

Exploring The Rock 'N' Roll/Horror Connection

INIQUITIES

The Magazine of Great Wickedness and Wonder

**Peter
Straub**

Spring, 1991
Vol. 1 No. 2
\$4.95 US
64829

New Horror Fiction by:
**Ramsey
Campbell**

**William
F. Nolan**

**Elizabeth
Massie**

**Brian Hodge
& William
Relling Jr.**

**Joe R.
Lansdale**

Part 1 of his 3 part column

Interview:

Craig Spector



J.K.
A Classic Resurrection by
Charles Beaumont

Special J.K. Potter Sneak Preview

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John B. Rosenman



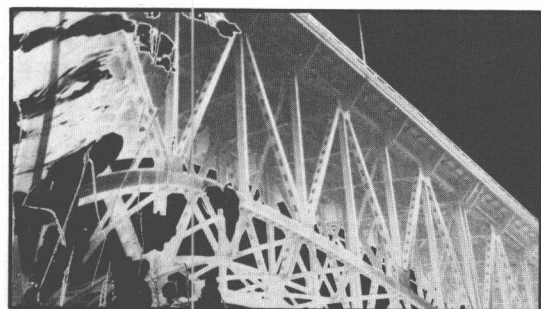
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Ramsey Campbell



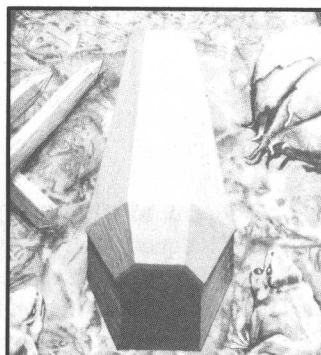
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Iniquities: The Magazine of Great Wickedness and Wonders, (Issn # 1050-6632) Spring 1991, Volume 1, Number 2, is published quarterly. Iniquities is published by Iniquities Publications, 167 N. Sierra Bonita Ave. Pasadena, CA 91106, all rights reserved. S.A.S.E. must accompany all (solicited or unsolicited) materials submitted to Iniquities. Send all manuscripts to: Iniquities, Att. Fiction Editor, 18030 Brookhurst, Suite 14, Fountain Valley, CA 92708. Iniquities obtains first North American serial rights and non-exclusive international rights, unless otherwise specified. All letters sent to Iniquities Magazine or its editors, are assumed intended for publication. Nothing of Iniquities contents may be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission by the publishers or copyright obtainee, all contractual agreements applied. Any similarity between persons appearing in fiction and real persons living or dead is coincidental. Single copies \$4.95 US currency. Subscriptions \$19.95 US currency. Postmaster: send address changes to Iniquities: *The Magazine of Great Wickedness and Wonder*, 18030 Brookhurst, Suite 14, Fountain Valley, CA 92708.

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Wickednotes

Well, a lot has happened since the release of *Iniquities* #1 (we've had ample time for a whole lot to occur since that fateful day). One of the big sparks of attention that we got was a result of the confiscation of *Iniquities* by the Canadian Customs and Excise Department of Revenue, Canada. Yes, Those That Wish To Dictate To Others seized a copy of *Iniquities* as it was winging its way to one of our subscribers. The subscriber, Mr. Ian Harris, challenged Customs and put up quite a fight. In the end, Mr. Harris received his copy of *Iniquities* five months after it had been mailed to him. During the battle, the incident was written up in every periodical from Mark Ziesing's catalog to *Locus* magazine. Good attention, but we were kind of expecting Geraldo Rivera or Maury Povich at *A Current Affair* to pick up on the scandal.

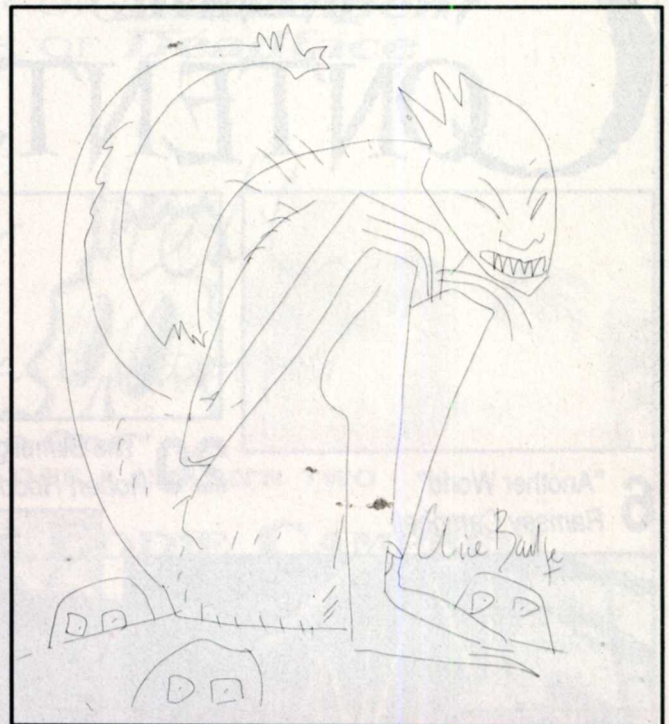
But enough complaining. We had mentioned the trials and tribulations of producing a magazine in the past, and as if *that* stuff wasn't bad enough, more mangle has befallen us. If you look on the masthead of this issue, you will probably notice the absence of founding co-father Bill Furtado. Due to personal reasons, Bill has decided to step down from his duties as an active partner in the *Iniquities* venture. He is still very much a part of the spirit of the magazine. We are confident that Bill will join our little family actively in the near future. At least we hope so. As a result of his decision to step down, your fearless twosome editors have been literally bombarded by sharing Bill's duties. This has been especially mangy for us and we've had to hire extra help just to maintain stability. It's been hard on us, but did Bill care or think about what he was going to put us through? *N o o o . . .* (We'll miss you Bill!)

But enough complaining. We've managed to secure ourselves a nationwide distribution deal with Eastern News Distribution, Inc., a subsidiary of the Hearst Corporation. We are excited and pleased as we are just one step closer to achieving world dominance by having the magazine in every chain, specialty bookstore and newsstand in the country. BUT, we're going to have to start sticking to a regular schedule! (Just kidding, we were going to do that anyway...shit happens.)

But enough complaining. There has been some good news since the first issue was released. Not only have we been reaping huge attention from within the field at large, but we've been gaining attention on a national scale. It seems that the mass media, from *CNN News* to the *New York Times* has been interested in reporting on the phenomenon of horror, and *Iniquities* has shared the spotlight almost every time. We knew we were going to get some attention from the first issue. But we were expecting much more: fame, fortune, beautiful women falling at our feet and famous celebrities inviting us to hoity toity parties. The mangy part about it is that so far, these expectations have not been attained yet. In fact, the beautiful women and famous celebrities have been ignoring us.

But enough complaining. One of the things that we've realized is that we're going to have to start living up to *your* expectations. Sticking to a quarterly schedule is just one of them. Keeping the pages filled with exciting fiction from the wide array of horror is another. Maintaining our dashing good looks and sparkling personalities is, of course, our highest priority (urrrrgh). It's been a tough road from the first issue to the present, but it's getting less bumpy as we go along. Could somebody send us a bulldozer?

