembling



hands and read his father's spiky writing:

*Nothing for weeks. Friends laughing.
Good customers going to Pete Brady.
No good. Just like dad. It's going to
end the same way and I*

The note ended there, but its few words (and the palsied uncertainty he could see in his father's hand) told him everything he needed to know.

He put the boxes away after that, back up in the crawlspace attic where he didn't have to see them, or, with any luck, think about them either. As he came back down the ladder and mixed himself a fresh drink, Bill Raven's words were going around and around in his head like the waking memory of a vivid dream:

Something happened to him. Something had changed ... almost like he was doomed. Doomed to live out what happened to your grandpap.

Even with the alcohol buzzing in his brain and the feel of the cryptic note still fresh upon his fingertips, Art found it hard to credit the concept of being doomed to do something. It reminded him a little too much of movie curses, voodoo dolls, or at the least, a fatalism he could not accept. But the choice of that word -- doomed -- didn't lessen the impact of what Bill had said. It didn't take away the obvious connection between the deaths of both his grandfather and his father. And it didn't lessen the unhealthy dread he carried with him to bed later that night.

He dreamed again. In the dream he was fishing a quarter-mile off Big Walker Point with one of his regular customers, a man named Johnny Hammond who went out with him two or three times every summer. He didn't like fishing near the point. As he had told Mr. and Mrs. Evans, the water there was simply too shallow for walleye. But they'd already been out for nine hours and hadn't caught a thing. Big Walker Point was the last place to try.

Suddenly, Johnny Hammond was on his feet in the boat, staggering from side to side, calling at the top of his voice, "I got one, Artie! Sweet Jesus, I got one!"

Art felt a burst of joy that was almost nuclear in its intensity. The dry spell was over, he thought wildly, watching Johnny's rod bend almost double. The curse was broken, the doom had been shed. Thank God, thank God.

Johnny battled his monster fish for ages. Every time he thought he had weakened it enough to haul it in, the fish would run deep again, and all the instructions Art could offer did no good.

"Can't ... can't hang on anymore,"

Johnny gasped after more than half an hour. "You gotta help me, Art ... gotta ... gotta take the pole."

Art did, and for the first time felt the sheer power of the catch take hold of him. He, too, fought until his arms were on fire and his chest hurt, until his back throbbed with pain, until the sweat stood out on his forehead and ran down his face in stinging rivulets. After an eternity, the struggle broke. It was so sudden that he almost fell overboard. One second he was fighting with everything he had left and the next he was reeling quickly, effortlessly.

The fish was heavy. Even with no fight, he could tell that. He couldn't imagine what it was. No walleye could be so big or battle so long and hard. But what else would it be? There were no muskies in Conley Lake, and the thought that it might be a prehistoric sturgeon was laughable.

Then he saw it coming up.

Not a fish, but a person.

A white, bloated corpse.

Its head was lolling, its face framed by weeds and twigs and long, floating strands of hair.

And its pale hands floated beside it, reaching upwards.

He looked around for Johnny, but Johnny was gone. He was alone in the boat. Just before the corpse broke the surface, he dropped the pole and screamed. Even with no tension on the line, the corpse kept rising slowly, inexorably. It crested out of the water and hooked one hand over the gunwale.

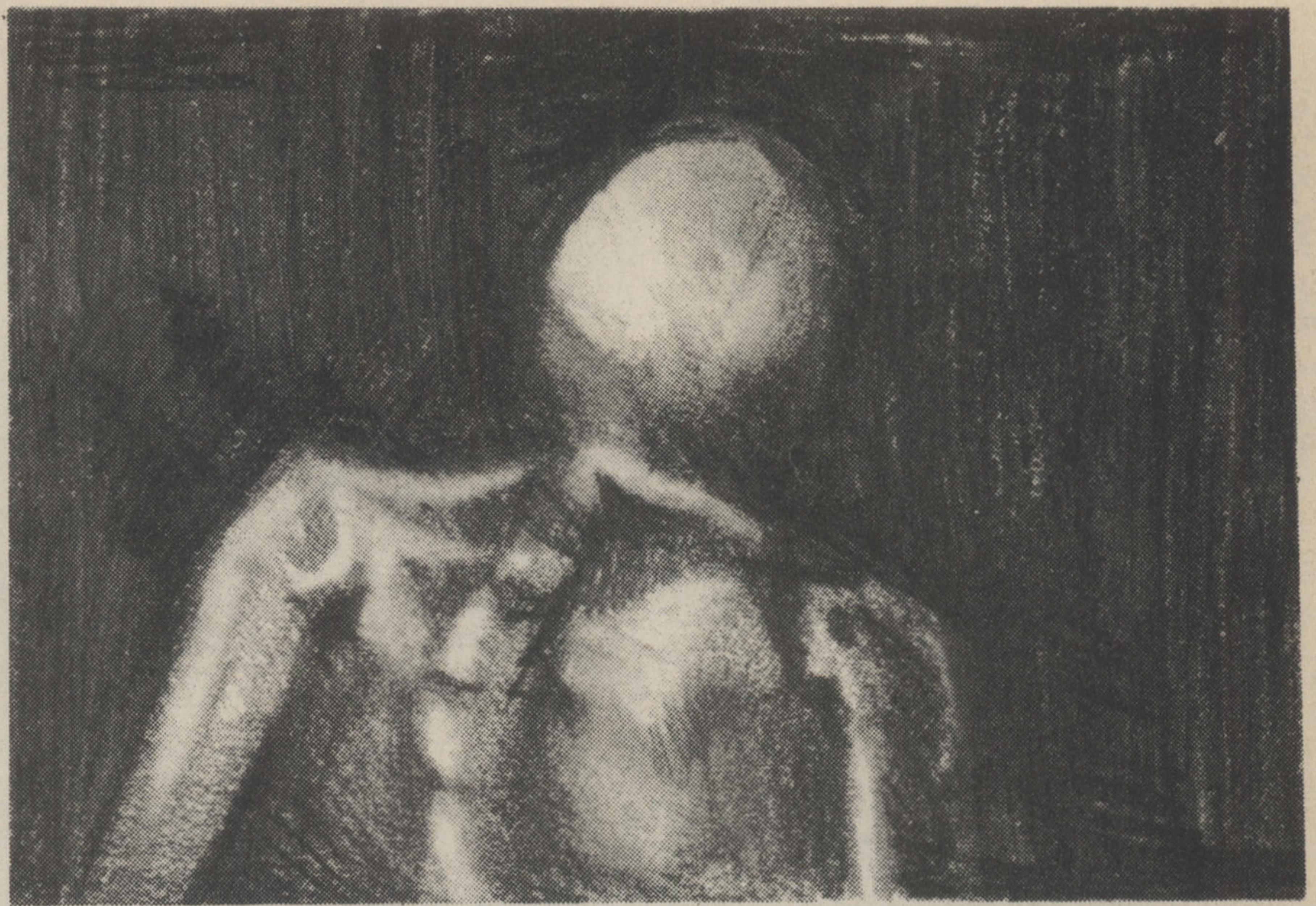
Art sat up in bed, sobbing and wild eyed, just in time to hear the whispering click of the cabin door being quietly closed.

It was raining that day, a light but steady drizzle. He had customers scheduled, the Donahues, a family of three from Cleveland. He reached them at their motel in town and canceled, mumbling a variety of excuses all having to do with the weather. After a quick breakfast of oatmeal with a whiskey chaser, he bundled into his slicker and rainpants and took his boat out on the lake.

It took fifteen minutes to reach Big Walker Point. Once there, he dropped both the bow and stern anchors and pulled his bottle out of the tackle box. He took a quick slug and gazed at the rain-dimpled surface of the lake. He didn't know what he expected to happen, but he was coolly determined to wait there until it did.

It didn't take long. Less than an hour after dropping anchor, he heard something behind him, a noise that sounded like a bucket of fish being dumped onto the floor of the boat. He whirled around, heart hammering, and saw his father sitting in the stern.

The man was dead. Drowned. Like the



corpses in his dreams, there was no color left to him at all. His flesh was so white that it was almost transparent. His hair, seemingly bleached, hung limply around his face. His clothes -- a strapless white undershirt and faded dungarees -- were rotted. They hung in wet, loose strips. His arms and chest bulged in strange places. The bulges seemed to be moving, undulating gently, as though something alive were moving sluggishly just under the skin.

Art cried out and hefted one of the paddles from its oarlock. His father's pale lips drew back into a quivering smile, revealing a toothless oral cavity that was filled with water and clogged with mud and algae. The water ran out lazily and pooled at the corpse's shoeless feet.

"We was doomed," his father said thickly, spraying Art with flecks of mud. "Both me and your grandpa. We was doomed."

Art swung the paddle frantically. He felt a slight resistance as it struck his father's body, but otherwise it was like hitting a cloud. The paddle went right through the corpse and came out the other side, dripping wet.

"You're dead," Art intoned. "Jesus, Dad, what're you doin' here? *You're dead!*"

The corpse nodded, spilling more water. "Dead," it croaked. "And doomed."

And at that his father simply leaned backwards and slithered out of the boat like a snake. The body struck the water without a splash. Art scrambled to the stern and looked over. He caught -- or *thought* he did -- a glimpse of pure, shimmery whiteness going down and down, but it was gone almost before he could register it.

Dead. And doomed.

Shaking badly, he hoisted the anchors and started for home.

I'm a gamer, Art told himself, and after that day made a strict effort to put the early summer behind him. To dwell on what had happened was to lose his mind, he decided, and so he serviced his customers when he had them and kept his thoughts on other things when he didn't. He was convinced that his urge to drink and his troubled dreams would vanish if he could just have one good day -- just one -- and so he fished with his clients and he fished alone. The waters of Conley Lake that had always been his favorite spot became even more than that. They became his home, day and night, as he desperately sought that first catch, the one that would break the jinx and make everything better.

But the catch never came.

Hour after hour, day after day, nothing.

In early August another state-record was pulled from the lake (a walleye unlike any that had ever been seen), and yet Art was luckless despite all his skill, the years of knowledge he brought into play, and the battalion of nightcrawlers and *army* of leeches that he deployed in the effort.

Toward the middle of the month he went into town to buy gas for the outboard. As he was leaving the Shell station, he ran into Stumpy Mitchell.

"Hey, Art," Stumpy said, waving him over. "Glad I ran into you, bud. I ... say, you feelin' all right? You look like hell."

"I'm fine," Art said, a little too quickly. "What's up?"

"They're gonna be hirin' over to the mill next week. You interested?"

Art frowned. "Why would I be interested

in that?"

"Well, I figgered ... you know ..."

"No, I don't know. What the hell're you talkin' about?"

Stumpy shrugged uneasily. "Jesus, Art, you know."

Art shook his head. "You're crazy, Stump. You know I don't take no outside work in the summer. In the off-season, sure, I'll take whatever I can get. But not in August. I'm a guide, not a damn millworker."

"Hey, sorry," Stumpy said. He looked very uncomfortable now, as though he wanted to sink into the sidewalk and vanish from Art's sight. "I just thought, well shit, with your bad luck an' all ... you can't be a guide if you ain't catchin' nothin'."

"I'm a guide," Art repeated woodenly, and after his friend had walked away, he said it yet again, soft, barely audible, "Goddammit, I'm a guide."

And yet Stumpy's words haunted him for a week afterward. *You can't be a guide if you ain't catchin' nothin'*. Sometimes they came alone, and sometimes they swirled in his head alongside, and mixed up with, Bill Raven's words about doom.

"I'm a gamer," Art reminded himself whenever those voices popped into his brain. "A guide and a gamer."

But when Labor Day came, effectively bringing the major portion of the tourist season to a close, he still hadn't caught a fish and he was feeling far less than game. At thirty-nine, he thought perhaps his life was over. Everything he had built his reputation on was gone. The things he had staked his very being on had left him. The axis around which he revolved had been broken or stolen or both. Conley Lake had been his home, and that home had somehow, in some way, been poisoned against him.

He stopped drinking again, but no longer felt like getting out of bed in the morning. What was the point? he wondered every day. Why get out of bed when you had no life to lead?

If he had subscribed to the fatalism he had earlier rejected so strenuously, he would have plainly seen how all the pieces had fallen into place. He would have realized how neatly and unavoidably he had been prepared for the final day.

Late September.

Cold.

Raining again.

He awoke in the darkness of the hour just before dawn, aware of a presence in the room with him. He could feel it as well as hear it, low voices conversing in a soft, unreadable tone.

He fumbled on the nightstand and closed

his fingers around the lamp. Groping his way upward, he found the switch and turned it. The room was flooded with light, the force of which drove him back against the pillow like a punch.

"Son," a voice said, and he opened his eyes again, blinking.

They were standing above him, his father and grandfather.

Cold water dripped from their drowned corpses, and when his father spoke, his voice was the sound of waves washing across a rocky beach.

"Don't you understand yet?" his father said.

"Don't you understand?" his grandfather echoed.

Art shrank away, but his pillow and headboard would only allow him to go so far. He gazed into the bloated faces and realized that neither of them had any eyes. Instead they had small pools of dark, deep water that glimmered where their eyes should have been.

"It's a cycle," his grandfather said in his heavy, water-logged voice. "It didn't start with me, and it ain't gonna end with you. It's a cycle -- and you gotta play your part."

His father reached out to touch him. Art scrambled out of bed and ducked past the corpses, but his father came after him anyway. With squishing, relentless steps, he crossed the room and cornered Art by the dresser on the far wall.

"Play your part," his father said, those wishing-well eyes brimming as though with tears.

"Play your part," his grandfather said.

"No," Art told them. He might as well have wished them a happy day for all the reaction he got. "God, no."

Their arms floated toward him through the air. Their white fingers worked and writhed like maggots.

"Play your part," they said in thick, dripping unison.

"But I don't understand!"

"Play your part," they said again.

The pale fingers stopped inches from his face. He could smell the rot and moisture-spurred decay. It was a rich, foul odor that swept over him, covered him like a blanket.

"I don't understand," he said again, pleading.

But if he had hoped for a response, he got none. The two figures turned away without touching him. Side by side, they padded out of the room, leaving pools of fetid water behind.

When the door closed behind them, Art Madigan was sobbing much too loudly to hear.

An hour later he crossed the yard and headed toward his boat. When he got there

and climbed in, he was amused to see that the pen he'd used to write the note was still gripped in his tight, bloodless fingers. He let it slip and watched it drop into the lake. It sank from sight, barely a ripple left behind.

He started the motor and headed for Big Walker Point. This time he didn't anchor but merely sat and waited. The morning crept by slowly. The rain stopped and the sun came out, but it was sunlight screened by high clouds, weak and cold and ineffective.

"I'm a guide," he muttered to himself from time to time as the boat drifted free across Conley Lake. I'm a guide, he thought, but it's more than that. I'm a gamer, a fighter. I don't give up easy. I don't give up at all.

But he thought he could hear the grinding of a tremendous wheel turning somewhere beyond his sight.

And he waited.

Waited for the day to turn to evening.

Waited for the water around the boat to darken and swell.

Waited for the ripple, for the shimmering glimpse of transparent whiteness rising toward him.

He waited.

Eventually, he knew, his father and grandfather would come to him like guides. Then he would know what he was supposed to do next.



THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION

THOMAS F. MONTELEONE



Just When You Thought It Was Safe To Go Back Into The Small Press . . .

"... Also, somebody please do something nice for Tom Monteleone. The man is a sad, sad case."

Sherry Esposito, Carol Stream IL

"Any chance of going monthly with Horrorstruck? It's hard waiting sixty days for a MAFIA fix!"

Tom DeMarco, Toronto, Ontario

"Monteleone could rewrite the Manhattan telephone directory and make it enjoyable."

Anna G. Shanks, Storm Lake IA

"One column which turns my stomach is Thomas F. Monteleone's column. He is rude and condescending, and obviously has a chip on his shoulder ... please replace him with anything."

R. Bradley Trent, Moore OK

"About Monteleone: smug, self-righteous, know-it-all, loaded with 'in' jokes and asides that only other professionals could understand or appreciate."

Sue Welland, New York

"Although an accomplished pro, Monteleone often gets right to the point of what's on the mind of we other folks, the little guys, the readers ..."

William Cousins, Beardstown IL

"Has Monteleone ever published anything besides the MAFIA

column? I'd have an easier time taking him seriously if I could be convinced that he wasn't just an arrogant, overblown, struggling little amateur, frustrated because he hasn't been able to sell that first novel."

Mike Bremen, Philadelphia PA

Yeah, I know, there's got to be a bunch of you out there wondering what the hell something as sleazy as a MAFIA column is doing in the revered, and some might say *hallowed* pages of *The Horror Show*. And I'm sure there's another bunch who, having never been abraded by a MAFIA column, don't have a clue as to what I'm talking about. The rest of you, I'll presume, plainly don't give a shit.

Well, regardless of what any of you might be thinking, I've decided a brief (*very* brief) history's in order here. Although the *Mothers And Fathers Italian Association* began as an irregular column of fun and highly-opinionated opinion more than ten years ago (with a seven year hiatus), the column actually hit its stride and found its audience over the past two or three years. Given your basic *carte blanche* (by Paul Olson, the editor of *Horrorstruck*) to write about whatever thereby moveth me, I tried to have some fun every couple of months. When the magazine folded on pretty abrupt notice, I was at first relieved because it was getting tough to come up with good column topics (although I had been doing a great job of it, if I must say ...), and also because I had a long book and several other book projects (an anthology and a short story collection) which needed my attention. Funny thing was, after about three or four months of not writing any columns, I started feeling these odd mental twinges, these elusive and ineluctable cravings to be writing something different, something askew and irreverent.

After waking up in the dead hours of the night several times, with these lingering, subconscious *needs* tapping like skeletal fingers upon the windowpanes of my mind, I had no idea what was wrong. I didn't recognize the early symptoms, and had no idea back then I had a MAFIA-jones, and it was starting to seriously kick.