But enough complaining.



INIQUITIES

The Magazine of Global Terrorism and Violence

Published by
Iniquities Publications

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Distribution

U.S.A. Newsstand Distribution by

Eastern News Distributors, Inc.

1130 Cleveland Rd.

San Dusky, OH 44870

The Editors

SPLAT; SOUNDTRACK; STIFFS

John Skipp and Craig Spector's long-awaited Eco-Horror epic, *The Bridge*, will be the focus of a major release by Bantam Books, hitting book stores this October. In support, Bantam has re-issued *The Light at the End* and *The Scream*, two hard-to-find knock-out novels by the original Splatterpunk tag team.

And in the media melt down department, Skipp & Spector also announced that they'll be releasing their original soundtrack for *The Bridge* on CD. This is, to the best of anyone's knowledge, the first time any author(s) has written, performed, recorded and produced a soundtrack album for a novel; and is the first time Skipp & Spector's music has been made available to the public. *The Bridge* CD will also be available in October.

As for *StillDead*, the notorious sequel to *Book of the Dead*, the editors inform us that the book is nearly wrapped, and contains stories by Kathe Koja, Nancy Collins, Poppy Z. Brite, K.W. Jeter, Gahan Wilson, Pat Cadigan, Mort Castle, Elizabeth Massie, and others, including a couple of weird, major surprises!

The dead always come back.

HORRORIFFIC SPRING RELEASES

Masters of Darkness III, Tor Books, Dennis Etchison, Editor

Some of the most effective, most terrifying work in horror and dark fantasy is captured in short story format. With *Masters of Darkness III*, Dennis Etchison (himself a master of the short tale of terror) enlists some of the horror field's most potent talents for a collection of what they consider to be their finest -- and most frightening -- tales of dread. Each contributor to this volume offers insights into the world of modern horror fiction, and their thoughts on what makes these stories their most outstanding work.

Contributors include World Fantasy Award-winner Clive Barker, Stephen King, Dean R. Koonts, Hugh B. Caves, National Book Award-winner Joyce Carol Oates, James Herbert, British Fantasy Award-winner Brian Lumley, Jack Williamson, and Jack Vance. To be released in May of this year.

From Dell's Abyss line of horror:

Dusk by Ron Dee - April '91

Specters by J.M. Dillard - May '91

SLEEP WALKERS

Columbia Pictures, Director: Mick Garris

Stephen King's original script *Sleepwalkers* (the first not taken from a novel or short story) begins shooting June 3rd in and around Los Angeles. The story takes place in the mythical town of Travis, Indiana, a picturesque middle America setting. *Sleepwalkers* director, Mick (Critters 2, Psycho 4) Garris, describes the film as, "Norman Rockwell goes to hell".

The film promises the masterful story telling of King and the creative edge we're familiarized with in Garris' *Psycho 4*. Of the story, King says, "Sleepwalkers are the actual creatures that the legends of vampires and werewolves are based on".

The casting is not yet set, but Garris informs us of very interesting possibilities. Release Date of *Sleepwalkers* is tentatively scheduled for early '92.

HOT, HOT, HOT

Richard Christian Matheson's first novel *Created By* (Doubleday) is scorching with sales everywhere. In fact, auctions are now being held throughout European countries with intense results. Italy has paid the biggest advance to Matheson since King for a horror novel. It's no wonder; the book was sold in America based on five chapters (approximatley 75 pages) and a five page outline with a six figure advance. The book is also being sought after for film rights. When you're hot, you're hot.

And on the subject of "hot", *Red Sleep*, Matheson's scary, erotic, metaphoric, vampire film, will begin shooting in August this year. There is talk of Robert DeNiro starring. Like we said, "hot". Richard Christian Matheson and Mick Garris are the Executive Producers on the film. John Landis will direct.

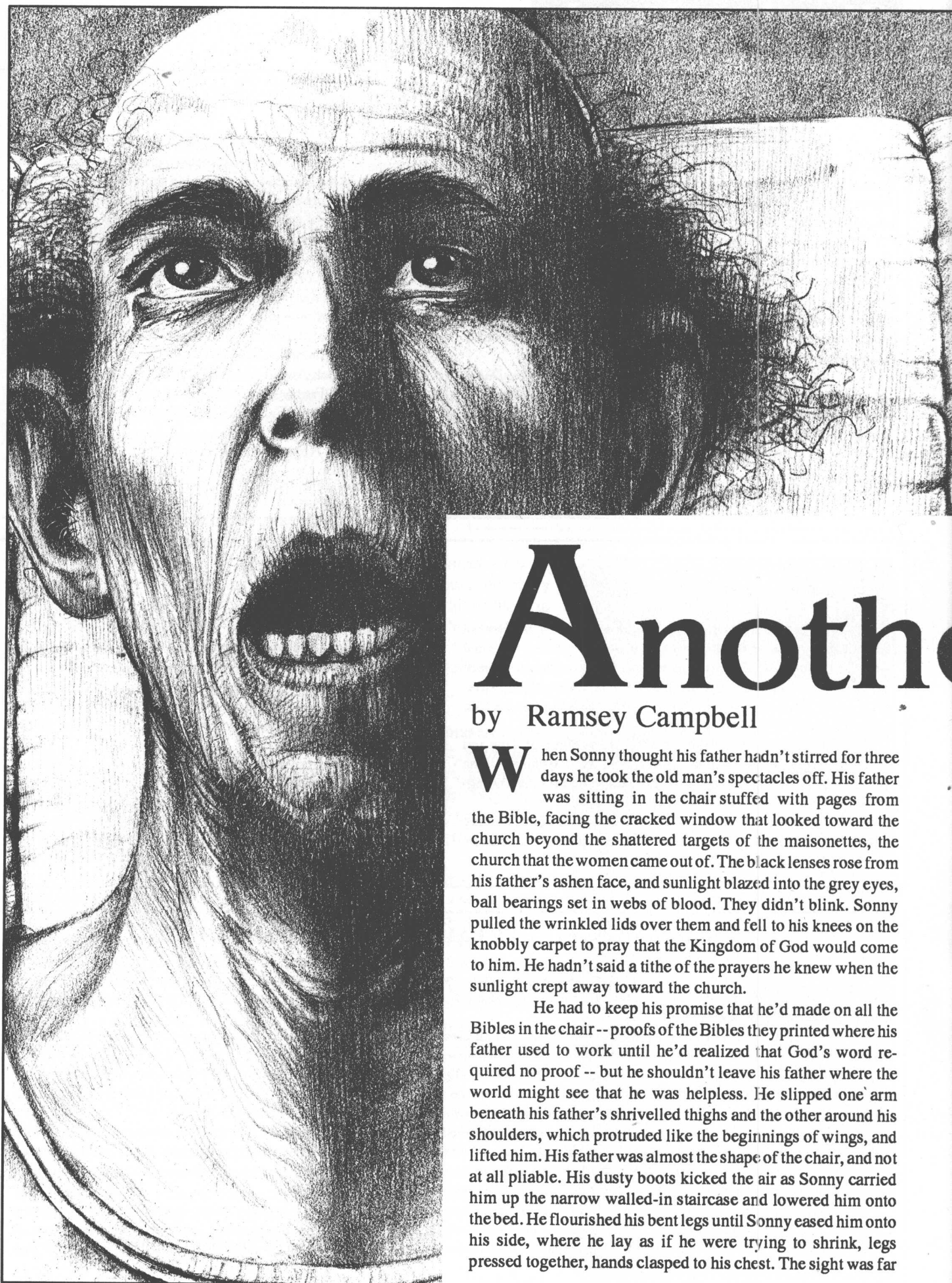
THOMAS F. MONTELEONE LAUNCHES A NEW SMALL PRESS

Writer and anthology editor Tom Monteleone has started a new hardcover imprint called BORDERLANDS PRESS. It draws its name from Monteleone's innovative, cutting edge anthology series, Borderlands. The other officers in the new enterprise are businessmen Henry G. Curtis and James C. Dobbs.