Yeah, there I was--actually--*missing* writing to you odd-lots of humanity. But I remained strong and resistant; I kept busy with *real* work, writing stuff which would bring me some major jing, some bill-paying money. The months passed, and even though every week or so I would get a letter from somebody saying how much they missed their bi-monthly MAFIA-fix, I had simply not considered starting up the column. Then I get hit with this kind of synchronicity storm. Three different editors all write within a week's time asking me to do the MAFIA for their magazines. Now, listen, I'm old enough to recognize Destiny when it's staring in at me from the edge of the universe.

So Dave Silva and I made this deal, see, and I started writing this column, and then he sends me this postcard telling me he's gonna shut down his magazine (!). Great timing, Dave. We cut this great deal where he pays me an incredible amount of money per column, and a couple weeks later I find out it's only gonna last for two issues ...

Well that's okay, because I'm sure there's a magazine out there somewhere that will offer me a deal equally as sweet, and the MAFIA will remain defiantly in print. For now, though, you get the rest of this column, plus a Special Double Column for Dave's planned Spectacular

End Of The Decade Special Double Issue. I figured it was the least I could do for you. That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that you're going to have to wait another year to read it ...

One more thing: before get on to the topics at hand, I guess I should comment on the comments from selected letters I included at the beginning of this piece. Regular readers will recognize my habit of using a few of your conflicting comments as a kind of interesting preface to many of my columns. After reading them, it makes me wonder if all these people are reading the *same* column. And the neat thing is: yes, the column's the same, but the thing which is always infinitely different is the unique-ness of each reader. Every one of you brings your own complete set of likes and dislikes, fears and opinions, strengths and neuroses, etc. to the reading experience--and therefore each of you gets something *different* from each MAFIA.

I love it. That's exactly how it should be. If you all hated me or all loved me, man, that would be *boring*--the one thing none of us want to be. Diversity is what we're striving for, here, okay? So, keep the cards and letters coming in. I love to get mail almost as much as I hate answering it. Here's the address:

P.O. Box 5788
Baltimore MD 21208

Now, there's a couple things I want to talk about. First--a few months ago I got a small press magazine in the mail called *Carnage Hall*. Nothing special about this event--I get tons of little publications like this from time to time, from some of the more verbal and industrious members of my readership. But as I flipped through the pages, I knew I was going to love *Carnage Hall* because its inaugural editorial, by the editor/publisher David Griffin, went on at great length about a subject I love very much: *me*.

Without reprinting or even paraphrasing, the essence of the piece took me and my MAFIA column to task for the following offenses:

1. wandering prose
2. embellishing my essays with purely personal commentary
3. "foul" or "vulgar" language
4. improper critical (ie. academic/scholarly) form
5. influencing other writers to be equally irreverent or arrogant or disrespectful
6. deliberately insulting or demeaning my readers

and several other things I can't remember as I write this. Doesn't matter, though. The hit-list you see is plenty, right?

At first I thought: *Okay, who's this asshole Griffin, and why does he want to come along a poke a sharp stick in my cage?* But as I read through the piece, I realized he was trying to be rational and objective and sincere. No sharp stick at work here; just a dull perception of what the MAFIAs are all about.

Griffin's biggest mistake: he insisted upon seeing my MAFIAs as "criticism." What you're reading here, friends, is unsullied, unrefined *opinion*. Everything, therefore, is "purely personal commentary." So if any of you shared David's misconception about me being a (aargh!) "critic," then please, banish such thoughts from your pointed little heads. I write these things for fun, guys, okay? I'm old enough and successful enough that I don't do much in my professional life that I don't enjoy. If it ain't fun, I probably ain't gonna get involved. As far as the vulgar language is concerned, well, that's just part of the informal style I've always wanted in the MAFIA. I know, just as all of you do, if a reader finds words like "shit" and "fuck" offensive, they're not on my wavelength anyway. I don't feel there *are* any dirty words--rather the minds that perceive them as such are far more soiled. I mean, let's face it--even *sex* isn't dirty unless it's done right.

The other points here are also pretty simple. I can't be responsible for influencing inferior imitations of my column or opinions. If the other stuff is truly inferior, people tend to ignore it anyway. Just as I

can't be responsible for some doughnut who might read one of my stories and then go out and kill twenty five people. If we all have to think and create in fear of what others might do, we should all pack it in and sell women's shoes.

And as far as insulting my readers by calling you ciphers and drones and shit like that ... well, you should all know that it's just *sh tick*. And if you don't know what that is, then that's the crux of the problem. I'm just trying to make you all smile, and maybe think a little while you're at it.

Hey, that's enough, already. I wanted this column to be a kind of hybrid. Ie., contain a few elements for my old readers, and also have some introductory stuff for any new readers. However, if you *are* a new reader and you're intrigued, outraged, or whatever, enough by this column and you would like to get copies of my previous columns, they're available by sending me \$10.00 (to cover photocopying and postage) at the above address. For this nominal sum, you will receive all my *Horrorstruck* MAFIAs (eight, I think) and all the wonderful stuff contained therein. You'll laugh! You'll cry! You'll kiss ten bucks good-bye!

And now, for my final comments and opinions, I'd like to tell you what it's been like to be editing an anthology these days. I sold John Douglas at Avon Books this idea for a new annual anthology called *Borderlands*, which will contain new, original HDF fiction. The deal was to publish stories which were innovative, bizarre, surreal, which did not employ some of the more traditional symbols and settings of the genre. Stories which, if you will, operate on the borderlands of contemporary Horror and Dark Fantasy. I also have deals working for a limited edition hardcover and plenty of foreign editions. The book will be a showcase for the HDF field and will include only the best stories I can find. I've already bought some excellent stuff.

But I gotta tell you, friends, it ain't been easy.

I put a notice in a small press newsletter called *Scavengers* and my post office box became immediately *jammed* with manuscripts. For six weeks now, I've been getting about twenty stories per day. No shit. I dump ten into the mail bin at my post office each afternoon, and twenty new ones jump out to take their places.

I'm stunned at the number of you out there trying to write HDF. So many in fact, you're threatening to bury me under a pile of manuscripts slowly inching towards critical mass. I swear the fucking things are multiplying at night in my basement. Manila envelopes are materializing everywhere in the house. In the kitchen cabinets, behind the toilet, on top of the VCR, in the bookshelves, on top of my computer monitor, in the closets, on my workbench, even in my underwear and sock drawers.

So anyway, after reading lots of submissions from the seething, troubled masses, I've arrived at several basic conclusions. I preface this by saying that many years ago, I was employed by Sol Cohen, then publisher of *Amazing SF Stories*, to read the magazine's "slush pile" for Editor Ted White. I did it for about two years, and learned a lot about what makes a good story and a bad one. Back then, about 30% of the stories were thoroughly un-readable; 50% passably written but dumb or unsalable for other reasons; and the remaining 20% fairly well-written and close to publishable quality. Ted ended up buying maybe 2% of his fiction from the slush pile--but I can remember early stories from James Tiptree Jr, George R. R. Martin, Janet Fox, George Alec Effinger, and others who came out of *Amazing's* unsolicited submissions.

The point of all this rambling: the quality of well-written stories from the small press far exceeds the percentages I encountered in the SF markets years ago. I'd have to say that almost all the submissions I've received for *Borderlands* have been if not well-written, at least fairly well-written. The occasional clunker is probably less than 5%.

And I find that extremely commendable. It shows me there is a large segment of writers out there, who have trained themselves to be good wordsmiths, at least on a purely technical level.

Does that mean I've bought a lot of stories from this large pool of small press writers?

Unfortunately, no.

In fact, at this writing, I've only bought two. I have maybe another 8 or 10 "on hold," ie. stories I like, but am still not sure I like well enough to write that big check. The rest of it has gone shuttling back. The hard fact is that while almost all the stories I get are passably written, there are other things wrong which keep them from being publishable at the professional level.

Here's the way I see it:

1.) Cliched ideas. Over and over, I see the same basic tales being told. Men and women going to singles bar and getting picked up by men and women who are really (a) serial killers, (b) vampires, (c) some other monsters ... Ghost towns which come alive when the protagonist arrives ... E.C. Comics plots about jealous husband/wives killing spouses who come back from the dead to exact their revenge ... Businessmen who slowly deteriorate into madness ... Unsuspecting fools who disrupt Indian burialgrounds with the expected results ... And an unending parade of serial killers. This last one has been incredible. I'd say 20% or more of the my submissions have been about serial killers(!).

2.) Bad characterization. This is a problem for even most professional writers. You don't have much space to create believable, fleshed-out characters in a short story. Most of the stories I read have weak, dull, stupid, or extremely familiar even stereotyped characters. If I can't find something interesting or arresting about the character, then I'm probably not even going to finish the story.

3.) Improbable logic. Things happen in stories not because of any real sense of organic progression, cause-and-effect, or simple logic, but rather only because the writer *needs* a particular event to take place. It doesn't matter that the story doesn't make sense. Well, it matters to me, and I don't buy stories like this.

4.) Surprise endings and predictability. For some reason, lots of writers, especially the novices, have this idea that a story's ending has to be some punchy, nut-grabber of a closer that is like, oh wow, man, like TOTALLY surprising, man ... But in most cases, the gimmick-ending has been telegraphed as efficiently as anything Western Union could serve up. You can usually see the "surprise" revelations coming light years away. And as an adjunct, there are just hundreds of stories which fall into such familiar patterns you find yourself jumping to the last page to see if you were right in your prediction. It's painful how many times I nail it. The best advice to novice writers is *forget* all those clever endings, and try to write stories which reach conclusions which are logical, revealing, and in some way emotionally satisfying. Trick, or surprise, endings are the Chinese food of literature--right after you've read one, you find yourself hungry for a *real* story. (Yeah, yeah I can hear all you pinheads starting to kick about latent Asian racism already ... well fuck you, I was just trying to be clever.)

5.) Not Horror/Dark Fantasy. Actually, my needs also encompass suspense and plain old (if there is such a thing) surreality . . . but what I really mean here is the stories turn out to be not very scary, horrifying, or even disturbing. To write effectively in the HDF and related genres, you have to strike some kind of emotional chord in the reader. He has to *feel* something--be it fear, disgust, paranoia, etc. In other words, stories in this category just don't have any *coglioness*, no balls; and I think that's the bottom line of all this. If you don't remember anything else, remember this: your stories gotta have some emotional moxie or they're gonna be flat and ultimately silly. It's an inherent aspect of writing HDF, and is probably the hardest lesson to be learned.

And here I am just handing it to you for freebs--jeez, what a nice

guy ...

The point of all this? I'm not sure, other than to maybe avoid receiving *more* of the same stories I get every day. And of course to make you all more conscious, self-aware, and ultimately *better* writers. You see, I'm planning on making *Borderlands* the best example of HDF fiction available, and therefore creating a series of annual anthologies. I want it to be the benchmark of the genre; the standard against which all the other stuff is measured. And I can't do that without your help. You guys have to send me stuff that doesn't make the mistakes I've been talking about. Besides, too much of that stuff and I'll get cancer of the eyeballs or worse--the imagination.

Hey, it looks like we're about out of time, so I'm gonna kick outta here. Watch this space some time in early 1990 for a Special Double Column (Yes, you'll get *two* MAFIAs back-to-back, or if you prefer--belly-to-belly, for the price of one!) for Editor Silva's Special Double Issue. As usual, I enjoyed it. Was it good for you, too?

(Hey, honest, I've never asked that in my life ...)

PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION DEPT

By now my latest novel from Tor Books should be available. It's called *FANTASMA*, and other than a cover featuring an entity which resembles absolutely *nothing* described within the pages, it looks like a nice package, and is, of course, an excellent book which I want all of you to buy and tell ten of your friends to do the same. That's the way it's done when you don't have a big ad budget, friends. I also have a story, "No Pain, No Gain," included in *The Seaharp Hotel: Greystone Bay III* edited by Charlie Grant. It's scheduled for later this year, but you should start clamoring for it now at your local Waldendalton. Ciao.

QUIZ ANSWERS:

1. *d.* He also wrote a few eerie horror stories.
 2. *b.* David was the one who hurt his finger on a buckle, later on.
 3. *c.* England was western Europe's sole representative.
 4. *d.* They tried implanting 100 cloned embryos, but some didn't live.
 5. *a.* They emerged singing, and wearing matching capes.
 6. *b.* The role wasn't humorous, but he was quite believable.
 7. *c.* Ironically, the script for *that* film called for an amusement park finale, before it was changed!
 8. *b.* Since they were the first couple of their kind ...
 9. *a.* Remember how Candy wore one almost like theirs?
 10. *c.* She used it in the trailers, too.
 11. *b.* The setting of the film was Tarrytown, NY, same as the story.
 12. *d.* Not long after that, Jack uttered the famous "Heeere's Johnny!"
 13. *c.* Rather unusual mixture of films that year, wasn't it?
 14. *a.* Both a dummy and a stand-in were used for those scenes.
 15. *d.* Oddly, in *Damien*, the location of the numbers moved a bit!
 16. *a.* C'mon, you remember his snappy uniform and hat ...
 17. *b.* Eventually, the strain of "riding" to find out the names kills him.
 18. *d.* Remember how the thing speeds up?
 19. *b.* The girl did him in for killing her pet turtle.
 20. *c.* The episode was dubbed, "I Was A Middle-Aged Werewolf"
- Bonus: *Linda Blair, in The Exorcist.*

NIGHTMARES

HORROR HAPPENINGS: NEWS, EVENTS, LATE RELEASES

NIGHT SOUNDS, Volume I

Embassy Cassette has just launched a new line of horror stories on tape called *Night Sounds*. Volume I includes five fully dramatized horror stories which will take you back to the days of *Lights Out* and *The Shadow*, only these tales are quite contemporary in subject matter and delivery. Excellent sound quality, effects and music. Each story runs about twenty minutes in length, just right for listening to on the way to and from work. A fun listen. Unfortunately, no price was mentioned in the review copy. Check out your local book store, and if they don't carry *Night Sounds*, then you might write to: Embassy Cassette Inc., 3617 W. MacArthur, Suite 500, Santa Ana, CA 92704. Hard to beat if you're looking for an enjoyable bit of listening entertainment within the horror genre.

THE ARKHAM LOVECRAFT

Here is the definitive H. P. Lovecraft--an in-progress three-volume critical edition of the collected macabre fiction that will embody the author's own final thoughts and stylistic preferences:

The Dunwich Horror and Others by H.P. Lovecraft. Edited by S.T. Joshi, with an introduction by Robert Bloch. 433 pages. \$17.95.

At The Mountains of Madness by H.P. Lovecraft. Edited by S.T. Joshi, with an introduction by James Turner. 458 pages. \$16.95.

Dagon and Other Macabre Tales by H.P. Lovecraft. Edited by S.T. Joshi, with an introduction by T.E.D. Klein. 448 pages. \$18.95.

THE DONNING COMPANY

The trade division of The Donning Company/Publishers, including Starblaze Editions/Graphics/Classics, has been sold to Schiffer Publishing Ltd. of West Chester, PA. Donning will continue with its publication of pictorial histories but is no longer a market for fiction.

MINN-CON 1989

Minn-Conn 1989 is scheduled for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, October 6, 7, and 8, in the Maplewood Room at Howard Johnson Motor Lodge, 6003 Hudson Road, Saint Paul (I-94 at Highway 120). Guests

of honor include Karl Edward Wagner, who authored *In A Lonely Place, Why Not You And I, Night Winds*, and others, plus has served as editor of DAW Books' annual horror anthologies (*The Year's Best Horror*) since 1980. Registration is \$7 to September 1st. For more information, contact: John Brower, 3136 Park Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55407.

THE STOKER AWARDS

The Second Annual Stoker Awards, sponsored by Horror Writers of America, will be held at the Warwick Hotel in New York City, June 16th-18th. Laurence Kirshbaum, President of Warner Books, will serve as the keynote speaker. Tickets for the event are \$60.00. For more information, please contact: Joe Citro, HWA, 112 Hadley Road, S. Burlington, VT 05403.

FOOTSTEPS PRESS

Footsteps Press has just published a special edition chapbook of Harlan Ellison's erotic masterpiece, "Footsteps," which includes an Ellison introduction plus illustrations by Ken Snyder. Lettered edition (signed by both Ellison and Snyder, and including an Ellison photograph) is \$18.00. Numbered edition (authographed by Ellison) is \$13.00. "Footsteps" also appears in Ellison's collection, *Angry Candy*. For more information, write: Footsteps Press, Box 75, New York, NY 12473.

TALES OF THE OCCULT

Prometheus Books has just released a new anthology of reprinted occult stories edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh. Authors include H.G. Wells, Ray Bradbury, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edward Bulwerlytton, Edith Wharton, and many others. 354 pages. Cloth \$22.95. Paper \$14.95. For more information write: Prometheus Books, 700 E. Amherst Street, Buffalo, NY 14215.

CLIVE BARKER

According to *Locus*, Clive Barker has sold four (still to be written) horror books to Collins (a British publisher) for two million pounds. The working titles are *Cabal #2*, *Cabal #3*, *The Art #2*, and *The Art #3*. The contract apparently does not include U.S. rights.

POCKET BOOKS

Pocket Books has three new horror books which you might want to check out. The first is a debut novel called *Psychic Fair*. Written by George O'Hare, the occult thriller revolves around three teenage boys who reach an unhappily dead Civil War colonel through a Quija Board. The second book is called *Goat Dance*, and revolves around a little girl who is able to communicate with the dead. Robert R. McCammon calls *Goat Dance* "a dark, mesmerizing delight ... a fine, frightening tapestry." And finally, *Hot Blood*, which is a collection of twenty-four stories (eleven of them previously unpublished) by such masters as Robert R. McCammon, Harlan Ellison, Graham Masterton, Ramsey Campbell, and Theodore Sturgeon.

SWAN SONG IN HARDBACK

Dark Harvest has come through with another winner. Robert R. McCammon's powerful post-nuclear war novel, *Swan Song*, was originally published in paperback by Pocket Books. Now, Dark Harvest is publishing the first hardback edition, which is sure to be in great demand. *Swan Song* is scheduled for an August release. \$21.95. For more information, write: Dark Harvest, P.O. Box 941, Arlington Heights, IL 60006.