Borderlands Press will be different from the other small press hardcover houses. There will be an emphasis on graphics and text design. Our covers will have a designed, rather than an illustrated appearance, and will have a distinctive, recognizable "look". The usual quality bindings and papers will be standard, and all volumes will be slipcased. Royalties will be higher than the numbers which have become standard in the publishing business, and authors will be treated with the respect they deserve. This is going to be a publishing house that keeps the writer's needs in focus. Monteleone promises to always be a writer first, and publisher a distant second.

Borderlands Press' first offerings will include signed, limited editions of *The Magic Wagon* by Joe R. Lansdale, *Gauntlet* (which will include a signed essay by Stephen King), *Borderlands II* edited by Monteleone, a series of Harlan Ellison titles which have never appeared in hardcover, and Peter Straub's next (as yet untitled) novel. Several one-shot anthologies are planned, plus more limited editions by popular authors. Unsolicited manuscripts are not being read at this time, even if represented by agents.

A division of Borderlands Press will offer a variety of typographic and publishing services at less-than-New-York-City rates. Magazine publishers take note: Book quality (1100 dpi) typesetting, page design, printing, scanning, and data conversion are all available. Information on purchasing the first Borderlands Press titles can be obtained by writing to: **BORDERLANDS PRESS, P.O. Box 32333, Baltimore, MD 21208**



Another

by Ramsey Campbell

When Sonny thought his father hadn't stirred for three days he took the old man's spectacles off. His father was sitting in the chair stuffed with pages from the Bible, facing the cracked window that looked toward the church beyond the shattered targets of the maisonettes, the church that the women came out of. The black lenses rose from his father's ashen face, and sunlight blazed into the grey eyes, ball bearings set in webs of blood. They didn't blink. Sonny pulled the wrinkled lids over them and fell to his knees on the knobbly carpet to pray that the Kingdom of God would come to him. He hadn't said a tithe of the prayers he knew when the sunlight crept away toward the church.

He had to keep his promise that he'd made on all the Bibles in the chair -- proofs of the Bibles they printed where his father used to work until he'd realized that God's word required no proof -- but he shouldn't leave his father where the world might see that he was helpless. He slipped one arm beneath his father's shrivelled thighs and the other around his shoulders, which protruded like the beginnings of wings, and lifted him. His father was almost the shape of the chair, and not at all pliable. His dusty boots kicked the air as Sonny carried him up the narrow walled-in staircase and lowered him onto the bed. He flourished his bent legs until Sonny eased him onto his side, where he lay as if he were trying to shrink, legs pressed together, hands clasped to his chest. The sight was far



r World

less dismaying than the thought of going out of the house.

He didn't know how many nights he had kept watch by his father, but he was so tired that he wasn't sure if he heard the world scratching at the walls on both sides of him. His father must have suspected that the Kingdom of God wouldn't be here by now, what ever he'd been told the last time he had gone out into the world. Sonny made himself hurry downstairs and take the spectacles from the tiled mantelpiece.

"Eye of the needle, eye of the needle," his father would mutter whenever he put on the spectacles. Sonny had thought they were meant to blind him to the world, the devil's work - that the Almighty had guided his father as he strode to the market beyond the church, striding so fiercely that the world fell back - but now he saw that two holes had been scratched in the thick black paint which coated the lenses. The arms nipped the sides of his skull, and two fists seemed to close around his eyes: the hands of God? The little he could see through the two holes was piercingly clear. He gazed at the room that shared the ground floor with the stony kitchen where his father scrubbed the clothes in disinfectant, gazed at the walls his father had scraped bare for humility to help God repossess the house, the Stations of the Cross that led around them to the poster of the Shroud. Blood appeared to start out of the nailed hands, but he mustn't let that detain him. Surely it was a sign that he could stride through hell, as his father used

to.

His father had braved the forbidden world out there on his behalf, and Sonny had grown more and more admiring and grateful, but now he wished his father had taken him out just once, so that he would know what to expect. His father had asked them to come from the Kingdom of God to take care of his body, but would they provide for Sonny? If not, where was his food to come from? You weren't supposed to expect miracles, not in this world. He clasped his hands together until the fingers burned red and white and prayed for guidance, his voice ringing like a stone bell between the scraped walls, and then he made himself grasp the latch on the outer door.

As he inched the door open his mouth filled with the taste of the disinfectant his father used to wash their food. A breeze darted through the gap and touched his face. It felt as if the world had given him a large soft kiss that smelled of dust and smoke and the heat of the summer day. He flinched, almost trapping his fingers as he thrust the door away from him, and reminded himself of his promise. Gripping the key in his pocket as if it were a holy relic, he took his first step into the world.

The smell of the world surged at him, heat and fallen houses and charred rubbish, murmuring with voices and machinery. The sunlight lifted his scalp. Even with the spectacles to protect him, the world felt capable of bursting his

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senses. He pressed against the wall of the house, and felt it shiver. He recoiled from the threat of finding it less solid than he prayed it was, and the pavement that met the house flung him to his knees.

The whole pavement was uneven. The few stones that weren't broken had reared up as though the Day of Judgment were at hand. As he rubbed his bare knees, he saw that every house except his father's was derelict, gaping. Behind him the street ended at a wall higher than the houses, where litter struggled to tear itself loose from coils of barbed wire.

He would never be able to walk on the upheaved pavement unless he could see better. He narrowed his eyes and took off the spectacles, praying breathlessly. The husks of houses surged forward on a wave of sound and smells, but so long as he kept his eyes slitted it seemed he could stave off the world. He strode along the pavement, which flickered like a storm as his eyelids trembled. He had only just passed the last house when he staggered and pressed his hands to his scalp. The world had opened around him, and he felt as if his skull had.

The market stretched across waste land scribbled on by tracks of vehicles. There were so many vans and stalls and open suitcases he was afraid to think of counting them. A crowd that seemed trapped within the boundaries of the market trudged the muddy aisles and picked at merchandise. A man was sprinkling petrol on a heap of sprouts to help them burn. Beyond the shouts of traders and the smoldering piles of rubbish, a few blackened trees poked at a sky like luminous chalk. To his left, past several roofless streets, were concrete stacks of fifty floors or more, where the crowd in the market must live. So this was hell, and only the near edge of hell. Sonny retreated toward the church.