MOVIE SEQUELS

Can't get enough, huh? Well, there's more on the way. More Freddy Krueger. More Jason. And more Michael Myers. A *Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 5* is now filming in Los Angeles. Freddy is back, along with Alice Johnson, who survived Freddy in No. 4 and is now pregnant. Scheduled for release in August. *Friday the 13th Part VIII* is also scheduled for August, and, according to rumors, finds Jason loose on the streets of New York. *Halloween 5* is due to start filming in Salt Lake City for an October release.

SCREAMS

September 1st, Underwood-Miller will be releasing *Screams*, a collection of three early suspense novels by Robert Bloch. 542 pages. Hardback. \$39.95. The collection includes: *The Will To Kill* (1954), *Firebug* (1961), and *The Star Stalker*

(1968). For ordering information contact: Underwood-Miller, 708 Westover Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601. On a side note: Underwood-Miller is also in the process of reprinting in hardback form Karl Edward Wagner's *The Year's Best Horror*. Each book will contain three volumes of the series, beginning with the most recent volumes and working back.

THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

Applause Theatre Books has published the novel based on the successful movie, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Illustrated. Trade paperback. \$12.95. Written by Terry Gilliam and Charles McKeown. For more information: Applause, 211 West 71 Street, New York, NY 10023.

STEPHEN KING

According to *Locus*, the Book-of-the-Month Club will begin offering a "Stephen King Library" beginning in 1990. The club has purchased the rights to King's next four novels as well as owning the licensing rights to 18 King backlist titles. On another note, a collector's note, King's latest publication venture is a special edition of *My Pretty Pony* from the Whitney Museum's Artists and Writers series. The book runs 68 pages, illustrated with nine hand-printed lithographs by Barbara Kruger, bound in stainless steel with an inset "digital timepiece." The book will sell for \$2,200. This fall, Knopf will be doing a smaller trade edition for somewhere around \$50.00.

THE HOUSE OF FEAR

Footsteps Press has just released a new limited edition chapbook by Chet Williamson called *The House of Fear*. 500 copies. Signed by Williamson. \$10.00. For more information write: Footsteps Press, Box 75, Round Top, NY 12473.

HAUNTED HOUSES USA

Pocket Books has just published a trade paperback that's part horror and part travel. *Haunted Houses, USA* is a unique travel guide for those of you who are also interested in the supernatural. From the Wyeth Mansion in West Virginia (where the ghost of Lady Skipwith can still be heard running from the jealous husband who murdered her) to The Myrtles in St. Francisville, Louisiana (where more spirits than can be counted lurk) this book has it all. 287 pages. \$8.95.

THE VAMPIRE

The legend of the vampire is one of the oldest and most awesome superstitions, and

over the centuries it has been embellished by novelists, short-story writers and filmmakers alike, until today it has become one of our most potent myths. Now, Basil Copper and Citadel Press have joined together to bring you: *The Vampire, In Legend and Fact*. The book is divided into four sections: In Legend, In Literature, In Film and Theatre, In Fact. If you're a student of the supernatural, or just an avid fan, you'll probably enjoy this one. 216 pages. Paperback. \$7.95. Citadel Press, 120 Enterprise Ave., Secaucus, NJ 07094.

SMALL PRESS MAGAZINES

For those of you who are hungry for more horror fiction, you might want to check out some of these small-press publications. Write them directly to inquire about subscription prices, frequency of publication, etc.:

Grue

P.O. Box 370, Times Square
New York, NY 10108

After Hours

21541 Oakbrook
Mission Viejo, CA 92692

Cemetery Dance

P.O. Box 189
Riverdale, MD 20737

New Blood

540 W. Foothill Blvd. #3730
Glendora, CA 91740

2 AM

P.O. Box 6754
Rockford, IL 61125-1754

You'll find more information throughout this issue on most of these magazines.

NIGHTCRAWLERS

This came in a little late to make the last issue, and may, in fact, be too late for this issue to still help you track down a copy. But if you can, you won't be disappointed. *Nightcrawlers* is an audio collection of three tales by Robert R. McCammon. William Windom (most currently from *Murder She Wrote*) does an absolutely fantastic job reading each full-length story. Running time: 180 minutes. Two cassette tapes. Simon & Schuster Audioworks. \$14.95. This is one of the best tapes around. Rumor has it that a second collection is currently under consideration, and will again be read by William Windom.

BRITISH FANTASY SOCIETY

The British Fantasy Society was formed in 1971 to provide the discerning reader with a greater coverage of the fantasy, sf, and horror fields. To achieve this, the society publishes a regular newsletter, *Dark Horizons* (a magazine that contains fiction

and articles), and organizes an annual fantasy conference which attracts some of the top names in the field. The British Fantasy Awards are presented each year at FantasyCon for Best Novel, Best Short Story, and a variety of other categories. Membership is open to everyone. United States membership is \$24.00 annually, payable to the British Fantasy Society. To subscribe, write: Di Wathen, 15 Stanley Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DE, UK.

FANTASYCON XIV

The British Fantasy Society will conduct this year's FantasyCon October 6th through October 8th. Thomas F. Monteleone (see the MAFIA column) will be the American Guest of Honour, Stephen Laws the British Guest of Honour, and Brian Lumley the Master of Ceremonies. The convention will be held at the Midland Hotel, New Street, Birmingham, England. For British Fantasy Society members, full attending membership is \$22.00. For non-members, \$25.00. More information: FantasyCon XIV, 15 Stanley Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DE, England.

BLOOD IS NOT ENOUGH

Ellen Datlow, fiction editor at *Omni* and co-editor of *The Year's Best Fantasy* has just finished editing a collection of vampire short stories for *Morrow*. *Blood Is Not Enough* is currently available in hardback. Half the stories are reprints, half originals. Writers included are: Gahan Wilson, Tanith Lee, Pat Cadigan, Scott Baker, Ed Bryant, Harlan Ellison, Chet Williamson, among others. No price information. The paperback is scheduled for October of 1990.

HORROR WRITERS OF AMERICA

HWA is a professional organization formed to establish a sense of community among those with a special interest in dark fantasy, horror, and occult fiction. The main purpose is to improve public perception of the genre both as literature and entertainment. There are two levels of membership: Affiliate (receive all the benefits except voting privileges) and Active (must have sold three pieces of short fiction or articles relating to the genre, none less than 2,500 words in length at three cents/word or better, or one book-length manuscript at an advance of \$2,000 or better). Annual dues: \$40.00. Join July-September for \$25.00. Write: Joseph A. Citro, 112 Hadley Road, S. Burlington, VT 05403.

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SKIN DEEP

BRIAN HODGE

I should've had the sense to come in out of the sun long before I finally did. But when it's your first day in Cancun, the Mexican Caribbean, your hotel room is the very last place you want to be.

The three of us had flown out of O'Hare before the rest of Chicago even began to worry about awakening, and we hit Cancun at mid-morning. From the air, against a field of turquoise water, its reef and sandbar arms, reaching out from the Yucatan peninsula, looked like the pitted blade of a reaper's scythe.

Mongo and Clark and I quickly found a cabbie eager to zip us to our hotel, the Maya Caribe. A little guy with a Fort Knox of gold teeth, he handled his sixties vintage Chevy like a Grand Prix racer. Mongo tried to talk him down on the fare. The cabbie refused to budge, even though Mongo nearly made two of him, and while some of it *was* fat, it was still solid enough that it might as well have been muscle anyway. Mongo paid, and the Chevy scuttled away, doing zero to sixty in roughly four seconds.

"Hey, what is this?" Mongo said. His given name was Jim, but ever since he had taken a liking to the infamous bean scene in *Blazing Saddles*, with occasional emulation, as well, people had called him Mongo. "Everybody says Mexicans like to haggle. It's the national sport, or something."

"Are we *that* obvious?" I wondered.

"Screw it," Clark said, stooping to sling a bag over his shoulder. "Hedonism! Hedonism! Who's with me?"

So with this as our battle cry, we stormed the lobby, checked in, and found our room. Some people might have found it vaguely pathetic, three avowed single guys on the downhill slide to thirty, heading out for an unbridled week like college students ten years our junior on spring break. Maybe it was. But I found it infinitely preferable to hanging out with the family types our age, listening to the men complaining about curtailed freedom and the women complaining about dull male complacency and both genders exchanging the same old potty-training stories about their kids.

Room service was next on the agenda, and we had them bring up a couple Leon Negra beers apiece, immersed in buckets of ice. Forget Coronas with lime wedges; that's strictly Kool-Aid for tourists and those who believe the ad campaign. We sipped the

Negras and paused a few moments, fighting the brain-lag that accompanies waking up in your own bed and standing in another country before lunch time. We gazed out the window at the ribbon of white powder beach layered against the blue sea. The beach was sprinkled with gleaming bodies, some moving, some immobile atop bright rectangles of towel.

"Hard to believe," I said, "that twenty years ago this place was just a pile of turtle bones."

Mongo and Clark looked at me, two-fisted drinkers all of us, and they waited for an explanation. A captive audience, what I live for.

"Didn't you guys read the stuff from the travel agency?"

"Nah," said Mongo. "I never made it past the pictures."

So I recounted the tale of Cancun's origins, how it had been a lowly fishing village of under 500 people until the early seventies. Around then, the Mexican government decided that their economy was in such piss-poor shape that they'd better do something jiffy quick. A new resort area sounded like a good idea. So they decided to build one from scratch.

"They picked the place by computer, if you can believe that," I said. "They fed in all this criteria about climate, and ease of accessibility, and that sort of thing, and out pops *this* place. So in come the builders, and down goes the jungle, and here we are."

"Rich Americans," said Mongo, "in search of world-class breasts."

"I don't know," Clark said. He leaned against the windowsill, the Leon Negra of choice held in a thoughtful sip. "That all sounds distinctly *unnatural*. If the Mayans knew about it, they'd be turning over in their graves."

Yeah, I thought. As if anybody knew what really happened to the Mayans. In the light of encroaching modernization, maybe it was just as well they had decided, one day a few hundred years ago, to up and pull a Houdini with their civilization. Leaving behind their temples and pyramids and artifacts, as if they were playthings cast aside by jungle gods who had grown tired of them, and had sought entertainment elsewhere.

We stared at that beach-bound smorgasbord of world-class breasts long enough to finish the beers, then set out to do a little ex-

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ploring. We rented a trio of mopeds and cruised the seven kilometers inland along the Boulevard Kukulcan. Until we hit the downtown district, about the only place we could have turned off were other hotels.

Downtown was another story. We parked the mopeds and set off on foot. The place was disgustingly clean ... shiny boutiques, well-manicured grass and shrubs. Even the palm trees looked plastic. The clothing on most everyone else was a riot of beach colors: bright yellows and greens, blues and oranges. Here a tall Rastafarian with dreadlocks rolled along on skates, toting a jambox playing reggae. There a blond teen in a muscle shirt carried on blasting Motley Crue. Here we took in such intrinsically Mexican attractions as the Ocean Pacific shop, d'Angus Steak House, and the Paris Drugstore, open twenty-four hours for your convenience. There we found a food stand and stocked up on crab tacos, washing them down with more beer and feeling the heat of the pavement burning up through our Nikes.

"What do you think happened to the people of the fishing village that used to be here?" Mongo said.

"Probably died of culture shock right here in their own country," I said.

When we tired of the cultural melting pot we had found downtown, we headed back to the hotel. Five more minutes saw us changed into our swimming trunks and trekking across the sand. It was like walking across a field of sugar. We found a comfortable spot and set up camp. Towels down, beers in hand, resting back on our elbows. Sun and sky above us, sea before us, barely-dressed women all around us. Too bad it would only last a week. Then back to the real world.

The three of us worked in the same ad agency on Michigan Avenue. Clark and I had known each other for several years, as both of us worked in the creative department. They paid me to write copy; most of it was drivel, but when that's what the situation calls for, I can deliver. Clark was a commercial artist whose work I have higher regard for. We had little contact with Mongo at the office, since he worked in the alternative world of media buying. But we all worked out at the same health club, and that's where the friendship was born. We worked out in vastly different ways: Mongo on his revolving-door relationships with women, Clark on his immaculate tan with the tanning beds, me trying to sweat out the effects of too much booze. If you want to stay fit, go to a gym. If you want to stay trendy, go to a health club.

"Don't you need some sunscreen?" Mongo asked me. His tan didn't come close to approaching Clark's, but he was still well-ahead of me. A few whiter shades of pale

and I would have qualified for albino.

"I slapped some on in the bathroom," I said. "I want to try to get a *little* color on this trip."

Clark shook his head. "We go through this every single time we take you out in the sun. You end up looking like a lobster. Give up."

"Never say die," I said.

"Never say *fry*," he countered.

The sun beat down, and the ever-present Leon Negras went to our heads. We were approached by a hotel-supplied native bearer named Ernesto who was happy to bring them to us. Mongo spied a lovely French-looking lass wearing a miniscule lavender bikini, and set off in her direction to try his luck.

"Want to place bets?" I said. Then I pointed as he made his initial approach. "I say he craps out. She's too classy."

"You're on. Loser springs for the rest of the beer."

We watched for several moments, after which the girl scooted over on her towel. Mongo, who had been squatting in the sand, settled beside her. He quickly glanced our way, grinning, and gave a thumbs-up behind her back.

"Damn!" I said. "He's disgusting. I hate him."

"What do you think the ancient Mayans would've made of our boy wonder Mongo?"

"They probably would've worshipped him," I said. "Great white god of fertility."

Clark drew his knees up, resting his chin atop them. "Wouldn't it be weird if the Mayans were still around? Like, still out in the jungles, but hidden away somewhere that nobody ever knew about except them. And pretty soon, they come out, and want all their land back, and they see what everyone's done here ... and they're *real* pissed. Wouldn't that be weird?"

I shrugged. "Couple plane loads of napalm and agent orange would take care of that pretty quick."

Clark nodded. "You're probably right. It's kind of neat to think about, though."

I agreed, imaginative souls the both of us, and we waited out the afternoon under the sun. In a brochure from the travel agency, its cartoon graphics showed the sun smiling down. Pleasantly. Benevolently.

They were wrong.

For in Maya country, at least, it looks down in fury.

I should've had the sense to come in out of the sun long before I finally did. But hindsight, as has been said, is always 20/20. And the pain of a sunburn creeps up gradually, sneaky as a thief in the dead of night. My skin felt a little tight by the time we left the beach, was colored a faint pink,

but no more.

Maybe it'll stay this way, I thought, *and won't get any worse.*

Oh, silly me. Silly fuckin' me.

We saddled up the mopeds and headed off in the opposite direction as we'd gone earlier, this time in search of dinner. We spent a couple of hours near the point of Cancun, where the reefs meet. And here it was that my glowing healthy pink deepened into a flaming neon red. Mongo too sported a burn, though bush league when compared to mine. In fact, by Mongo's admission, my chest and face were a more spectacular color than the sunset.

The heat I had absorbed all afternoon was absolutely radiant from my skin. It felt alive with a slow, steady glow, and if I were to look directly across the breadth of my body, I would probably see ripples of heat rising up.

Funny thing about sunburns; they can do a nasty re juggling of your priorities. The night was still young, but all I wanted to do was bike back to the hotel and suffer in peace and quiet. I lay atop one of the beds in the dark, wearing only my underwear. Feeling my skin throb from ankles to forehead.

Clark and Mongo popped in an hour later, bearing gifts.

"We went back downtown, and found that drugstore. Got you some aloe cream." This from Clark.

"Gimme," I said, rising from my bed of coals. "Gimme."

"And just so you don't feel left out tonight, I got you these." Mongo offered me a bottle of Gusano Rojo tequila, a couple of lemons, and a paring knife. No salt or shot glass, but I'd make do.

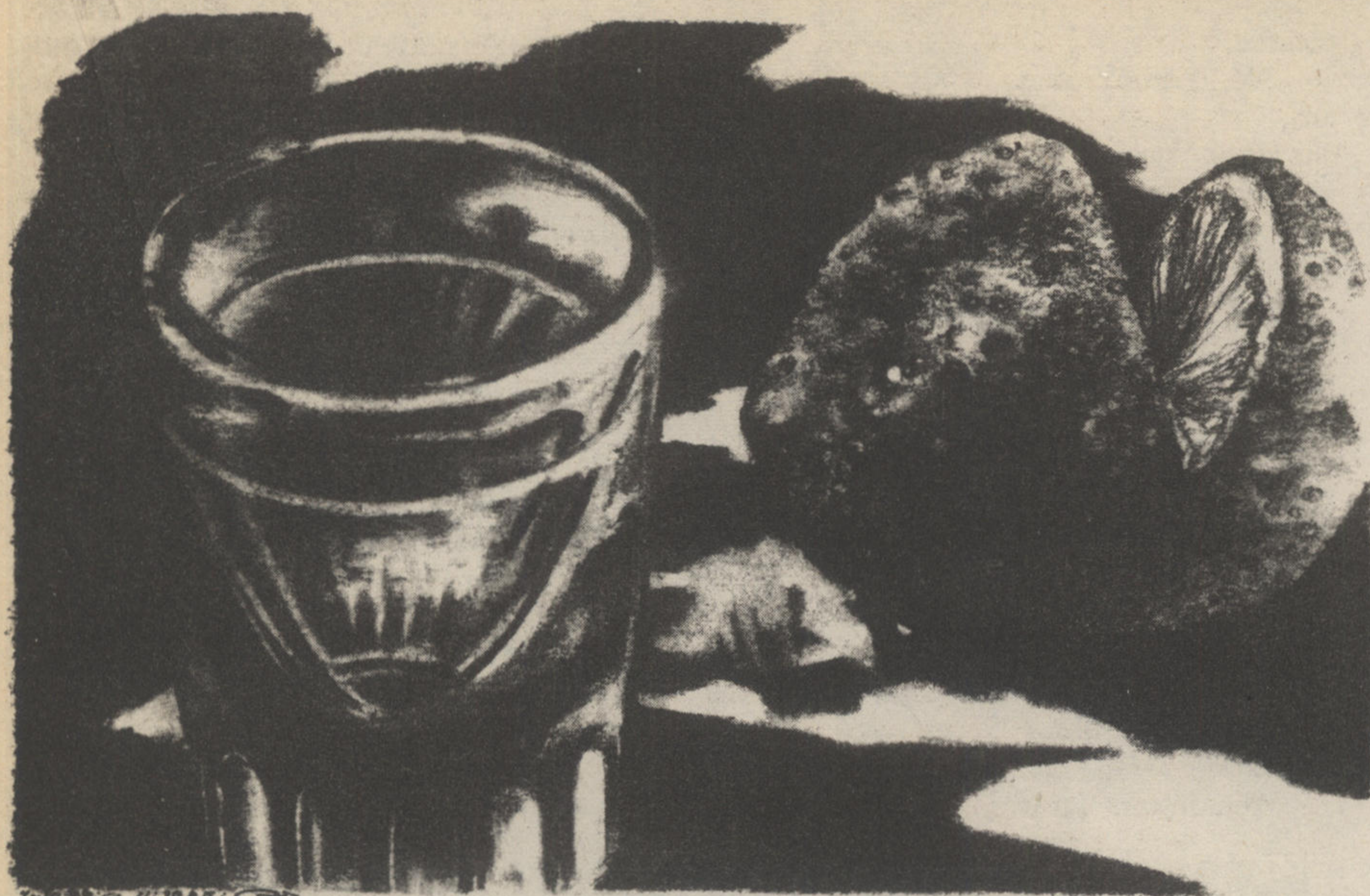
"Consider it from a medical point of view," Clark said. "We couldn't find you any decent painkillers, but this should help. I got faced one night with this guy back home, and he said that if you want drugs and can't find them, go for tequila. It's supposed to contain hallucinogens."