Then he caught hold of his mouth to keep in a cry. It wasn't a church any more, it was a Giveaway Discount Warehouse. All women were prostitutes, and he'd thought the women he'd seen leaving the church every night had been confessing their sins -- but they'd been using God's house to sell the devil's wares. The realization felt as if the world had made a grab at him. He fumbled the spectacles onto his face just as three muddy children sidled toward him.

Their faces crowded into the clear area of the lens. "Are you a singer or something, mister?" a boy whose nostrils were stained brown demanded. "Are you on video?"

"He's that horror writer with them glasses," said a girl with a bruised mouth missing several teeth.

"Thought he was a fucking boy scout before," said a girl in a mangy fur coat. A fleshy bubble swelled out of her mouth and popped sharply. "That why you're dressed like that, mister, because you like little boys?"

They were only imps, sent to torment him. If they seemed about to touch him he could lash out at them with his heavy boots. "Where can I find the Kingdom of God?" he said.

"Here it is, mister," the bubbling girl sniggered, lifting the hem of her coat.

"He means the church, the real church," the bruised girl said reprovingly. "You mean the real church, don't you,

mister? It's past them hoardings."

Beyond the discount warehouse, at the end of the street that bordered the market, stood three large boards propped with timber. Once the stares and titters were behind him, he took the spectacles off. There was so much smoke and dust on the road ahead that the cars speeding nowhere in both directions appeared to be driverless. The road led under hooked lamps past buildings which he knew instinctively were no longer what they had been created for, lengths of plastic low on the black facades announcing that they were Video Universe With Horror And Sci-Fi And War, The Smoke Shop, The Drugstore, Magazines To Suit All Tastes. There was Cleanorama, but he thought it came far too late. He peered narrowly to his left, and the hoardings thrust their temptations at him, a long giant suntanned woman wearing three scraps of cloth, an enormous car made out of sunset, a cigarette several times as long as he was tall. Past them was the church.

It didn't look much like one. It was a wedge that he supposed you'd call a pyramid, almost featureless except for a few slits full of colored splinters and, at the tip of the wedge, a concrete cross. Feeling as if he were in a parable, though he'd no notion what it meant or if it was intended to convey anything to him, he stalked past the hoardings and a police station like the sheared-off bottom storey of a tower block, and up the gravel path.

The doors of the church seemed less solid than the doors of his father's house. When he closed them behind him, the noise of traffic seeped in. At least the colors draped over the pine pews were peaceful. Kneeling women glanced and then stared at him as he tiptoed toward the altar. The light through a red splinter caught a sign on a door. FATHER PAUL, it said. Daring to open his eyes fully at last, Sonny stepped through the veils of colored light he couldn't see until they touched him, and pushed the door wide.

A priest was kneeling on a low velvety shelf, the only furniture in the stark room. His broad red face clenched on a pale O of mouth. "That's not the way, my son. Stay on the other side if you're here to confess."

"I'm looking for the Kingdom of God," Sonny pleaded.

"So should we all, and nothing could be simpler. Everything is God's."

"In here, you mean?"

"And outside too."

He was a false prophet, Sonny realized with a shudder that set bright colors dancing on his arms and legs, and this was the devil's mockery of a church. He stepped out of reach of the hairy hands that looked boiled red and collided with a pew, which spilled black books. The priest was rising like smoke and flames when a voice behind Sonny said "Any trouble, Father?"

He might have been another priest, he was dressed blackly enough. The thought of being locked up before he could have his father taken care of made Sonny reckless. "He's not a priest," he blurted.

"I'd like to know what you think you are, coming to church dressed like that," the policeman said, low and leaden. "It may be legal now, but we can do without your sort

flaunting yourselves in church. Just give me the word, Father, and I'll teach him to say his prayers."

Sonny backed away and fled as colors snatched at him. Slitting his eyes, he blundered out of the concrete trap. He ought to take refuge at home before the policeman saw where he lived, and then venture out after dark. But he had only reached the elbow on which the giantess was supporting herself when a car drew up beside him.

He thought he was going to be arrested. He recoiled against the hot giantess, who yielded far too much like flesh, as the driver's square head poked out, a titan's blonde shaving brush. "Are you lost?" the driver said. "Can I help?"

Sonny heaved himself away from the cardboard flesh and staggered against the car. Not having eaten since before his father had stopped moving was catching up with him. He managed to steady himself as the driver climbed out of the car. "Do you live near here? Can I take you home? Unless you'd like me to find you somewhere else to stay."

He was trying to find out where Sonny lived. "The Kingdom of God," Sonny said deliberately.

"Is that a church organization? I don't know where it is, but we'll go there if you can tell me."

Sonny backed away and fled as colors snatched at him.

That took Sonny aback. Surely anyone who meant to tempt him must claim to know where it was. Could this person be as lost and in need of it as Sonny was? "You really look as if you should be with someone," the driver said. "Have you nobody at home?"

Before Sonny could close himself against it, a flood of loss and loneliness passed through him. "Nobody who can help," he croaked.

"Then let's find you where you're looking for. My name's Sam, by the way." Sam held out a hand as if to take Sonny's, but stopped short of doing so. "What's it like, do you know? What kind of building?"

The sensitivity Sam had shown by not touching him won Sonny over. "All I know is it's not far."

"We can still drive if you like."

They would be too close in the car, and Sonny would be giving up too much control. He peered back at the church, where the policeman seemed content to glower from the doorway. "I'll walk," he said.

Past the hoardings, the smell of the market pounced on him. The smoke of charred vegetables scraped inside his head as he hurried by, trying to blink his pinched eyes clear. Ahead of him the road of cars flexed like a serpent, like the leg of a giantess. He dug his knuckles into his eyes and told himself that it was only curving past more old buildings claimed by names; Macho Militaria, Captivating Tots, Luscious Legs, Sex Aids... Some of the strips of plastic embraced

two buildings. "It is an actual place we're looking for, is it?" Sam said, trotting beside him.

Sonny hesitated, but how could he save a soul unless he spoke the truth? "That's what my father said."

"He sent you out, did he?"

"Into the world, yes." Both question and answer seemed to suggest more than they said, but what did the parable mean? "I had to come," he said in his father's defence. "There's nobody else."

Now that the market and its stench were left behind, the houses appeared to be flourishing. The facades ahead were white or newly painted, their front windows swelled importantly. Gleaming plaques beside their doors named doctors and dentists, false healers one must never turn to. Weren't these houses too puffed up to harbor the Kingdom of God? But the people were the same as the lost souls of the waste land: faces stared at him from cars, murmured about him beyond the lacy curtains of a waiting room; two young women exhaling smoke sidled past him and hooted with laughter. "He'll get no girls if he goes round dressed like that," one spluttered.

"Maybe he's got better things to do," Sam said icily.

Sonny drew in a breath that tasted of disinfectant, which seemed too clear a sign to doubt. As he strode past the dentist's open door he experienced a rush of trust and hope such as he'd never even felt toward his father. There must be others like himself or potentially like himself in the world, and surely Sam was one. "It's how my father dressed me," he confided.

"Has it anything to do with where we're looking for?"

"Yes, to remind me I'm a child of God," Sonny said, and was reminded more keenly by a twinge from the marks of the birch.

"Does your father dress like that too, then?"

"Of course not," Sonny giggled. "He was, he's my father."

Sam appeared not to notice his indiscretion. "How old are you anyway? You dress like ten years old but you could be in your early thirties."

"We don't need to know. Years like that don't matter, only the minutes before the fire that consumes the world. If we've spent our time counting our years we'll never be able to prepare ourselves to enter the Kingdom of God. Not the place we're going now, the place of which that's a symbol. Where we're going now is the first and last church, the one that won't be cast into the fire where all corruption goes. That's because we keep ourselves pure in every way and cast out the women once they've given birth."

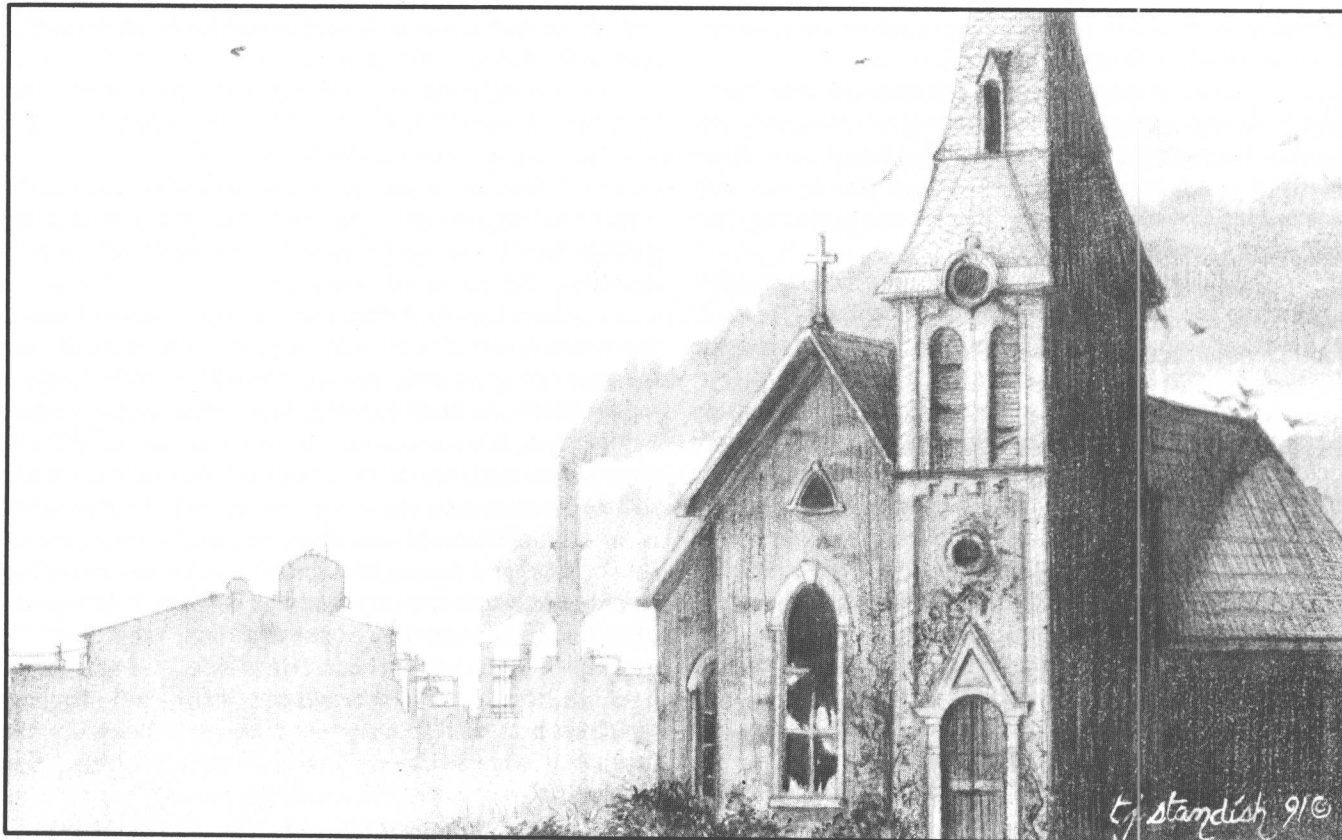
Sam's mouth opened, but what it said seemed not to be what it had opened for. "You mean your mother."

Though it hadn't the tone of a question, Sonny thought it best to make things clear. "Questions come from the devil. They're how the world tries to trick the faithful."

"So you have to look after your father all by yourself."

Why should that matter to Sam? Sonny couldn't recall having said his father needed looking after. He tried to let the truth speak through him as he searched the curves

Another World



ahead, where gleaming houses rested their bellies on mats of grass. Newspapers and boards quoting newspapers hung on the corner of a side street, and he glanced away from the devil's messages, perhaps too hastily: the world seemed to pant hotly at him, the houses swelled with another breath. "Only the pure may touch the pure," he mumbled.

"That's why I mustn't touch you."

Such a surge of trust passed through Sonny that his body felt unfamiliar. "Maybe you'll be able to," he blurted.

"Not if --"

"We can all be saved. We just have to admit we need to be," Sonny reassured Sam, who agreed so readily that Sonny wondered if he'd missed the point somehow. Houses white as virgins breathed their stony breaths and expanded their bellies until every polished name-plaque turned to the sun and shone. For a moment he thought it was God who was filling the virgin bellies, and then he recoiled from himself. How could he let the world think for him? Where had he gone wrong? "Quick," he gasped, and tottered round, almost touching Sam's bare downy arm.

The world twisted and tried to throw him. The fat houses between him and the market began to dance, wobbling their whited bellies. He mustn't think of leaning on Sam, but a distant edge of him wished he could. He held the spectacles to his eyes as he came abreast of the dangling newspapers, but the darkness of the lenses seemed a pit into which he was close to falling. As he stepped off the pavement to cross the side street, he felt as if he were stepping off a cliff.

He faltered in the middle of the side street, though cars snarled beside him. He thought a voice had spoken to him, saying "King God." He snatched off the spectacles so eagerly

that one lens shattered between his finger and thumb. Black shards crunched under his feet, the sun went for his eyes, but none of this mattered. He hadn't heard a voice, he'd seen a sign. It hadn't just said King God; only the lens had made it seem to. It said Kingdom of God, and it was in a window.

He ran across the side street, scrambled onto the pavement. How could he have missed the sign before? Surely he needn't blame Sam for distracting him. The Kingdom was here now, that was all that mattered -- here beyond the window that blazed like a golden door, like a fire in which only the name of the Kingdom was visible, never to be consumed. He took another pace toward it, and the sunlight drained out of the window, leaving a surface grey with dust and old rain, which he was nevertheless able to see through. Beyond it was ruined emptiness.

He stumbled forward so as not to fall. The sign he'd seen was a faded placard in the window, beside a door whose lock had been gouged out. A rail dragged down by stained curtains leaned diagonally across the window. Several chairs lay on the bare floorboards, their legs broken, their entrails sprung. On a table against the ragged wall, a dead cat glistened restlessly.