Mongo was edging toward the door. "So ... you don't mind, ummmm, if we ..."

I sat on the edge of the bed, greasing myself with aloe, imagining I heard my skin hiss. "Out of my sight," I said. "Begone."

They didn't need to be told twice.

So here I was, my first night in Cancun, miserable and alone with a bottle of tequila. What to do, what to do? Hallucinogens, he had said? That seemed appropriate. You hear about these tribal Indians south of the border who ingest all kinds of hallucinogens to show them visions. In fact, the bottle's label said nothing about tequila. It said *Mezcal*, a word bearing more than a passing resemblance to mescaline. Whoa, maybe we got the real thing here. And when in Rome, do as the Romans do.



I can rationalize *any* behavior when I set my mind to it.

I clicked on the TV and found some American programs dubbed with Spanish dialogue, so I didn't understand much. High school Spanish class was a long time ago. And I drank, oh yes, doing the equivalent of a shot every fifteen minutes. Maybe ten. You lose track of time after awhile. But I kept track of the gulps by lining up the peels from the half-slices of lemon I cut to kill the mezcal's formidable bite. By the time I had twelve of the little crescents on the dresser, the burning of my skin was equaled only by the burning in my belly. Rich American Flambé.

I tried to navigate the room a little, found that Cancun must have been bobbing in the ocean. My brain, thick and heavy, countered by sloshing inside my skull. Oh, we're having some fun *now*. I collapsed onto the bed again ... and fell ... and fell ... and fell ...

And found that I could walk much better in my dreams.

The setting was a jungle, daytime, but the canopy of foliage turned the place into a world of perpetual twilight. You've seen this place, you know this jungle. Indiana Jones country. The land of a thousand B-movies, the living emerald forest come to life, a jungle of such magnitude that it's no mean feat to imagine what the world must have been like when lizards ruled the earth and sky.

Except no lizard can clear the jungle as it had been ahead ... and build a pyramid-shaped altar. It stood gray and immense even by the standards of the jungle, human figures and hieroglyphs carved in raised relief against the stone, widely-tiered steps leading up to the plateau at its top. I floated toward it,

dreamwalking up the steps.

The men I found at the top could only be described as beautiful, a picture of primordial harmony with their surroundings. They *belonged* here. Their skin was a bronzed brown, their hair black and straight and long. They wore loincloths, and some of them were adorned with bracelets and jewelry of breathtaking detail. And oh, the wisdom in those dark, dark eyes ... eyes that have learned the secrets of the jungle, eyes that guard such truths as white men will never know.

Four of them held down a fifth atop a stone table, men positioned at his shoulders and thighs. And then a sixth lifted the cruelly gleaming blade ...

The fifth man watched him with honor, with dignity, and yes, even with love ...

Even as the knife came arcing down into his ribcage.

Dreams will often deny you the little luxuries taken for granted in everyday life. Things like running, or closing your eyes. So I watched through air misted crimson as the still-beating heart was yanked from its home, then held aloft in the air. As the four men relaxed when there was no more need to restrain their captive. As the priest's knife returned to the body to caress it further, stroking its lengths as a brush might glide along a canvas, turning the act of butchery into an art as old as civilization. As they began to peel the dead man's hide from the underlying flesh and muscles.

And yes, even as they all turned (*falling, I'm falling*), finally, and saw me. They smiled, though not malevolently. They moved toward me, the first two reaching with reddened hands.

The magic in their eyes, that accumulated

storehouse of generations upon generations of knowledge ...

Their hands upon me, upon my flaming skin. Chattering words I would never understand, they led me toward the table as the priest cleared it. As he welcomed me with upturned hands. Smiling.

Finally I began to float ... and I rose ... and rose ... and rose ...

Until I realized that the sight of that hotel room ceiling was the most precious thing I had ever beheld. I blinked sweat from my eyes, loosed a sour tequila belch that burned all the way up my throat. All at once I knew that it wouldn't stop there.

I rolled off the bed and crabbed an undignified scabble to the bathroom, just in time to see everything I had ingested the past few hours go hurtling into the toilet. It didn't take long. I'm an old pro at this scene.

I soon went wandering back toward the bed, hoping that now, at last, sleep would come more peacefully.

I didn't remember it until later; perhaps things might not have turned out so terribly had I recalled it at this point.

But there's nearly always a little vomiting involved in those Indian hallucinogenic experiences. At some point or another.

"So what did you do last night?" It was my first question of the rudely bright morning, once the preliminaries of moaning and groaning and vowing eternal sobriety were dispensed with.

Clark grumbled and shielded his eyes from the sun. A sheet from his bed, a portable brought up by room service, was knotted around him in vaguely Roman fashion. Mongo was already up, standing by the window in bikini briefs. A warm breeze fluttered his hair.

"*Bebo mucho cerveza*," said Mongo, "*y no recuerdo nada*." Loose translation: I drank a bunch of beer and don't remember shit.

"How's the burn?" Clark had finally found his voice.

I sat up on my bed, facing him, examining my shoulders, thighs, stomach, chest. "I think I've stabilized. But I go out in the sun today and you'll carry back a Cheeto. Quick-fried to a crackly crunch."

"Last night ... what did we talk about doing today?" Mongo asked.

Clark rose and cast off the sheet, Caesar ready for his day. "We thought about doing the tourist thing. See the sights, look at the Indian ruins. Culture! Who's with me?"

As Mongo nodded, I recalled the previous night's dream. Envisioned Clark and Mongo, gringos to the end, stretched out on whatever ruin they chose to visit, watching the fall of the blade. A queasy turn of my stomach.

Should I tell them not to go, to maybe find other plans? Whine about being left alone again?

Oh come on, I thought then. *Get real*. These ruins were *tourist* attractions. Gringos would probably be tripping all over the things, perhaps quietly despised by the Mexican version of park rangers, but certainly no worse. You don't sacrifice the hand that feeds you.

So I kept my mouth shut, and once Mongo and Clark had made themselves presentable, and wearing a loose T-shirt and shorts, ventured down to the bar to drink my breakfast. I made fast friends with Raoul, the bartender. But then, bartenders generally *do* seem to like me. I generously tip a job well-done.

Morning had slipped into early afternoon by the time I found the stairs and wandered back up to the room. Time for a nap, maybe. Or a *siesta*, rather. When in Rome, and all that.

I met the bed face-first, sprawled out in a T-shape. Outside, the sun traveled ever westward. People strolled out to the beach, soaked up their ration of sun, departed. And on I slept. I doubt I moved even once ...

Until my burned cheek felt the first leathery touch brush across it.

My eyes fluttered open; the uphill crawl of awakening was fraught with many a roadblock. At last my vision cleared, and my cotton-dry mouth mumbled confusion. I saw a tiny pair of eyes staring back at me. And a wide, wide mouth. A green face.

From elsewhere in the room, there came amused laughter.

With a startled cry and a barely coherent "Whu-the-hell?" I rolled away across the bed, staring back at the thing which had been sitting beside my face.

It was the ugliest frog I had ever seen. A squashed-looking thing with a broad, flat head, its skin was olive-drab, a color better suited to jeeps and tanks. But the worst part was its back; it was covered with dozens of tiny white spheres, the green flesh swelling up to enclose them.

"Don't you like her?" Mongo said.

"What's *wrong* with that thing?" I asked.

"Nothing that time won't take care of," said Clark. "We found her at the edge of a little pond this afternoon. That's one of those toads that carries her eggs on her back."

"Yeah," Mongo said. "We figured this is the closest you're gonna come to a sexually active female on *this* trip."

"Oh, you guys are *scum*," I said, starting to laugh. "Just remember, on this day in history, I said you both were *scum*."

Mongo hung his head in mock shame, hands in pockets and digging his big toe in the carpet. "And we thought you'd be

pleased."

"Well, that's okay," I said. "I'm scum too."

Clark stepped forward to retrieve his specimen, putting her in a large wax Coke cup which, apparently, he'd used to bring her in.

And I realized they had made a valid point. It would do no good to barricade myself in the room. I would be hurting no matter where I was, so I might as well get out and have some fun to counterbalance the pain.

"Okay, listen," I said. "No more house arrest for me. And you give me another day or two for the flames to go down, and we'll go out and we *will not rest* until each and every one of us has had a completely meaningless relationship. Fornication! Who's with me?"

And this time, it was unanimous.



Things didn't really start to get weird until the next day.

We slept in late, then began the day by swilling Leon Negras at poolside, at a table beneath an umbrella the size of a satellite dish. Every so often, I had to scratch at my beginning-to-heal sunburn, peeling away dead strips like onionskin parchment. Mongo did the same.

After shopping for presents for friends and co-workers back home, the day culminated with us camped around a table at an outdoor cafe near the point of Cancun. Strolling musicians in sombreros periodically came around to annoy us, as we sat stuffing ourselves from platters of tacos and nachos and chili rellenos and ordering margaritas by the pitcherful.

Mongo leaned heavily on one forearm, errant locks of hair spilling over his forehead. "I guess Project Fornication is out of the

question for tonight." He peered sadly into his lap, stained, as it was, with salsa and guacamole. "I don't think I could get it up with a crane."

"A fact I'm sure the fathers of Cancun are *all* grateful for," Clark said.

Mongo came back with some rude comment, and I stared at the devastation wrought across our table. This went beyond feast; we'd just had an orgy.

"What do you say we change our pace a little," I said. "Go down to the beach, look at the stars, look out at the sea, maybe get a little philosophical."

"It's the Hemingway thing to do," Clark said.

"And maybe take some more margaritas with us, just in case."

"Hey, that's the way Papa would've done it."

So we ordered a couple more pitchers as

Step One of our plan. Mongo, on a supposed trip inside to the bathroom, suddenly stopped, pointed in horror, and cut loose with his Chicago-perfected "Holy shit, is that a *RAT?*" line. In the brief but adequate pandemonium which ensued, Clark and I managed to slip away with a pitcher apiece, and didn't slosh out *too* much in our haste.

We wandered northeast, until we found our way to an open stretch of beach. To our left, at the very tip of the point, stood the Camino Real. To our right, the Hyatt Regency. Several yards ahead, the night surf lapped at the beach, a never-ending assault to reclaim the land. The moon was huge, and its reflection on the water looked like a highway to faraway lands and distant shores. A highway to carry us anyplace but back home.

Avoiding the cover of the few token palm trees and the mushroom-shaped umbrellas, we plunked our unsteady butts in the sand. It

was still warm with the sunlight it had absorbed all day, a strangely comforting bed. Shoes were removed, and here we came to rest. Day is done, all is well.

"You know, we've hardly taken the time to look at scenes like this," Clark said.

Nobody else had much to say to that, but the silence was amiable enough, broken only by the slurping from the pitchers, and so after a moment, Clark went on.

"When you sit *here* and really look at what's out *there*, it makes you think that maybe the builders and developers didn't quite kill this place after all. Know what I mean?"

Mongo and I said we didn't.

"One good hurricane, and this place is history. The one in 'eighty-eight proved that. But say a *really* big one. Or one off-shore earthquake followed by a tidal wave. Gone, all of it. Everything back there that looks so

Eventually my hands fell limp. A margarita pitcher was somewhere closeby, but it was beyond me to grope for it. The day was finally catching up and closing in.

My eyes roved among the stars. Had I ever seen so vast a sky? Not in Chicago, I hadn't. I floated both within the sand and above it, body left behind as the mind soared. A cerebral drunk, if there was such a thing.

Soon sleep was all but upon me, and I smiled, imagining hordes of the Mayans of old emerging from the jungles to frolic on the seashore. To play, to frolic, to rejoice ... to simply *be*. The moonlight would glisten on their sea-slicked bodies, turning them silver, turning them pure.

I could almost see them. Then ... wow. Scratch the almost.

Moments later, breaking my reverie, I could feel hands upon me, fingers light as feathers on my arms, legs, chest, stomach.

Then I saw my skin move. All of its own accord.

As if pulled by unseen hands, my sunburn continued to peel. Strips of skin separated and tugged free of my limbs, my torso. The night air on my cheek suddenly felt cooler as an inch-wide strip of dead skin came free, leaving behind the sensitive, healing skin underneath. The limp tatters of flesh, filmy thin, pulled loose and clung in body hair, or slipped silently to the sand.

My eyes lit on the pitcher that Clark had left behind; it had toppled onto its side, dribbling a few remaining trickles of margarita into the thirsty sand. And what's in margaritas, class?

"Tequila," I muttered. "Visions, right."

My ad writer's imagination was rolling, tequila brain soaring. Let's think this through, and pull out all the stops this time.

Wouldn't it be weird if the Mayans were still around?

Ah, wouldn't it be weirdest of all if Clark was absolutely right? If he, in his naive sense of justice in an all too modern world, had stumbled onto a genuine natural truth? What if they were still around? Only they could not be seen, could only make their influence felt in other ways. Ways rooted in whatever long-forgotten mysteries the jungle had taught them.

I watched as a patch of dead skin fully four inches wide came free from the lower reaches of my stomach and began rolling slowly up toward my chest. It curled up like a wet stamp on a humid day. I couldn't take it any longer, and screamed to wake the dead.

Clark didn't hear. He was underwater by this time. In another world, empty pitcher cast adrift on the waves. Only Mongo heard, and he jerked, then rolled over to look at me with startled eyes.

All at once, my skin's intimate striptease ended. As if those unseen hands had been startled too. *I know about them now*, I thought. *The tequila showed them to me. And that must mean ... they know about me now.*

Mongo rubbed his face with a gritty hand, tried to focus on me. "You okay?" he said. "Did you yell?"

The splash of surf, the whine of a gentle breeze, the chirp of insects, the drone of traffic. What's wrong with this picture?

"I'm okay," I said, looking down at the tender skin newly exposed to the night air. "Bad dream, I guess."

Mongo nodded his head, pushed his hair back, sort of smiled at me. It was a reassuring smile, oddly tender, maybe even protective. Drunks are sometimes overcome by spells of camaraderie, emotional bonds not quite like any other. Perhaps because they never know when they will be the one needing a



solid turned into so much rubble. Nature has this way of losing the battles, but in the end winning the wars. I think we've forgotten that somewhere along the line."

"We?" I said. "Meaning?"

"People. *Homo sapiens* in general. We used to know that. You can bet your gonads that the people who lived here a few hundred years ago knew that. And made it work for them."

Clark rattled on awhile longer. Pretty profound stuff, I guess, but when you can't count the pitchers the three of you have consumed on both hands, your concentration tends to wander. At some point I remember lying back, idly peeling strips of dead skin from my arms, my legs, my chest, my stomach. Boris Karloff as the Mummy. Peel and discard. Off with the old, get down to the new. How much dead skin can one person shed, anyway?"

"Faggots," I mumbled, for no doubt my scum friends were playing games with me again. "Faggots ..."

Guys who would stoop to sticking a toad beside a sleeping friend's face would certainly not hesitate to move on to worse games when that friend has nearly drunk himself unconscious on the beach.

So I blinked, and thrashed my head, and babbled stuff that made no sense, until no one could deny that I was awake.

And alone, as well.

Mongo was a heap five feet away, softly snoring. I raised my head and looked to the sea, found a mostly-naked Clark standing mid-thigh in the water, holding a pitcher in one hand. Had he possessed one, he surely would have held a Neptune-like trident in the other.

Alone. With the touch of hands still lingering.

caretaker.

"I was dreaming too," he said, then shook his head, perplexed, as if some pieces of a puzzle were missing. "Something about ... Indians."

A moment later, as Clark broke water and coughed, Mongo suddenly spasmed, then crawled a few feet forward to vomit into the sand.

We slept on the beach until close to dawn, then trudged our grubby selves back to the hotel for more sleep. Hangovers were especially fierce this morning, best fought from bed. But following an afternoon dip in the pool, we felt as fresh as newborn babes.

I peeled off more dead skin in the bathroom and dropped it into the trash can, where it appeared that Mongo had preceded me. In no way did it come off by itself, though, and I wondered if last night's scene on the beach had been a delusion.

Perhaps. More than three pitchers of margaritas should have that power. But perhaps not. I had been drinking long and hard enough to consider myself a pro ... not an amateur prone to seeing pink elephants.