Sam pressed his forehead against the window. "This can't be it, can it? Nobody's been here for months."

Sonny's father had been, only days ago: wasn't that what he'd said? He must have meant it as a parable, or meant that he'd met some of the brethren. What could Sonny do now, as the world throbbed with muffled mocking laughter? Go back home in case the Kingdom had come there and if not, stay nearby until they found him?

Then Sam said, "Don't worry, I'll help you. Shall we

see to your father first?"

The window had blackened his forehead as if he'd been branded, and Sonny seemed to perceive him all at once more clearly. "See to him how?"

"Have him taken care of, however he needs to be."

"Who by?"

"I won't know that until I've seen him. I promise I'll do whatever's best for both of you."

Sonny swallowed, though it felt like swallowing chunks of the world. "Who are you?"

"Nobody special, but you might say I help save people too. I'm a social worker."

Sonny felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach, the way his father had punched him sometimes to make him remember. He doubled up, but he had nothing to vomit. People who said they were socialists, communists, architects of the devil's kingdom, and he'd let one of them entice him, hadn't even realized he was being led. Perhaps the ruined shop had been set up for him to see, to turn him aside from searching further.

Sam had stepped back. He was afraid Sonny would be sick on him, Sonny realized, and flew at him, retching. When Sam retreated, Sonny turned with the whirlpool of sky and bloated buildings and staggered to the corner of the street, almost toppling into the parade of cars. He jammed the one-eyed spectacles onto his face and fled.

His legs were wavering so much that a kind of dance was the only way he could keep on his feet. The houses joined in, sluggishly flirting their bellies at him, growing blacker as he jiggled onward. The giantess lazily raised her uppermost leg, the stench of charred rotten vegetables surged at him down the uneven street. Compared with Sam and the virginal buildings, the smell seemed at least honestly corrupt. It made him feel he was going home.

He was appalled by how familiar the world already seemed to him. The children jeering "Pirate" at him, the pinched faces eager for a bargain, a trader kicking a van that wouldn't start: Sonny thought for a moment which felt like the rim of a bottomless pit that he could have been any one of them. As he stumbled past the discount church and down the disused street he wept to realize that he liked the feel of the open sky more than he expected to like the low dimness of the house. Then he wondered if he might have left his father alone for too long, and fell twice in his haste to get home.

He dug his key into the lock, reeled into the house as the door yielded, shouldered it closed behind him. A smell of disinfectant that seemed holier than incense closed around him. He mustn't let it comfort him until he had taken care of his father. Anyone who'd seen his father sitting in the Bible chair might wonder where he was now, might even try to find him.

His father lay as Sonny had left him, straining to touch his clasped hands with his knees. Sonny gathered him up and wavered downstairs, thumping the staircase wall with his father's shrivelled ankles and once with his uncombed head. Would it look more natural to have his father kneeling in the front room? As soon as he tried, his father keeled over. Sonny sat him on the Bibles and stood back. His father looked at

peace now, ready for anything. The sight was making Sonny feel that the Kingdom of God was near when he heard the key turn in the front door.

He'd been so anxious to reach his father that he'd left the key in the lock. He knew instinctively that it wasn't the Kingdom of God at the door. He felt the house stiffen against the world that was reaching in for his father and him. He scabbled the hall door open. Sam was in the hall.

All Sonny could think of was his father, powerless to defend himself or even to dodge the grasp of the world. "Get out," he screamed, and when his voice only made Sam flinch, he forgot the warning his father had given him, the warning that was so important Sonny's stomach had been bruised for a week. He put his hands on Sam to cast the intruder out of the house.

And then he realized how thoroughly the world had tricked him, for Sam's chest was the memory Sonny had driven so deep in his mind it had been like forgetting: his mother's chest, soft and warm and thrusting. He cried out as loudly and shrilly as Sam did, and flung her backward onto the broken road. He staggered after her, for he wasn't fit to stay in a house that had been dedicated to God. He hadn't been ready to venture into the world after all, and it had possessed him. In the moment when he'd flung Sam's breasts away from him he'd felt his body reach secretly for her.

He slammed the door and snatched the key and flew at her, driving her toward the waste where the lost souls swarmed under the dead sky. He tore the spectacles off and shied them at her, narrowly missing her face. The lost souls might tear him to pieces when they saw he was routing one of them, but perhaps he could destroy her first - anything to prevent the world from reaching his father ahead of the Kingdom of God. Then he threw up his hands and wailed and gnashed his teeth, for the world had already touched his father. He had been so anxious to take his father to the safety of the Bibles that he'd forgotten to disinfect himself. He'd held his father with hands the world had tainted.

A smell that made him think of disinfectant drifted along the street to mock him. It was of petrol, in a jug that the trader who had kicked the van was carrying. The trader glanced at the spectacle of Sonny lurching at Sam, trying to knock her down as she retreated toward the market with her hands held out to calm him, and then the trader turned away as if he'd seen nothing unusual. He put down the jug in order to unscrew the cap on the side of the van, and at once Sonny knew exactly what to do.

He ran past Sam and grabbed a stick with a peeling red-hot tip from the nearest fire, and darted to the jug of petrol. He had just seized the handle when the trader turned and lunged at him. Sonny would have splashed petrol over him to drive him back, but how could he waste his father's only salvation? He tipped the jug over himself, and the world shrank back from him, unable to stop him. He poured the last inch of petrol into his mouth.

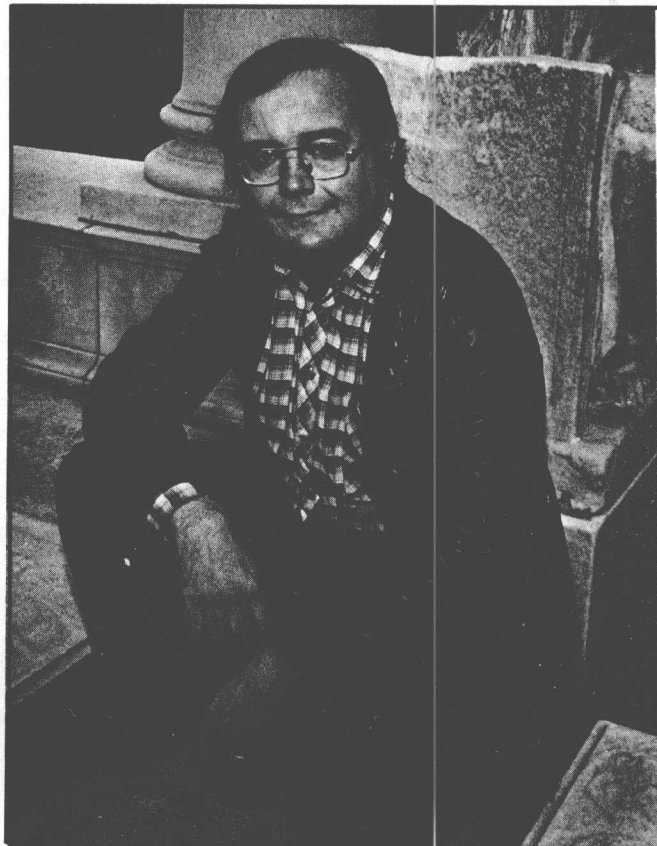
"Don't," Sam cried, and Sonny knew he was doing right at last. The taste like disinfectant stronger than he'd ever drunk confirmed it too. He ran at Sam, and she sprawled backward, afraid he meant to spew petrol at her or brand her

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with the stick. Smiling for the first time since he could remember, Sonny strode back to the house.

He was turning the key when Sam and more of the devil's horde came running. Sonny made a red-hot sign of the cross in the air and stepped into the house, and threw the key contemptuously at them. The stick had burned short as he strode, the mouthful of petrol was searing his nostrils, but he had time, he mustn't swallow. The stick scorched his fingers as he took the three strides across the room to his father. Carefully opening his mouth, he anointed his father and the chair, and then he sat on his father's lap for the first time in his life. It was unyielding as iron, yet he had never felt so peaceful. Perhaps this was the Kingdom of God, or was about to be. As he touched the fire to his chest, he knew he had reached the end of the parable. He prayed he was about to learn its meaning.

Ramsey Campbell, author of the highly acclaimed novels *The Parasite*, *The Nameless*, *The Face That Must Die*, *Obsession*, *Incarnate*, *The Hungry Moon*, and *The Influence*, as well as his short story collection, *Dark Companions*. Campbell has won more awards for horror fiction than any other living writer including the British Fantasy Award for the story "In The Bag" and the World Fantasy Award for "The Chimney". He lives in England.



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Spector peaks

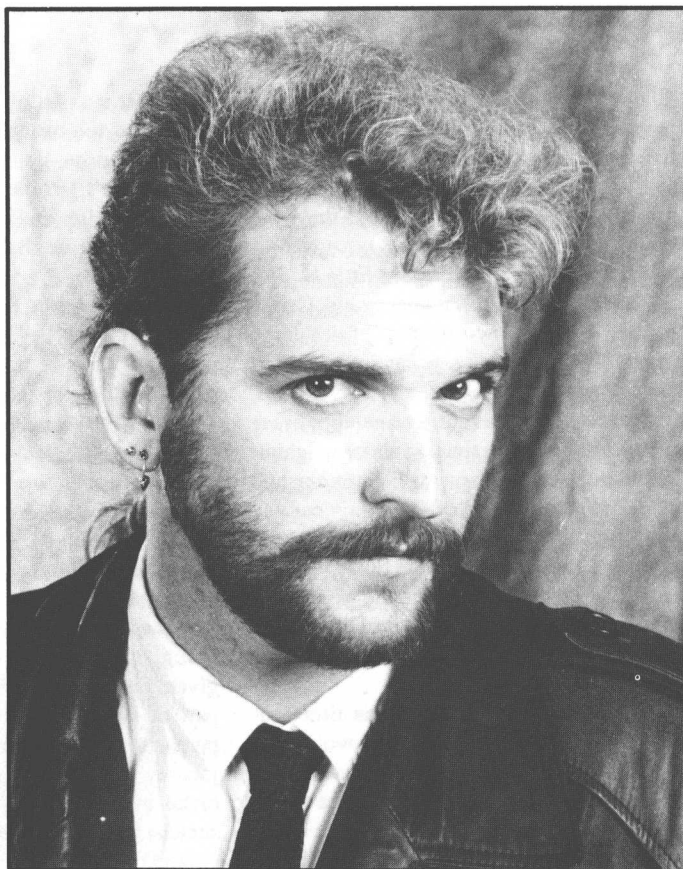
Iniquities interviews Craig Spector...

and our little separation of the minds is complete.

In an attempt to let readers in on a little bit of what Skipp & Spector are really like, we've interviewed them separately, hearing the different views of each of them with no influence by the other. The result is fascinating. The same questions, but...

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Spector is one of the modern masters of horror, bringing a stark ultra-realism to fiction. We tried to get into his mind as much as he would permit; maybe get a feel for the man behind the nightmares. But read, and find out for yourself...



Beth Gwinn

INQ: *Have your life and career gone in the direction you had hoped? Do you feel in control of your destiny, or is your destiny in control of you?*

SPECTOR: Well, I really thought I'd be closer to total world domination by now, but I'm learning to pace myself. (laughs) Seriously, I'd have to say yes and no, both and neither, all of the above. Ten years ago, being a horror writer was not exactly in my plans. I was this iconoclastic quasi-New Age singer/songwriter at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, and I thought I knew exactly where my life was going.

And then along about 1982 comes this throw-away idea about a punked-out vampire living in the subways of Manhattan. And over the next two years it snowballed from an off-the-wall aside into a short story into a novel that ultimately became *The Light At The End*, and in doing so opened a path that I previously hadn't even considered. Namely, that writing fiction might be more than a freak burst of creativity for me.

When *The Light At The End* sold I saw this amazing door open up, where before there had only been walls. All I had to do was step through, then work like hell to make it all real. And in the process I discovered a part of myself, and became much more the person I'd been trying to be all my life. I think destiny likes to sneak up and whack you where you're not looking. I try to keep myself open now, to the unknown and the unforeseen. I'm living in a state of calculated

risk.

INQ: *And Control?*

SPECTOR: As for control, I think you have to be willing to throw yourself into the breach, while still remembering that *your destiny is bigger than you are*. There's a larger mechanism at work that will guide you. But in order to do that you'll have to give up a certain amount of control. Life may not go exactly as you thought it would. So what? If it feels right, surrender to your inner voice. Then run with it.

Then, at the very least, you'll have an interesting life. Too many people lock down their imaginations, shut off contact with that inner voice, and feel used up by the time they're thirty. Or else they end up window-shopping their destiny: mall-walking through their lives, browsing at everything and buying nothing, and they end up feeling like they never really lived.

Fuck that. Life is too short. I want to go out knowing that I lived every day like it mattered.

INQ: *What did you aspire to be in your youth? What did you want to be when you grew up, or did little Craig run around screaming 'I wanna be a thplatterpunk'?*

SPECTOR: At various points I was going to be a world-famous cartoonist, or a world-famous musician, or just plain world-famous. For a while I was going to be a world-famous architect, but I hated math. My parents always said "you can do *anything* you set your mind to," and they pretty much let

me do whatever the hell I wanted. So I took it as a reality imprint at a very early age.

I was always kinda weird. I began speaking in full sentences; skipped right over the *goo-goo* part, and was stone-quiet for so long my parents thought something was physically wrong with me. Then *boom* full sentences, in the crib.

And I really haven't shut up since. In school I used to get up in front of the class during show-and-tell and just make up shit, improvise: anything to get a rise out of them. And as far back as I can remember I had this twisted perspective on things. When I was six I jumped off a playground sliding board and opened my head up on one of the big lug nuts that anchored it. I hit the ground and knocked myself out. My brother ran home screaming that I'd killed myself; I got up, ran home and locked myself in the bathroom. My mom was out in the hall, banging on the door, and there I was up on the counter, staring in the mirror. Playing monster with *real blood*. (laughs) Yeah, I was a little strange.