So when in doubt, punt; go with what you know. Sunburn pain was down to a minimum. Tonight we ride.

Where to go in quest of meaningless relationships was the only matter unsettled. The day before, Clark had found in the lobby a brochure with a cartoon-like map of Cancun. An angled aerial perspective presented both the hotel zone and downtown. It showed most of the buildings, and listed descriptions of all attractions under categories. Clark went wild over the graphics. Mongo was scanning the listings under NIGHTCLUBS AND BARS.

"Here's an interesting one: Friday Lopez," he said. "Whoa! Hey! Listen to this, listen to this: 'Come alone, and leave with a new friend.' Ha haaa, I know what *that* means!"

And so Friday Lopez it was. The place wasn't even far away, less than two kilometers from our hotel. Outside the place, a bass line from within thumped underfoot, and I looked at Mongo.

"You're getting as disgusting as I am," I told him, then plucked a sizable tatter of dead skin from his cheek.

We found a packed house inside, and for a moment we could only stare in awe at the band, the haze of smoke, the people dancing and carrying drinks, the glitz. It was as if we had just teleported ourselves into one of the meatmarkets back home on Rush Street.

"One stop shopping, right at your fingertips," Clark said.

We seized a table as soon as one opened, prepared to hang in there for the duration. The situation necessitated a few compromises



in our behavior compared to most of our conduct thusfar. Pacing our drinking, curbing audible belches and the like, willingness to do the obligatory dancing. It's the same everywhere.

And it paid off in Cancun just as easily as in Chicago. If there really is such a thing as a universal language, it has to be lust.

The logistics we went through, the subtle and not-so-subtle dropping of cues, the orchestration of seduction ... they aren't important. There exists only one mating ritual when last names don't matter; all else are variations.

Clark was the first to strike pay dirt. He said they were going to go stargazing from her hotel balcony, and not to wait up for him.

An hour later, Mongo and I were in the driver's seat as well. They said they were sisters, visiting Cancun with their parents. Mine was the fair-skinned blond, Brandi. Mongo landed the darker brunette, Amber. Who said opposites attract? We danced, we bought them drinks, we told them stories and made them laugh. They told us stories and we smiled to be polite.

"So what do you think, Coach?" I said when the girls went on a bathroom break. "World-class breasts?"

Mongo see-sawed his hand. "Definite runners-up, though."

And close enough was good enough for us.

When Brandi and Amber returned, Mongo made a show of checking his watch. "Jeez, would you look at the time? Not long until the light show outside."

What was he talking about, the girls wanted to know. So did I, for that matter, though I kept quiet. Mongo knows best.

"What? You didn't *hear*? Oh man. In about a half-hour, Mars and Venus *and* Saturn are supposed to all line up in the same path. It only happens, like, oh, once every three hundred and twelve years or so. Supposed to be the wildest lights you've ever seen."

"Ooooh," said Brandi. "Are you a scientist?"

Mongo gave her his best grin. I've seen women liquefy at that grin. "I'm an up-and-coming junior Carl Sagan."

Of course he had them hooked, and of course they wanted to see. And since they were staying at the Sheraton, on around the point, their hotel, complete with its matched set of parents, made a *terrible* vantage point from which to view this spectacle. You had to be facing north. Just like our room at the Maya Caribe.

They bought the whole nine yards, or pretended to. And up in our room, well before this celestial light show would be discovered a no-show, it was the furthest thing from their space-for-rent minds.

Two couples, two beds. I love it when mathematics works out this evenly. Mongo and I had no reservations about the lack of privacy; it wasn't like we hadn't seen each other in this context before. And it didn't seem to bother Brandi and Amber, either.

Time lost meaning for quite awhile.

And then I dozed, sleeping on my stomach because the little vixen had very long fingernails which she enjoyed using on my back. Breakfast for this one was in serious doubt. Cab fare, at most.

Outside, a lonely wind whined in the eaves, the ever-present surf splashed on the shore. A chorus of insects. The magic of na-

ture is never truly far away. Only far from mind.

Dreams of Mayans on the beach, Mayans climbing the walls of the hotel, Mayans in the room. Wouldn't it be weird if they were still around? You bet, Clark. Weird. But maybe not as unlikely as we had once thought.

Somewhere in those pre-dawn hours I heard Brandi moaning. It was a faraway sound at first, and the Mayan dreams flew away in insubstantial silken threads. Brandi had a cute voice, a childlike moan. I listened, smiling groggily at the sound. Was she dreaming too? I lay there, weighing that erotic little whimper and its effect on my libido with her fingernails and their less desirable effect on my back.

My ... back ...

I hadn't been aware of it at first, but now, with a clearer head, I felt the feathery touch on raw skin back there. It felt almost like the dabbing of a tiny paintbrush. And then came a persistent, lighter-than-light tug at the base of my spine.

"Brandi?" I whispered.

She whimpered in reply, and I looked over at her beside me. She lay on her back, one leg splayed and draped onto the floor, both hands gripping the sheet beneath her with fingers curled and locked. Her forehead was creased in the same way I had noticed when we were making love earlier, her lips pouting. But she was asleep, no question.

What's going on ...?

I saw something pale move, again felt the tug and tickle on my back. So I twisted my head around to peer over my shoulder toward my outstretched legs, alabaster in the moonlight. And I saw it.

Rooted at the small of my back was huge strip of peeled skin, rolled together into a tight narrow tube. It moved in the air like a snake after the free end had touched my back, then sought Brandi once again. Wavering, it slowly stretched and lowered itself, seeking the juncture between her thighs. And there the head-end disappeared, sliding deeper, farther in, and she moaned once more.

I bit my pillow to stifle the cry I could not hold anymore, and reached around to grab the whip-like protrusion from my back. There was the faintest flare of pain when the skin pulled free, a red raw feeling, and for a moment the tube of skin quivered in a manner almost serpentine. Then it fell limp.

With a shiver of disgust, I bolted from the bed to throw the vile thing out the window. And then I simply sat in the adjacent chair, naked, thinking. No longer doubting last night on the beach. No longer doubting the existence of the Mayans. No trick of the imagination tonight. For by this time I felt quite sober. Only I didn't want to be. Now, less than ever.

Easy enough to remedy. I grabbed Mongo's get-well present. No lemons this time, but I wouldn't grouse about something so trivial. The bottle and I got to be very close friends, and while I drank I sometimes heard Mongo groan and thrash, no doubt in the grip of nightmares of his own. I saw sweat bead up on his face. Until I couldn't see or hear anything beyond the roaring surf inside my own skull.

When morning came, I found myself slumped over the back of the chair by the window, neck aching from subjection to angles that were never meant to be slept in. The remainder of the night had passed in a blur that might have been sleep and might not have been. Such dreams, encore performances of the sacrificial dream I'd had the first night, with my sunburn at its worst. Dreams? Maybe they really *had* been visions.

I stared dreamily out toward the beach, the early risers already trekking across the sand for a dip in the sea. Might not be a bad idea. Might help wash away the pain in my head, the pain in my back, which had probably been what had really awakened me.

Then everything from the night came back in a sudden rush. Just before I turned around to face the rest of the room.

The girls were still asleep. Well, that was one thing to be thankful for. The *only* thing.

I could only sit and stare when I saw Mongo, the mezcal residue backing up in my throat. I knew it was him only by the process of elimination. Because Mongo, unmoving and silent Mongo, was but a fraction of his former self. Red muscle and flesh glimmered wetly in the morning light, as if he were no more than an exhibit from a medical school lab. All around him on the bed, with some having fallen to the floor, lay endless strips of peeled skin.

When Amber, still asleep, cuddled closer to his glistening body, now starting to draw the attention of flies, I could not hold it down anymore. And in the bathroom, kneeling over the toilet, I wondered just what act of magic his sacrifice had been linked with.

When I reached around to scratch the nagging itch at my back, I knew. The mirror showed me the rest.

The normally smooth skin of my back had bubbled outward in better than a dozen places, the red and raw flesh angry-looking and swollen, and oh so tender. Trickle of darkish fluid oozed from the pustules, which seemed to throb and swell even as I looked at them.

I had very little doubt, all of a sudden, as to what that snake-like protrusion had been seeking last night. And I would have bet my life that Little Miss Brandi was ovulating.

Though I had the sinking feeling that my life wouldn't be worth much anymore. Not to me.

To the Mayans, though, perhaps it was a different story.

I remembered the ugly toad that Clark and Mongo had brought me.

Well, I *had* heard somewhere, long ago, that the greatest forms of magic are rooted deeply in nature.

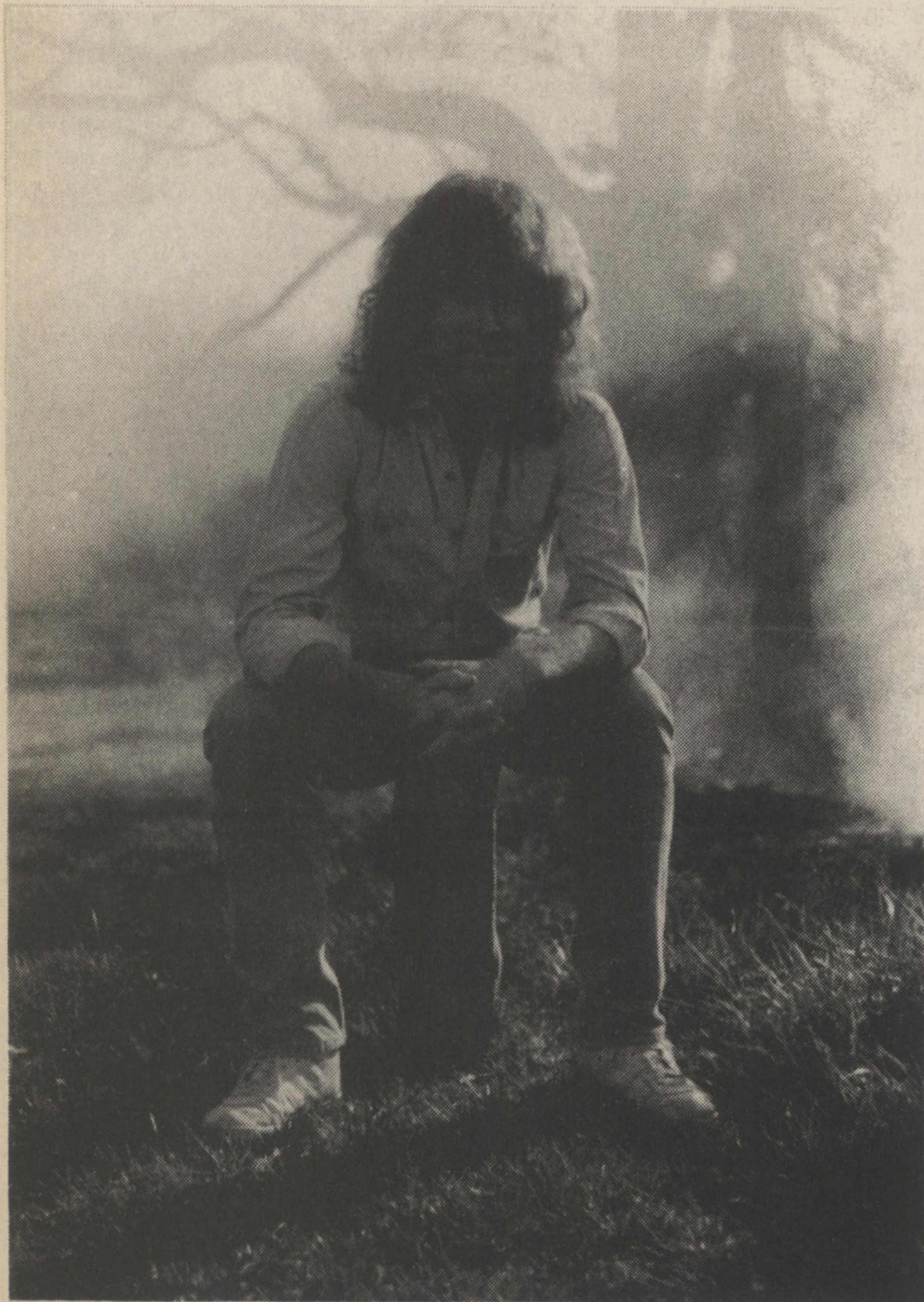
Yeah, Clark, the Mayans are still around. And they're on their way back. I'll introduce you sometime. As if I had a choice.

I wonder if they'll call me Great White Father.

Somehow I doubt it. Oh, how I doubt it.



BRIAN HODGE



THS: *First off, why don't you tell us a little about your personal side?*

HODGE: Well ... if you saw me in half like a tree to count my rings, you'll find 28. I love loud music, rude comedy, dark beer, endearingly bad movies, cookies and cream flavor ice cream, and at least nine out of every ten children. Haircuts are traumatic. My neighbors complain about my stereo. I'd die without a VCR. My apartment is cluttered with lots of neat toys, such as primitive ceremonial masks, a severed mannequin leg, *Ghostbusters* Ecto-Plasm, and a six-foot inflatable snake. I exercise and run a lot to keep fit, but have a diet that would reduce a nutritionist to quaking despair. I play keyboards, and wank around a bit on guitar and mandolin. Sometimes I suffer sleep disorders, and get a real charge out of adrenalin rushes. I suppose my farthest-reaching goal is to experience as much as possible of the wonders of life, and *not* look like Keith Richards in twenty years.

THS: *Okay, can you tell us how you broke into the field?*

HODGE: Hooo, that's been a long road. But briefly?

THS: *Briefly.*

HODGE: I've been writing ever since I *could*--say, second grade--but

even through college, didn't have too terribly much focus. A year after I graduated and was working a major suck-o-rama of a job, I talked my way into some early vacation time to attend a writers conference in Boston. The big draw was Stephen King's presence one day. This is where I met writer Beth Massie, and we got to be great friends. In fact, I told her about *The Horror Show*. Anyway, I had a workshop leader named Pam Painter, a Harvard professor, and she took a real liking to me and my work, and slipped me a list of literary agents she knew, to start contacting whenever I had a novel ready to shop around. My first agent was on the list, although we've since parted company--very amicably, and she *did* sell *Oasis*--after it became apparent she didn't have much of a feeling for horror. I moved on to the same agent that handles Skipp and Spector, and since then it's just been a continual process of hammering away on both novels and short stories.

THS: *You've recently had two novels published. Oasis, which was published by TOR, was actually written before your first published novel, Dark Advent. And wasn't Oasis based on the short story "Oasis" which first appeared in The Horror Show? Could you tell us a little about the transition "Oasis" made from short story to novel?*

HODGE: Yeah, the publishing schedules flip-flopped their order of appearance. But *Oasis* was written first, and sold about two months before agent number two sold *Dark Advent*. It just took TOR longer to grind the wheels to get it out.

As far as transition goes, it wasn't too hairy. For the Boston conference, we were to send in advance a sample of our work. So I fired off "Oasis" in its short story form since, at the time, I thought it was the best thing I'd done. Right after mailing it, I got word that it sold here at *The Horror Show*. In Boston, we did all sorts of supplemental writing based on our stories and characters, and I realized I loved them too much to keep them shackled inside 3700 words. Like, it was in Boston that I came up with the character of Hurdles and the anecdote about the guys painting his ass blue. So I left Boston determined to turn it into a novel, and conceived the basic plot structure while driving home. And believe me, a twenty-six hour solo drive of nearly 1200 miles straight through can twist your skull into some bizarre directions. It went through about five drafts before it sold. My exercise in "How To Write A Novel 101."

THS: *Was the origin and history behind Dark Advent a more comfortable experience for you?*

HODGE: Not necessarily. I'd had the germ of the idea for it ever since 1977 ... a medieval-type fable told in twentieth century terms. But when I was sixteen, seventeen, there was no way I could've done it justice. Then Stephen King put out *The Stand*, and I was just devastated, because I was thinking, "Oh nooooo! This is along the lines of what I wanted to do ... and he did it better!" All I'd managed to eke out was a 12,000 word novella. So I shelved it for years. But after *Oasis*, it just kidnapped me and wouldn't let go until I wrote it. I knew it was a bit risky to do it, because it's not the most original premise ... the end of the world as we know and love it. That's a tried and true premise, not only with *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, but older works like *I Am Legend* and *Alas, Babylon*. All wonderful books. But it simply felt right to do it, at gut level, so I gave in. And by all accounts, the sales and reactions have been excellent. Plus, it was fun to do the end of the world without using a lot of supernatural overtones, like the King and McCammon books. I knew I couldn't better them in that area, no way, so I stuck

pretty close to hard-core reality. Despite what the cover art suggests. So I think that sufficiently differentiates it. Hope so, anyway.

THS: *Both of your stories included in this issue explore sexual themes. One is from the male point of view, the other from the female. Are you equally comfortable writing from either perspective?*

HODGE: Pretty much, yeah. If you're doing novels in third-person variable viewpoints, you have to be able to switch-hit like that. I think that, regardless of your birth gender, everybody has male and female elements in their psyche. It's just a matter of finding the opposite one within you and tapping into that. Still, I'll take some of the women's-viewpoint stuff to women I'm close to and make sure it rings true. The uncredited collaborators, my safety valve.

The female-viewpoint story here, "Phallusies," was very important to me to successfully pull off without seeming voyeuristic. I'd done "Skin Deep" and was wondering what to do for the second story. I'm thinking, "Okay, here in 'Skin Deep' we have these basically likable guys who are behaving in pretty reprehensibly irresponsible ways." So I wanted to atone for that, kind of counterbalance it and get as far from that particular mindset as I could. Sometimes readers have this tendency to transfer a lot of a character onto the author. Sometimes it fits, sometimes it doesn't.

THS: *It seems like the big debate in the field these days is the so-named splatterpunk movement. Do you see yourself as aligned with the splatterpunks? And, I'm curious, what your thoughts are about the movement in general. Is it something that will last? Is it really something that's new?*

HODGE: I could go on about this one for a loooong time. First off, I do like the term "splatterpunk" simply because it's a neat hybrid word and fun to play around with. It's vivid. A friend gave me a custom-made "Splatterpunk" sweatshirt, and I love it, even wore it on a TV interview. But it's as often as not seen in a very derogatory context and is ultimately just used as a tool to categorize. And that's too bad. I'm an enormous fan of the guys who are the most visible under that banner heading ... David Schow, Skipp and Spector. Some people seem to dismiss them simply because of their approach, when there's a lot more substance to their work than just the blood-bags and special effects. They come up with some killer on-target psychological insights, and they're writing about things that matter. That alone elevates them way, way above someone like Shaun Hutson and his slugfests, where he seems content to trot out endless anatomical damage and leave it at that.

Is it new? No, not really. Clive Barker freely admits it stems from the tradition of Grand Guignol theater. And I remember reading stuff in junior high that was every bit as graphic, if less imaginative. I think it's just recently happened to come to the forefront because the approach is being adopted by guys who can indeed *write*, and have something to say. And some people, I guess, find that akin to washing down medicine with gasoline. Will it last? I suspect it will. It seems to be an inevitable evolution. But whether it retains its outlaw status or gains more widespread "respectability," that remains to be seen.

As far as if I see myself aligned with the splat-pack, well, self-evaluations are always a little risky. But I feel like I have one foot in the splatterpunk camp and one elsewhere ... not quiet horror, maybe just a bit more mainstream. Certainly I feel more affinity with them than I do with someone like King, or Dennis Etchison, or Charles Grant, simply because we're all close to the same age. We have the same reference points growing up. Ever since the sixties, society has been growing more little kids tougher and tougher. You can't blame us if it takes more to scare us, because we grew up watching coverage from Nam and accepting the idea of war and assassinations as a fact of everyday life. So naturally I feel I have more in common with them.

But ultimately, when it comes down to writing, I just don't con-

sciously think about it. I'll adopt the approach that best fits the story or novel. I'll do whatever I need to get my fingernails under your psyche and start peeling. "Phallusies" is by necessity a psychological story. I've got one coming out in *New Blood* called "Graphic Arts" where a ghetto graffiti artist ends up turned into a virtual human spray can. It wouldn't have worked any other way. Who's to say you can't cover the spectrum, and use whatever works best? My main concern has never been coming up with the most creative gore, or the most liberal amounts, but bringing out as many emotional resonances as I can. Because once the story or book is finished and the reader moves on, it's not nearly so much the gore and pyrotechniques that they're going to remember, but how successfully you've tampered with their emotions. And *that's* my bullseye.

THS: *Have movies influenced your writing to any great extent? Do you think you'd enjoy doing a screenplay? Maybe following in Skipp and Spector's footsteps?*

HODGE: Ha haaa, what timing! As of this interview, I've just days ago wrapped up a screenplay version of *Oasis*. I'm friends with Bill Relling, and he sort of talked me into giving one a shot. He acted in the capacity of part guru, part midwife on the project. He's passed it along to his screenwriting agent in Hollywood. If it proves lucrative, or if it just opens a few doors, then yeah, you can bet I'll do more screenplays. Although I have this terrible fear that ultimate success will depend on some horrid studio exec who'll say something like, "Yeah, we love it, we wanna do it up big-time. How's a cool hundred thou pricetag sound? But first ... drop them there panties and let's hear you squeal like a pig, boy!"

I'm sure movies have influenced my prose, but it'd be tough to quantitatively measure it. I'm not really conscious of it. I just write, and tend to think extremely visually.

THS: *Short stories and novels, both of which you've done, are quite different mediums. What do you feel are your strengths and weaknesses in each of these areas?*

HODGE: As far as the writing goes, I've always thought of novels as being like marriages, involving long-term commitment and toughing it out during the sour times, and short stories are the quick, passionate affairs on the side. Strengths? Well, I think I can do a decent job of character development in both mediums, although, by the nature of the arena I feel more restrained in short stories. Which is at the same time a weakness, I guess. Because in a novel you're allowed more leeway to dork around without getting to the point, and get away with it in the name of "it's my style, man." I feel more pressure to be concentrated and to the point in a short story, whereas in a novel I can get lost in my own supposed profundities and ramble on and on and on and onandonandon ...

THS: *What are you working on now? Have you been able, with your recent novel success, to turn to writing full-time?*

HODGE: Oboy, another chance to ramble! I've recently finished a third novel called *Deathgrip*, and as of this interview, I don't know if it'll ever see print or not. This is mightily weird. *Deathgrip* was TOR's option book after *Oasis*, meaning they had first crack. My editor there, Melissa Ann Singer, was talking in terms of a 450,000 first printing, which was incredible. The highest figure I'd ever heard of them doing. But I got caught up in that great negative fallout after they were taken over by St. Martin's Press, since TOR slit their own throats by trying to compete in the hardcover arena. Shortly after she got my revisions on *Oasis*, Melissa axed all contact with me, even when I called to ask questions about my typeset galleys. She wouldn't take calls, answer mail ... absolutely no communications. Which is inexcusable behavior for an editor. And they had the nerve to send me a Christmas card? I think

the ultimate hypocrisy is that Melissa belongs to Horror Writers of America, whose main goal is to insure better treatment of writers. From my standpoint, she deserves the "Backstabber of the Year" award for her lies and shabby treatment of not only me, but a number of other people.

Beyond TOR, my agents and I can't seem to find anyone willing to do the novel. While I'm not saying it wouldn't benefit from the usual editorial attentions, it's without doubt my best novel yet ... the best characters, most original concepts, and most intricate plotting, and it's easily the most heartfelt. But it keeps getting turned down, without there seeming to be much of a unified consensus as to why. I was to the point where I was thinking, "Well, I've written a stinkhole of a novel." But I've just read an interview with Ray Garton where he's talking about the troubles he's had getting censored by his editors for espousing ideas that seem to be contrary to those of predominately conservative publishers. So maybe that's where a part of the problem lies with *Deathgrip*. There's a lot of stuff in there regarding corporate-type religion versus true spirituality. And some of it is the nastiest, most pointed stuff I've ever done. So I don't know. Maybe that's it. And maybe I'm deluding myself. It's just been a source of immense heartbreak recently. Enough to where you just feel like eating the barrel of a shotgun, the old Heming-way to go ... but naaaah. I want to dance somebody into the dust over this, someday. I just find it difficult to accept that one publisher would be willing to go nearly half-a-million with it, and nobody else thinks it's worth a chance. So its ultimate fate remains to be seen.

But, onward. I've started two more novels. *The Final Solution* is more of a mainstream thriller. *Nightlife* is a horror piece that should play like a really bizarre cross between *Altered States*, *The Emerald Forest*, and *Miami Vice*. Oh, that wicked cinematic influence again. Plus I'll have a story in Skipp and Spector's *Book of the Dead*, and a few other things are currently pending.

I'm not quite a full-timer yet, since I work a part-time night job. We'll see what happens with the current projects, and when royalty time rolls around this fall.

THS: *I know you're a great fan of Stephen King's and greatly influenced by his work. I think that's apparent in much of your own work. But, beyond King's influence, do you have a mentor in the field? Someone you have direct contact with? Who's given you advice?*

HODGE: I admit it, I first broke in trying to be a Stephen King clone. I wanted to do everything juuuust liiiike Steeeeeve. But that influence has lessened considerably in the last few years as I've found my own voice and confidence. Still, I can't escape it. Very few people who have come along since 1974 can, entirely.

But a mentor? That doesn't feel like quite the right word. I hear that word and think of Mister Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* ... "Man who can catch fly with chopsticks can accomplish anything." At any rate, I feel indebted to Rick McCammon. He's given me a lot of advice and moral support and kind words over the last few years. He and his wife Sally are two of the kindest people I've ever met. Bill Relling is getting to be like a big brother looking out for me. Tom Monteleone has had some worthwhile advice. Skipp and Spector have been great, although I've had far more contact with John. Still, at the World Fantasy Con, this girl came up to take a picture of Craig while we were talking and he threw an arm around my shoulders and we really mugged big time. I'm sure today she shows off the picture, saying, "Well, this is Craig Spector, the Craig Spector ... but I don't know who *this* bozoid is." They're all very kind people. I've been blessed in that respect.

THS: *Who else has influenced your writing? And do you believe in non-literary influences?*

HODGE: Besides the previously-mentioned folks, I'd have to credit

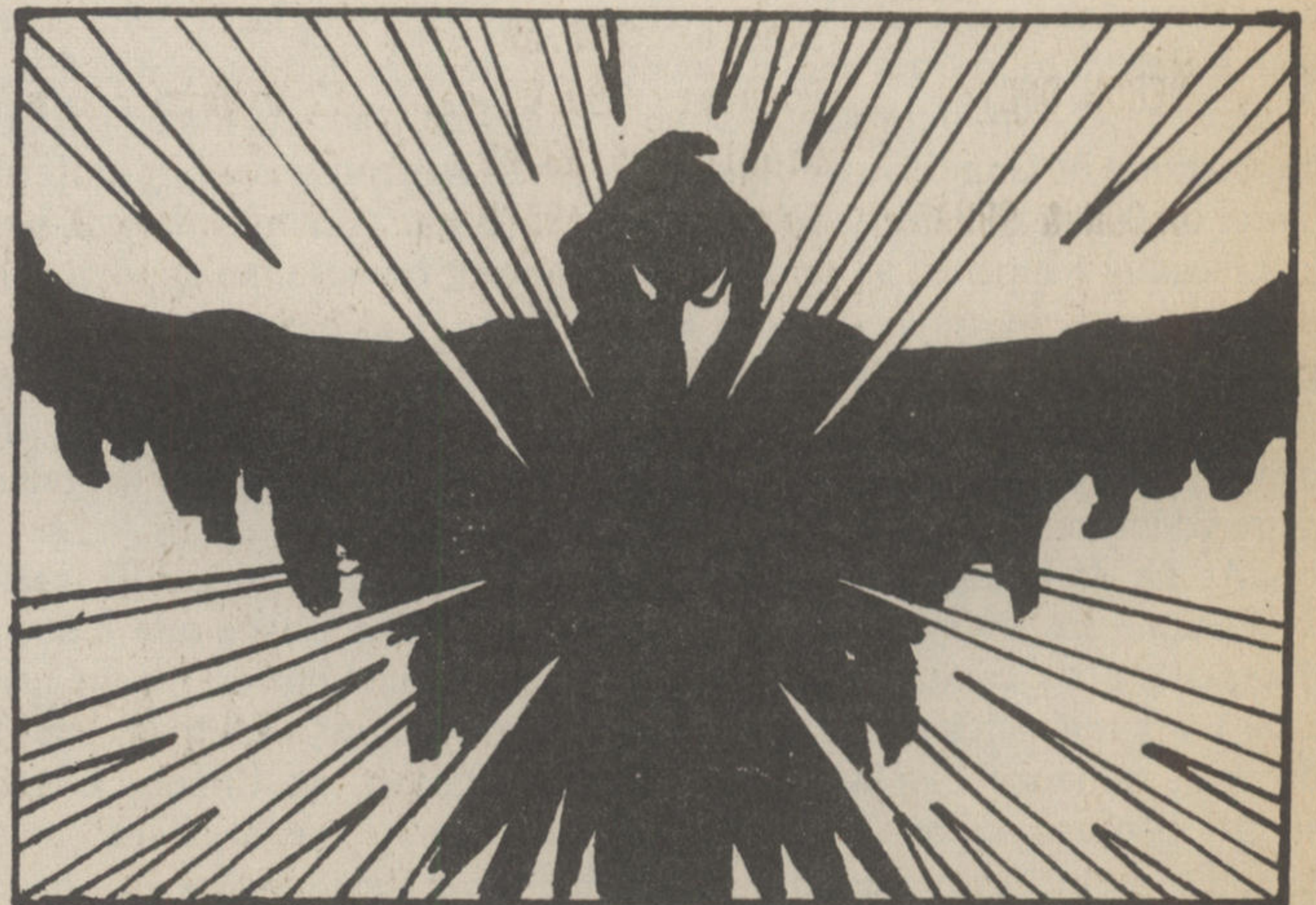
Joseph Wambaugh, because I love his storytelling and cynical humor. John Irving, for his whimsy and richness of experience, detail, and emotion. Mark Twain, for humor, satire, and sheer timelessness. Jay McInerney, for how well he captures the disaffection of modern young adults, and so economically. And Father Andrew Greeley, less for his fiction than his views on how effectively spiritual parallels can be explored in purely secular avenues. He's got a lot to teach all these right-wing fundamentalists with such a tunnel-visioned view on what's acceptable and what's going to rot our kamikaze souls.

I've a great believer in other types of influences, beyond writing, be it a direct pipeline or simply some kind of spirit that fills in between the words. Purists may cry foul, but come on, you can't shut yourself off from a mass-media culture. I'd say I've also been influenced by, in no particular order, Eddie Van Halen's approach to the guitar, the films of David Cronenberg, the standup comedy of Bob Goldthwait, some film roles and techniques of Malcolm McDowell, the music and videos of Guns N' Roses, Far Side cartoons, and a lot about Jim Morrison. It's so difficult to explain beyond that ... they're just *there*. Something about them all I greatly identify with. Dark poetry, soul magic, aggression, pragmatic idealism, a twisted life view, the constant search for something beyond the next horizon.

This sounds insane, doesn't it?

THS: *Maybe it's a good place to leave off? Do you have any parting comments you'd like to make?*

HODGE: I've pretty well exhausted most everything. I guess what I hope people think I do well is explore all kinds of relationships. Healthy ones, destructive ones. What makes them tick, what makes them break down. What strengthens the participants, and what rips them apart. Friends, lovers, families, enemies ... and especially when a relationship starts as one kind and mutates into another. It's endlessly fascinating, and ripe for exploration. Horror seems to be the most fecund route by which to do it, because at its best, it's the New American Mythology.





PHALLUSIES

BRIAN HODGE

For the first hour, Andrea didn't pay much more than a fleeting glimpse's attention to the girl at the other end of the bar.

Not that there were too many distractions. Not in Tappers Pub at mid-afternoon. For Tappers was one of those comfortable neighborhood bars tucked gently away from the mainstream in every city, anything but trendy. Not a place to go to be seen by the right people. It was, instead, a place to go to be yourself.

Andrea let the bartender swap an empty glass for a fresh vodka gimlet. He was Mike to novice patrons, Tequila Mike to friends of the bar, and Andrea considered herself approaching the status of the latter. Tequila Mike ... so named for his prowess in worm-eating contests. He engaged in other behavior of over-the-top machismo, such as breaking beer glasses in his bare hands without cutting himself (usually). Yet for all that, she still liked him. Maybe because he didn't do it for show, with motives of clear plastic. It was simply his way. And maybe because he seemed to accept her on face value.

Upon learning that she preferred the company of women--in every respect--to that of men, most guys Andrea had run across had reactions which could be divided neatly into three categories. First were those whose kneejerk response was revulsion; men who, when confronted with their implied obsolescence, angrily could not get away quickly enough. Next were the superstuds who insisted that all she needed was one good fuck to turn her around, and naturally they were willing to be the converting factor. Lastly were those who went out of their way to make sure she knew they wholly approved, phonily so, as if they were on the verge of asking, "Can I watch?"

Happily, then, Tequila Mike avoided such pigeonholing. I'm okay, you're okay ... just so long as you don't make trouble in my bar.

When he stepped aside to minister to the needs of someone else, with the air of a priest dispensing communion at Mass, Andrea caught sight of her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Rather tall on her stool, hair the color of wheat spilling past the shoulders of her blue flannel shirt, favorite attire for autumn. As at home in Tappers as anywhere, with every right to conduct her life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness from this very stool. Contrast that with the girl at the other end.

Small, dark, hunched toward her drink with her hair in her face ... almost shrunk in on herself.

"Who is she?" Andrea asked when Mike wandered back her way, and imperceptibly tilted her head in the girl's direction. Her voice was every bit as discrete as her gesture.

Tequila Mike hunched his shoulders, quite a thing to behold if you were so inclined. They were nearly as broad as an upright deep freeze. "Don't know. This is only about the second time I've seen her in here." He smiled. "She hardly looks your type. She's about as different from Kim as you could get."

"Maybe that's what I need right now."

"Maybe you're right."

Dear sweet Kim, whose sexual orientation vacillated between both poles of the spectrum with all the resistance of a feather in the wind. After a year of sharing the same apartment with Andrea, she had suddenly returned to an old boyfriend. Kim was either very confused or very shrewd, and outside her head it was impossible to judge which.

The first hour snowballed into another. Drinkers came and went. Cool sunshine dimmed at the windows, and only two fixtures remained constant. To Andrea's slightly blurred imagination, she and the girl at the other end must have looked like mismatched bookends on a shelf of broken dreams. Andrea found herself curious to hear the sound of her voice, as it didn't carry well whenever she ordered a refill. The longer she stayed there, the more the girl resembled some sort of crippled bird, scooped from the sidewalk outside by a caring soul and deposited atop a barstool out of easy reach of predators.

"Hey, Mike," Andrea called after checking the clock. "Could you flip the channel over to MTV? It's almost time for--"

"For *Monty Python's Flying Circus*," he finished for her with a grin. "I'm way ahead of you." He strolled over to the set behind the bar, forsaking CNN to do as requested. "What kind of way is this for you to be spending your vacation, hmm? Timed around Monty Python?"

His grin was still firmly in place, and she took no offense. All a part of the game. "Everybody's life needs a focal point."

Tequila Mike made an exaggerated show of checking a calendar pinned up behind the

On the far side of her face, make-up was losing a clandestine effort at concealing a bruise rimming the edge of her eye and temple. Maybe she was wrong, but instinct said that someone had been using Melanie for punching practice.

bar. "Let's see ... you haven't missed an episode in here for a week and two nights, am I right?"

"Hey," Andrea said with artificial anger. Still a part of the game, seeing what exchange of goofy dialogue from a Python sketch they could manage to weave into conversation. "I wasn't expecting the Spanish inquisition."

"*Nobody* expects the Spanish Inquisition!"

Mike and Andrea both blinked in surprise. The line should have been Mike's, but had been yanked from underneath him like a rug.

It had, instead, come from the heretofore silent girl at the far end of the bar. At once, she seemed embarrassed for having blurted it out. If she retreated back into her shell now, Andrea knew she would find it doubly hard to emerge again.

"Ah, another fan of British humor," Andrea said. "We may be a minority, but we're definitely an elite." At this, the girl smiled tentatively, and such a difference it made in her face. As if all she had been seeking was a little unqualified approval. "Why don't you move down this way? You can't see the TV very well from that end."

"Umm ... okay. Sure. Okay." A bit unsteady, the girl slid off her stool and crossed the distance. Two stools away she lingered, as if hesitant of invading Andrea's territory, but then settled onto the adjacent one. "Thanks."

They small-talked on superficial levels, during which Andrea learned that the girl's name was Melanie. But what she left unsaid was the most revealing. On the far side of her face, make-up was losing a clandestine effort at concealing a bruise rimming the edge of her eye and temple. Maybe she was wrong, but instinct said that someone had been using Melanie for punching practice.

Let it go, Andrea told herself. Most victims were only too happy to defend the source of their misery if someone from outside the little duo went on the attack. *Let it go ... for now.*

They attentively watched *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Andrea found herself mildly delighted that Melanie knew every verse and chorus of "The Lumberjack Song," Michael Palin's paean to transvestitism in the northwoods. When the show ended, they were both the drunker for it, but also more at ease. The magic of laughter.

"Oy," said Melanie, wearily shaking her head. "I should be getting home. My husband will kill me."

"So should I," said Andrea. "Except it's my liver making threats."

Melanie giggled. "One more for the road, then?"

Two rounds later, they still hadn't

budged. Only the room moved.

"Didn't I hear the bartender say you were on vacation?"

"I had this trip to Rio planned with someone, but we broke up first." Andrea held her drink at eye level. "Gotta spend the money *somehow*."

"Ooo, rough. I'm sorry."

"'s'okay. We didn't see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, anyway."

"Yeah." Melanie's face clouded with pain remembered, or perhaps anticipated, and she averted her eyes. "At least it's good you found out before it was too late."

Andrea nodded, then patted Melanie's arm, for what was intended as a minor comfort had instead emerged as a quiet plea for the same thing. Just a couple of battered souls, seeking shelter in the night. And sustenance from the local roadhouse.

"I mean ... I mean ... Bart's not a *bad* man ... I just seem to make him so mad sometimes, and I know he's got things on his mind."

"Lighten up on yourself." Andrea raised the hand from Melanie's arm to her shoulder. "You don't exactly come across like the Marquis de Sade here, y'know. Don't go blaming yourself for everything, because that's about the biggest trap you can set for yourself."

She looked into Melanie's eyes, trying to will into her some of the rigid backbone which a decade of bucking conventionality had instilled in her own spine. Soon, she had to turn away. Those alcohol-eroded inhibitions were starting to crumble, and the more she looked at the girl's lips, caught by a gentle tremble, the more she longed to touch them. With fingertips, with her own mouth. A healing touch.

"Make you a deal," Andrea said, a diversionary tactic for herself. "You forget about Bart for now, and I'll forget about my liver."

Melanie was game. So they talked. They watched the tube. Tequila Mike had left it turned to MTV, that peculiar glossy wasteland where it was tough to discern content from commercials. They scrutinized the endless parade of models from video to video, minimal of clothing and smoldering of eyes, and all too often, with heads of the same substance with which basketballs were filled.

"If somebody paid you enough, would you want to change places with them?" Melanie asked.

"Not a chance. I like to think I can make my way in the world based on something a little more substantial than what I can stuff into a bikini bra and shake at a camera."

Melanie seemed wistfully captivated by the screen. "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes they seem so ... appreciated. If only in that sense." After several moments, she pulled back from her forward hunch and shook her

head and laughed. "And why am I *staring* at them like this? You'd think I was a fourteen-year-old boy."

"Oh, I think most women have a fascination with other women's bodies, to some degree or another. If for no other reason than to see how they compare. We all stare, I think. We're all fascinated."

"You're probably right."

"Maybe that's the reason most women, even if they never act on it, are supposed to have a fantasy about going to bed with another woman. Some sort of narcissistic thing, like making love to yourself."

Andrea remained alert for any sign of withdrawal, and noticed none. Melanie took this in as easily as the rest.

"You're probably right about that, too," she finally said.

And how about you? Andrea wanted to ask, but dared not. Not this early. It was never easy, playing the role of the aggressor, the initiator. Not when tradition dictated the female play the submissive pursuee to the male pursuer. She was at least glad she was not a man in the identical position. Most straight women weren't so homophobic they got bent out of shape when propositioned by one of their own gender, whereas a straight man might punctuate his refusal with his fist. A pass from another woman? A reaffirmation of attractiveness. A pass from another man? An assault upon masculinity itself.

Evening became night, and night grew old. Melanie insisted that she really *had* to be going, and no more backsliding. Andrea said it was probably a wise idea. They settled up finances with Tequila Mike, who smiled and gave Andrea a gentle wink as they slung on jackets in rather clumsy attempts. And when the two of them stood outside Tappers on the sidewalk, Melanie simply stopped and longingly watched the traffic.

"I don't want to go home," she said, half-definite, half-question.

"Then don't," Andrea told her.

"Easy for you to say. You've probably got all these friends you could stay with. I don't have *anybody*."

"Sure you do. At least you do now." Andrea paused until Melanie looked her in the eye. "If you want."

Melanie's eyes slid closed, and for a second she swayed. "He will really kill me for not coming home."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'll bet he's not come home himself a few times. Am I wrong?" Andrea waited, and Melanie shook her head. "Then worry about it tomorrow." *Or the day after that, or ...*

And so it was decided. They covered the six blocks to Andrea's apartment on foot. She hadn't driven, for lately she had become accustomed to leaving Tappers in poor shape



to handle her car. She lived on the top floor of a roomy old house, drawn and quartered into apartments, no two alike, bare branches scratching at the windows.

Melanie sunk into the sofa, and her lap was immediately commandeered by Andrea's three-legged cat, Tripod. When she asked about the missing back leg, Andrea said she had picked him out at the animal shelter as a kitten because it was obvious no one else would; but the cause of the leg's absence was a mystery.

Andrea put on a cassette, Steve Hackett's *Bay of Kings* album. The faintly muted solo acoustic guitar floated throughout the apartment, soothing to the point of therapeutic. Passion and delicacy, controlled through the fingers of a master. She then joined Melanie on the sofa with a bottle of wine, which they agreed was the last thing they needed but started in on anyway. Tripod scampered away as if sensing his own intrusion.

"I appreciate this," Melanie said. "I ... I'm not used to someone being ... so ... so ..."

"Sshhh," Andrea said. "It's okay." She wondered if the hunger showed in her eyes. And if it did, if it was noticed. And if it was noticed, if it mattered. And if it mattered, if it would be reciprocal.

Melanie's head bowed much as it had when Andrea first saw her. From behind the hair came the sounds of sniffing. "I've messed everything up so bad ..."

Andrea scooted closer, resting one hand on Melanie's arm and using the other to brush locks of hair back from her face. The move was a two-edged sword. She thrilled to the initial contact, but alternately hated herself, feeling no better than some scummy lounge lizard preying upon someone already

wounded, and for purely selfish purposes. *No ... no, I'm not like that, the difference is that I care ...*

She ran gentle fingertips over the half-hidden bruise circling Melanie's eye, and when her hand was captured and held, leaned over to continue the job with her lips.

"No," Melanie whispered, a denial negated by her sharp intake of breath.

"You hurt," Andrea whispered back. "I just want to help."

"I ... can't ..."

"Yes we can."

Soon the denials stopped. And the hunger augmented. They moved from the living room into darker quarters, while the stereo's auto-reverse kept the music playing for many hours.

And it was a night of healing for all concerned.

Autumn made a great time to fall in love.

The end of Andrea's vacation was far more magical at home than it could ever have been in Rio. And after she returned to work, the magic refused to wane. Walks in the park. Pizza by candlelight while camped on the floor. Sunsets viewed from the windows of tiny restaurants or after plundering thrift shops of hidden treasures. The thoroughly everyday, made enchanted by the chemistry of two souls seeking mutual points of adherence.

While she didn't want to admit it even to herself, it felt to Andrea that their roles of aggressor and quarry had been changed to teacher and pupil. She didn't want to feel that way, she wanted to feel as equals. Yet how else could you respond when an entire new dimension seemed to blossom in another, and

sought you for guidance?

Not that it wasn't pleasant. Not that it wasn't flattering. There existed a pride almost decadent in introducing someone to the fact that lovemaking needn't be confined to the standard male biological pattern of AROUSAL - PLATEAU - ORGASM - REFLECTION. That the interplay could go on for hours, that they could lock into the middle half of the cycle and repeat it almost endlessly, until their bodies were too spent for anything else.

Not that it wasn't heavenly. But there remained the underlying fear. Wondering if, for Melanie, this would be a passing fad and soon she would turn her life back into the tried, true, and familiar.

"I'll have to confront Bart face-to-face someday, you know that," Melanie said. It was a lazy Sunday afternoon, gray and windy outside, dark and warm within. They lay in bed while raindrops spattered the window, while branches sought to get in. "The way he is, just that phone call won't do it. He'd have been over immediately if he'd known where I was."

"Do you *want* to see him?"

"No. Not really. But it seems like I owe him that much."

Andrea shifted from her back to her stomach, recalling bits and pieces of Melanie's verbal portrait of her husband. Bad about retaining jobs. Worse about considering the feelings of others. Proud of his half-dozen tattoos. His sole expertise seemed to be scoring decent coke. That such men inspired loyalty had always been unfathomable.

"You don't owe him anything."

"Plus, I still need to get the rest of my things from the house."

"Mel, you don't owe him *anything*."

Melanie sighed, leaned in to nuzzle her shoulder. "If Kim wanted ten minutes of your time, wouldn't you feel obligated to give it?"

Silence, save for the rain, and the distant strains of *Bay of Kings*. The tape had become their unofficial bedroom music.

"You can't honestly tell me no, can you?"

Andrea shut her eyes and curled in on herself. Because she would not lie. And knew when she was beat.

Tappers was doing moderate business a few evenings later. Andrea and Melanie sat perched at the bar, the remnants of the morning's paper in folded disarray around them. Melanie had been periodically working at the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. Andrea fed her the name Freyja--Norwegian goddess of fertility--and a crucial corner of the puzzle was finished. They celebrated with a quick kiss.

"Son of a bitch. I wouldn't've believed it

if I hadn't seen it."

The voice was coming from behind them, a stranger's to Andrea's ear, but she had little doubt as to whom it belonged. Even before she caught the look of almost guilty shock on Melanie's face.

"Bart," she said when she turned to face him. Voice neutral.

"Friend of mind tells me, 'Hey man, she's gone and turned lesbo on you.' I say, 'No way, not my Melanie. I have it on good authority that she likes dick.'" Bart shook his head ruefully at the floor, then looked up with a perplexed frown. "Never would've believed *this*."

Andrea swallowed revulsion. She was not the type to hate men by simple virtue of their gender. She did not reject their friendship, when genuine, just did not seek their passion. Hating Bart? That was quite another story.

He wore mostly black, and carried a denim jacket over one shoulder. An arm sported an intricate tattoo of an eagle gripping a snake. His hair needed washing. All of which was benign, on its own. But mix it with the look in his eyes, that sense of him claiming everything in sight as his own, and Andrea knew. She did. Not. Like. This. Man.

"Pack it up," he told Melanie. "You're coming home."

"I ... I don't think so, Bart." If her voice held a third of the conviction of his, she was doing well.

He rolled his eyes. "That wasn't a fucking yes or no question. That was reality, Melly. Get off the stool and walk out that door. It's time I cure you of this sick shit you're into."

Andrea pointed at his arm. "Can't be any sicker than walking around like a dime-story art gallery."

"Pipe down, Butch." He slid a longneck bottle along the bar to her. "Here. Amuse yourself with this for awhile. You might even like it."

Andrea shut her eyes for a moment. She seethed. She boiled. She felt something shoot up her spine like mercury blowing from the top of a thermometer. When she reopened her eyes and saw Bart stepping up to roughly seize Melanie by the upper arm, she couldn't hold it back.

She balled one hand into a fist, keeping the middle knuckle extended like a dull spike. And she let it fly, punching Bart just below the ear and behind the jaw, dead-center into the delicate bundle of nerve ganglia. His head snapped, his eyes widened, his jaw dropped.

Bart stepped back a moment to compose himself, then looked up at Andrea with a humorless grin that quickly made her wish



she had given calm reason one more chance. Public place or not, he was ready to do murder. Bart found another empty bottle and cocked it back.

And promptly dropped it to shatter on the floor. Tequila Mike had leaned over the bar and clamped one large hand around Bart's wrist. Once the bottle was dispensed with, Mike maintained the pressure and applied a twist, and all at once Bart had brand new priorities.

"Got a happy hour special," Tequila Mike said. "You let my customers stay happy, and I don't break your scrawny arm."

Bart grunted wetly as Mike, still inside the bar, began to drag him toward the door. Three people at the bar grabbed their drinks and fled their stools as the two of them went by. At the end of the bar, Mike twisted Bart's arm behind his back and sent him none-too-gently on his way out the door. He paused for a moment, waiting for further trouble, a triumphal re-entry perhaps, but there was none.

Andrea's smile of relief faded when she saw Melanie's face. Her painfully obvious gaze at the door. Her internal tug of war.

"I should talk to him. I don't want to leave it like this."

Andrea could only shake her head. "Mel. Don't. Please." She did not know which she was more afraid of: losing her to coercion, or to her own free will.

Melanie touched a finger to Andrea's lips. "Five minutes. That's all. Ten at most, and then I'll be right back. What can he do outside?"

Andrea nodded, turned to the bar. Listened to the footsteps fading toward the door. Ordered a refill on her drink. Another.

Another ...

While ten minutes stretched all the way to closing time.

The next week was as fully miserable as she had expected. But she could last. She took perverse comfort in cynically twisted adages. *If you love something, set it free. If it returns, it's yours forever. If it doesn't ... hunt it down and kill it.*

After a week, she knew she would survive once more.

At least, until day's end after work, when she returned to find Melanie slumped on the sofa, holding Tripod as if he were her last and only friend. As Andrea stood in the doorway, instantly recognizing Melanie's shadowed silhouette, numb existence became skyrockets of joy. At least until she turned on the light.

"Oh, Melanie," she whispered, and felt the skyrockets fizzle into clouds of aborted soot. "What did he do to you?"

The answer was obvious. Bart's legacy was written in swollen lips and puffy eyes, and the bruises circling them like satellites. Even her posture suggested how stiff and sore she was.

"At least I'm free now. He said he never wanted to see my face again." Her eyes gleamed with defiance, tempered by heartbreak. "Can you blame him?"

Last week's betrayal was forgotten. No grudge could survive in the face of that much pain. Andrea dropped her briefcase and shed her coat to the floor on her way to the sofa. She fell beside Melanie, held her as carefully as she would a priceless vase, eggshell-thin. Ever sensitive to the moment, Tripod made himself scarce.

"I'm sorry, Andrea," Melanie whispered

into her shoulder. "I treated you so bad that night."

"Don't worry about that, it's past history."

"It just seemed like he really wanted me back. Like it'd be better than ever. He cried. And he was so good to me those first three days." Melanie winced when Andrea's hand caressed her belly. "But I think this is what he had in mind all along. Hurting me. That's all."

Andrea withdrew her hand, leaning in to brush her lips over the wealth of bruises and abrasions. Tears stung her eyes. Perhaps, in some convoluted way, this would prove to be the deciding factor in convincing Melanie to stay. She would nurse those wounds, nurture that soul back into functioning order. After which they could make a concerted effort at one of those happily-ever-after arrangements.

Melanie took a deep breath. "He beat me. And then he raped me." She spoke with the husky voice of someone who has cried all the tears that can possibly be shed, and emerged into numb compliance. "And then he drugged me so I'd stay unconscious for hours, and hours ..."

Andrea felt her soul cracking in two. "He could've killed you."

"Sometimes ... I wish he had."

Before Andrea could react, Melanie pulled up her sweater and tugged down the top of her sweatpants. Enough to expose her belly ...

And the most horrid violation Andrea had ever seen.

From just under her ribcage to just over her pubic bone, Melanie's stomach was home to a huge, graphically rendered penis and scrotum. Lewdly erect, swelled beyond all dimensions of reality. Colored the dark pink of sausage, traced with bulging blue veins.

"He had his tattoo artist friend do that to me while I was knocked out. And said ... said that ... that ..." Her voice self-destructed, and it appeared that she had some tears in reserve after all.

Andrea held her closer, shaking her head, wanting to be miserably ill. "You don't have to repeat it. Please don't."

"He said no one would ever want me like this ... and even if they did, they'd still have to think of ... of *him*."

Together they wept, tears that mingled, tears that burned.

Tears that scarred.

Andrea took off the next few days on the pretense of sick leave. She and Melanie became virtual hermits, rarely venturing beyond the apartment door. She made anonymous calls to crisis centers, speaking in general terms and learning what kind of counseling Melanie might be able to undergo. For she would never completely heal without help.

As well, she tried in vain to convince Melanie to file felony charges.

"No. No police," was all the reply she could elicit.

"But why not? You could get him locked away for this."

"No police," Melanie would repeat, hugging herself and looking away. Never toward a mirror. "I'd have to ... to show them ... myself."

The days passed. The cuts healed. The bruises faded.

The scars, inner and outer, remained.

When she returned to work, Andrea felt the guilt of a career mom leaving behind a latchkey kid. She was no good in her office, distracted, jumpy, irritable. That she returned the first day to find Melanie in tears and darkness did not help. Nor did, the second day, finding Melanie's stomach raw and bloody, sandpaper in her hand.

"I want it gone," she said. "I just want to be rid of this."

"Soon," Andrea told her. "Doctors have techniques now, laser surgery, and they can remove tattoos, erase them right off ..." She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. While certainly no authority on the matter, she nevertheless knew that such a procedure was much easier said than successfully done. Melanie seemed to know too.

The third day, Andrea brought home a bag of take-out Chinese. That should perk Mel up. She flipped on the light ... and kung bao chicken splattered to the floor when she saw the blood on Tripod's whiskers.

After a quick, hysterical room-to-room search, Andrea found her in the bathtub. Naked, curled onto her side like a sleeping child. Pale, so pale. For so very much blood had been lost. The handle of a kitchen knife protruded from her belly, from its gaping wound.

And for Andrea everything snapped at once. This went beyond tears, beyond screams, beyond grief. She knew what it must feel like to die inside, without your body getting wise to the idea.

Calmly, so calmly, she sat on the floor and reached into the tub to hold the cold, limp hand. To contemplate the loss. And the damage.

The knife in Melanie's stomach had been driven on a very deliberate course from one side to another, severing the tattooed cock from the tattooed scrotum ...

The original castrated woman.

Andrea stared mutely at the knife, the sensory input weak and fuzzy. Dreamlike. More distinct was the gentle ache in her own belly, the clarion call of her own blood loss, the cramps before her period.

The vagina. What *was* it, really? Depended on whom you asked. A site of

pleasure? A gateway for a newborn child? A tool with which to consume and dominate a man? Perhaps. It was all in the point of view. But always, *always*, a channel into the soul. Ironic that a simple split in the flesh could be rife with such complexity.

The knife ...

She wondered how Bart would appreciate one more tattoo, this time a huge vagina, from breastbone to beltline ...

Lovingly rendered in all three dimensions.





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The BRITISH FANTASY SOCIETY was formed in 1971 to provide the discerning reader with a greater coverage of the fantasy, SF and horror fields. To achieve this, the Society publishes a regular NEWSLETTER, packed with information and reviews of new books and films that confront the fan, DARK HORIZONS, a magazine that contains fiction and articles, plus other magazines of fiction and on subjects designed to interest the Society's membership. Besides magazines, the BFS organises an annual FANTASY CONFERENCE which attracts some of the top names in the field. At these events the BRITISH FANTASY AWARDS are presented for categories such as Best Novel and Best Short Story. Amongst those who have enjoyed the benefits of the Society are:

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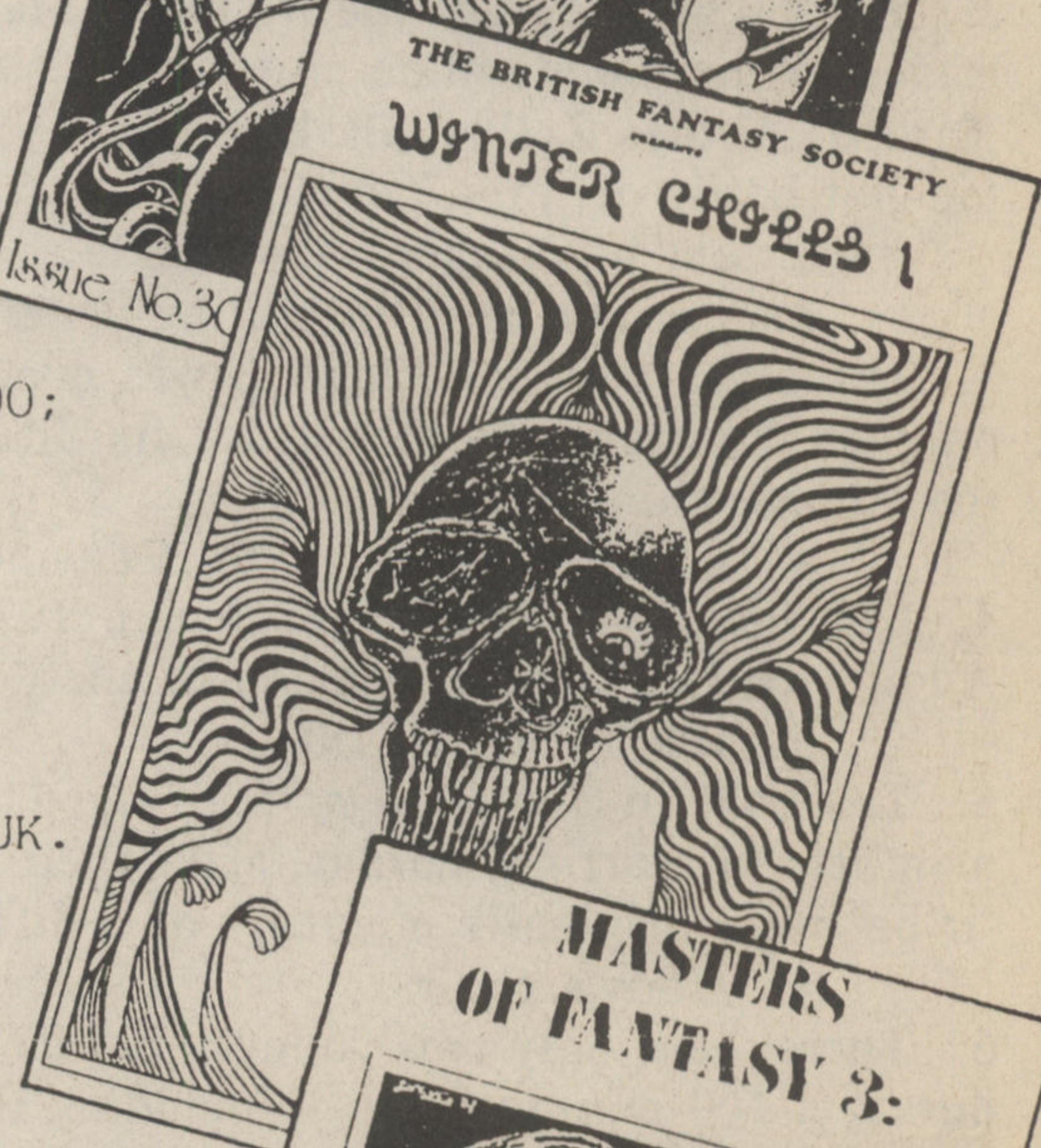
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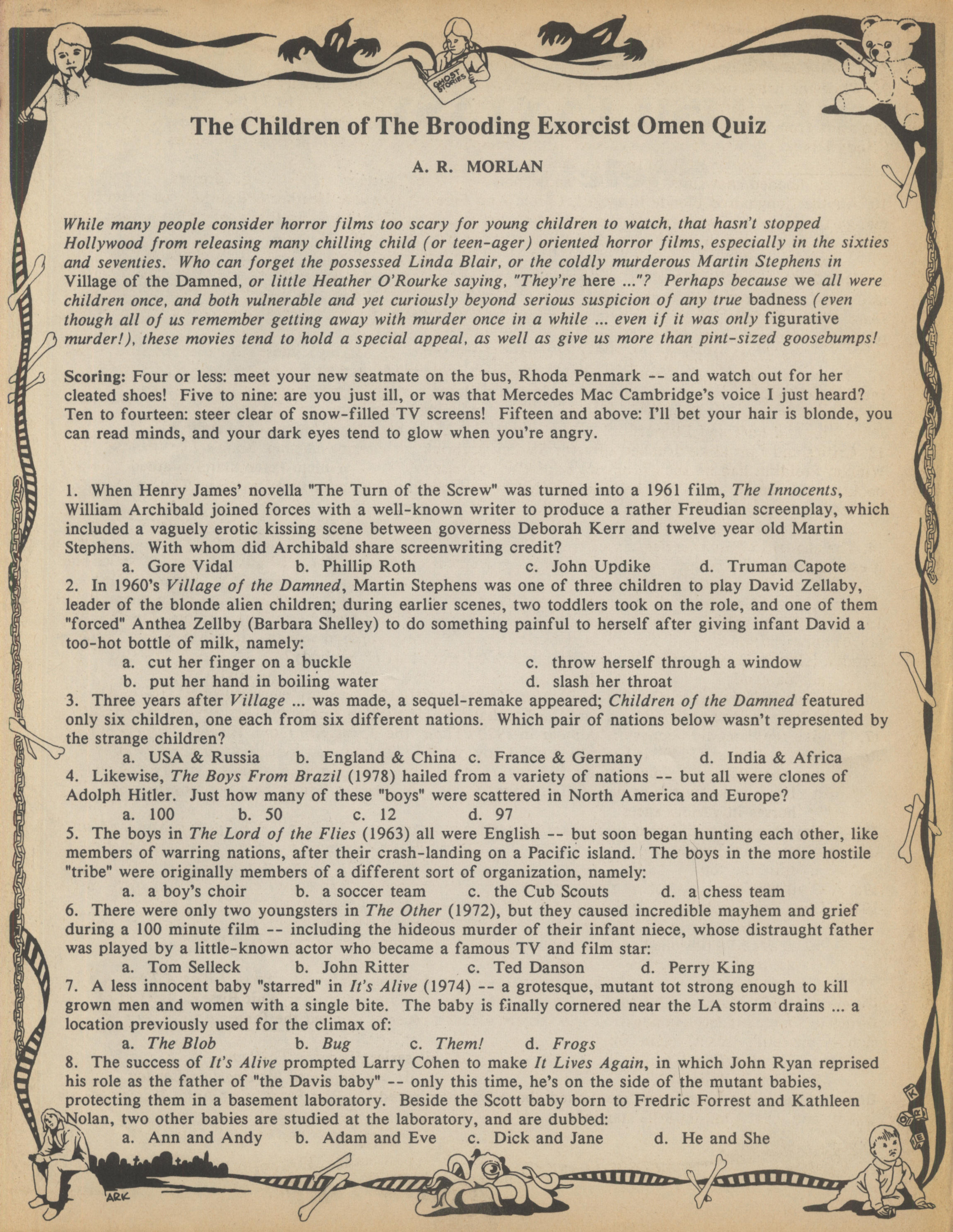
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The Children of The Brooding Exorcist Omen Quiz

A. R. MORLAN

While many people consider horror films too scary for young children to watch, that hasn't stopped Hollywood from releasing many chilling child (or teen-ager) oriented horror films, especially in the sixties and seventies. Who can forget the possessed Linda Blair, or the coldly murderous Martin Stephens in *Village of the Damned*, or little Heather O'Rourke saying, "They're here ..."? Perhaps because we all were children once, and both vulnerable and yet curiously beyond serious suspicion of any true badness (even though all of us remember getting away with murder once in a while ... even if it was only figurative murder!), these movies tend to hold a special appeal, as well as give us more than pint-sized goosebumps!

Scoring: Four or less: meet your new seatmate on the bus, Rhoda Penmark -- and watch out for her cleated shoes! Five to nine: are you just ill, or was that Mercedes Mac Cambridge's voice I just heard? Ten to fourteen: steer clear of snow-filled TV screens! Fifteen and above: I'll bet your hair is blonde, you can read minds, and your dark eyes tend to glow when you're angry.

1. When Henry James' novella "The Turn of the Screw" was turned into a 1961 film, *The Innocents*, William Archibald joined forces with a well-known writer to produce a rather Freudian screenplay, which included a vaguely erotic kissing scene between governess Deborah Kerr and twelve year old Martin Stephens. With whom did Archibald share screenwriting credit?
 - a. Gore Vidal
 - b. Phillip Roth
 - c. John Updike
 - d. Truman Capote
2. In 1960's *Village of the Damned*, Martin Stephens was one of three children to play David Zellaby, leader of the blonde alien children; during earlier scenes, two toddlers took on the role, and one of them "forced" Anthea Zellby (Barbara Shelley) to do something painful to herself after giving infant David a too-hot bottle of milk, namely:
 - a. cut her finger on a buckle
 - b. put her hand in boiling water
 - c. throw herself through a window
 - d. slash her throat
3. Three years after *Village ...* was made, a sequel-remake appeared; *Children of the Damned* featured only six children, one each from six different nations. Which pair of nations below wasn't represented by the strange children?
 - a. USA & Russia
 - b. England & China
 - c. France & Germany
 - d. India & Africa
4. Likewise, *The Boys From Brazil* (1978) hailed from a variety of nations -- but all were clones of Adolph Hitler. Just how many of these "boys" were scattered in North America and Europe?
 - a. 100
 - b. 50
 - c. 12
 - d. 97
5. The boys in *The Lord of the Flies* (1963) all were English -- but soon began hunting each other, like members of warring nations, after their crash-landing on a Pacific island. The boys in the more hostile "tribe" were originally members of a different sort of organization, namely:
 - a. a boy's choir
 - b. a soccer team
 - c. the Cub Scouts
 - d. a chess team
6. There were only two youngsters in *The Other* (1972), but they caused incredible mayhem and grief during a 100 minute film -- including the hideous murder of their infant niece, whose distraught father was played by a little-known actor who became a famous TV and film star:
 - a. Tom Selleck
 - b. John Ritter
 - c. Ted Danson
 - d. Perry King
7. A less innocent baby "starred" in *It's Alive* (1974) -- a grotesque, mutant tot strong enough to kill grown men and women with a single bite. The baby is finally cornered near the LA storm drains ... a location previously used for the climax of:
 - a. *The Blob*
 - b. *Bug*
 - c. *Them!*
 - d. *Frogs*
8. The success of *It's Alive* prompted Larry Cohen to make *It Lives Again*, in which John Ryan reprised his role as the father of "the Davis baby" -- only this time, he's on the side of the mutant babies, protecting them in a basement laboratory. Beside the Scott baby born to Fredric Forrest and Kathleen Nolan, two other babies are studied at the laboratory, and are dubbed:
 - a. Ann and Andy
 - b. Adam and Eve
 - c. Dick and Jane
 - d. He and She



9. While the drug-side-effect produced infants in Larry Cohen's films usually were dubbed with some sort of moniker, the not-really-human children of rage in *The Brood* (1979) had no names. But aside from a warped resemblance to Samantha Eggar's "real" daughter, the blonde-haired Candy (Cindy Hinds), they were indistinguishable and interchangeable, save for the different colors of the _____ they wore in most of their scenes:

- a. hooded snowsuits b. snowboots c. mittens d. dresses

10. Another longhaired blonde little girl, Carole Ann Freeling (the late Heather O'Rourke) was beset by malign forces in the *Poltergeist* series, including the infamous TV screen. In the second film, which one of Carole Ann's play things is a conduit for the spirits from beyond?

- a. a See n' Say b. a talking doll c. a toy telephone d. a clown toy

11. 1944's *Curse of the Cat People* also featured a blonde, longhaired little girl (Anne Carter), but wasn't as overtly scary or violent as the two films mentioned above, yet it did deal with the subject of childhood fears. While Simone Simon's cat woman appears as a nice ghost, the main scare comes from the mention of another famous ghost of literature:

- a. the *Macbeth* ghost b. The Headless Horseman c. Marley's ghost d. the Canterville ghost

12. In *The Shining* (1980), Danny Torrence (Danny Lloyd) is haunted by his insane, spirit-possessed father (Jack Nicholson), who chants a line from a children's story before chopping the apartment door:

- a. "Fee, Fi, Fo Fum ..."
b. "I'll huff and I'll puff ..."
c. "Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?"
d. "Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in ..."

13. Critics and fans alike drubbed director Stanley Kubrick for altering Stephen King's *The Shining*; William Freidkin had no such problems with *The Exorcist* (1973) -- William Peter Blatty adapted his own book for the screen. The film became the first horror movie to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar, but lost to:

- a. *American Graffiti* b. *Cries and Whispers* c. *The Sting* d. *A Touch of Class*

14. The sequel to *The Exorcist*, *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (1977) wasn't nominated for any Oscars, nor was it ever a memorable effort, but it was notable for a specific clause in Linda Blair's contract, in which she:

- a. wouldn't have to wear the heavy, uncomfortable make-up c. would get special billing
b. would have only limited on-camera time d. could read her lines off a teleprompter

15. After *The Exorcist* proved to that religion plus horror equaled good box office receipts, *The Omen* (1976) appeared, doing well enough to spawn two out of three proposed sequels. In the first film, little Damien (Harvey Stevens) bore the 666 Beast mark on what part of his body?

- a. his hand b. his leg c. his hip d. his scalp

16. The first follow-up to *The Omen*, *Damien: The Omen II* (1978) mainly centers around life in a:

- a. boys military school b. mental hospital c. palace in England d. home for orphans

17. Unlike the demonic youngsters popular in 1970's films, the young boy (John Howard Davies) in *The Rocking Horse Winner* (1949) is basically a good boy, until he is possessed by a rocking horse which:

- a. forces him to be mean to his siblings c. helps him pick winning lottery numbers
b. lets him know the names of first place horses in various races d. teaches him to be a winning jockey

18. A play thing of a different sort makes an early appearance in *The Fury* (1978); girls school student Gillian (Amy Irving) makes a _____ go berserk during an esp/psi type experiment:

- a. spinning top b. yo-yo c. paddle ball d. miniature train set

19. A Civil War era girl's school provides the setting of the non-supernatural chiller *The Beguiled*, in this 1970's film, Union soldier Clint Eastwood is murdered by a young student who:


- a. slits his throat with his bayonet c. spooks his horse, which throws him
b. feeds him poisoned mushrooms, after assuring him that they're harmless d. lets her sick pet turtle bite him

20. The ultimate set-in-a-school-youth-oriented-horror-flick has to be the campy *I Was A Teen-Age Werewolf* (1957), starring Michael Landon and the ubiquitous horror co-star Whit Bissell. Instead of trying to forget his most famous role, good sport Landon recently donned the fangs and fur (but not -- sigh -- the letter jacket) again, in:

- a. *The Howling III* c. his series *Highway To Heaven*
b. "Comic Relief II" d. *An American Werewolf in London*

Bonus: One of the young stars mentioned above was nominated for Best Supporting Actor/Actress -- who was it, and what film did s/he star in?

Answers on page 54 ...



The Horror Show

An Adventure In Terror



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