INQ: *What momentous occasions changed your course into becoming a writer?*

SPECTOR: The realization that I could actually make a living doing this. (laughs) It beat the hell out of being a street messenger, let me tell ya.

Plus, I realized that writing fiction and writing music were very similar to me; they're both forms of storytelling, they both had a rhythm and an urgency that I could

Spector Speaks

relate to. And the fiction was a lot easier to produce, because it didn't require four or five other people to pull it off. I didn't have to worry about not being able to finish a novel because the bass player was throwing up in the parking lot.

INQ: *What were you like as a little kid?*

SPECTOR: I was a pretty happy kid. On the outside, I was a show-off: small of size, large of mouth. I could talk my way into or out of almost anything. It was a survival skill, 'cause I was such a runt. I remember being pretty scrappy; one time an older neighbor kid started beating up on my big brother, and I vaulted off the hood of the family car and landed on his back, just latched onto him and pounded his head in until he ran away. But usually I could avoid it, cajole or flat-out insult my way out of fights. Like Dinsdale on the Monty Python sketch, "he used... sarcasm."

On the inside, I was this ultra-serious, driven little perfectionist. I would obsess over schoolwork or projects so much that I practically had an ulcer by the time I was nine. My mother used to keep me out of school, actually say "Oh, no you don't, you're staying home today", just to make me chill out.

I'm still like that. Gradually I'm learning to chill myself out, take time off between projects so that I don't strip my own gears. Otherwise I tend to overcommit, then let my ambition run amok and eat up the rest of my life. I'll still obsess over the project until I absolutely *know* that it's gonna fly.

But now, I use that anxiety impulse to help focus on what could possibly be wrong, sort of apply Murphy's Law to the *nth* power to figure out all the possible flaws, and then figure out how to fix them. Sort of like neurotic self-help for the nineties; you know: *Harness your hangups! Turn your twitches into riches!* (laughs) Yep, all in all it's yet another example of how to turn those personality defects into lucrative career skills.

INQ: *What in life really worries you? The kinds of things that keep you up all night with severe attacks of insomnia, gut-wrenching dilemmas and migraine headaches?*

SPECTOR: Oh, yeah, right! Like I'm really gonna tell you! (laughs) Someone once asked me, "don't you have nightmares writing that kind of stuff?" And I replied, "No. You have my nightmares."

INQ: *I like that.*

SPECTOR: It's true. The things I'm afraid of are the things that are in our books. I fear all kinds of brutality, and repression, and cruelty, and mindlessness. I fear failure. I fear harm coming to the people I love. A lot of it is generic, that freeform amorphous

dread that's a part of life in America at the tail end of the twentieth century. The-idea that if the drive-by shooters and the crack addicts don't get the people you love, the day-care rapists and the drunk drivers will. Or if they survive all that they can get blown out of the sky by a terrorist's bomb, or blasted to burger in some duplicitous middle east war. Or maybe just stay home and grow a nice fat tumor courtesy of their local toxic chemical dump or neighborhood nuke plant.

Or worse, that they'll escape all of those mortal, topical terrors and simply forget why life is worth living, and let the cumulative pain of a lifetime grind them into the ground until they succumb to their own bad habits, roll over, and die.

It all scares me. And it pisses me off. And it makes me a lot more passionate about living, of not wasting what little time we're given. Even though I really believe that a big part of life is actually *training* for death, preparing yourself for that next step in the journey of the spirit and all. It still doesn't make it any easier when somebody gets snatched away before you're ready to say goodbye.

I find that writing about death has given me a different perspective on life. I'm not as scared of being scared anymore, for one thing. I respect fear; it can be a perverse kind of ally. Fear sensitizes me to the terrible frailty of life, which I find personally valuable in an increasingly deadening culture. And conveniently enough, the writing gives me a place to process it all; to get it out where I can look at it. Then I can begin to deal with it.

INQ: *How do you deal with the large amounts of work that you have and the pressures of facing deadlines, schmoozing the public and coping with the demands placed on you by family and friends? What's your philosophy for coping with the stress?*

SPECTOR: (laughs) Easy. *Shut up and write.* The simplest advice in the world, and also the hardest to live up to. Don't like where your career is going? *Shut up and write.* Feel like your innate creative genius is going unnoticed in a callous, commercial world? *Shut up and write.* Haunted by the senseless slaughter of innocents? Got a deadline crawling up your ass that's making your life a living hell? Suffering from a deeply paralyzing writer's block? *Shut up. And write.* Write more, write better. Find your voice. Do whatever works. Do it *now.*

Because the most terrible truth of being a professional creative person as opposed to having, as they say, a *real* job, is that at some point you actually have to *do the work*, and not just talk about it. I mean, talk is great, talk is wonderful, the meaningful

discourse between human beings over points of common interest is a lovely thing. But at a certain point you are going to have to deliver the goods or you simply are not for real. And then all the self-important writerly opinion and posturing in the world, combined with two dollars and fifty cents, will buy you a cup of cappuccino. And you'll have to borrow the two-fifty.

As for my private life... That's probably been the hardest hit by this whole climb. It actually became so all-consuming that it turned into *The Thing That Ate My Marriage*. It was starting to pollute my perspective on things.

Fortunately, we've almost managed to work our way out from under that first big all-u-can-eat pileup. I make a point now of taking time to get away, be a real person, recharge my batteries. I mean, I'm still pretty compulsive: I hardly ever sit still, and even if I do I'll pick up a pen and start drawing unconsciously, like trance-doodling or something. (laughs) And the idea factory never closes. But some things never change...

INQ: *Have you ever cracked under pressure?*

SPECTOR: No, not really. In December of '89, we threw the first hundred pages of *The Bridge* away, principally because they sucked. This was not happy-making news, since we'd been struggling with it for almost two years and had promised our editor that we'd have it done by the end of December. That was the darkest day of my life; I felt like I was literally staring my doom in the face. I mean, it was like *everything was riding on this book. and now it's gone. and what do we do...! Aiiiiiieeee!!* But we faced it down, figured out what was wrong, completely revamped the entire story, and started over from scratch. We wrote a hundred and fifty new pages in a month. And we finished the whole first draft in three. And it's the best thing we've ever written. (laughs) Like I said. *Calculated risk.* The last few years have been like that.

Generally speaking, I have a pretty high stress tolerance factor. I go for days, weeks, even months on end, living on no sleep and no time off and stress out the wazoo and I might go crazy but I get it done.

And only then, when it's all nice and tucked in, would I allow myself to just fall out and suffer a complete physical nervous system shutdown. My body would send my brain on a forced vacation, just say *sorry. you can't think about anything because I'm out to lunch now.* It would last a day or so, and I'd come out of it feeling spent but clean, like I just vented something really toxic. Personally, I'd rather be skiing. But whatever works...

Actually, it's funny, because I was sort of waiting for that to come this last time around, and it didn't. I just spent a few weeks getting sleep, vegging out and enjoying the holidays. Either I'm over that phase of my life, or I'm storing up for a *really big one!* (laughs) Oh, great. Now I'll blow a hose or something...

INQ: *Do you find collaborating with John a crutch or a tool? Is it a way for each of you to pull each other through the hard and demanding times, and give each other moral support? Or is it just easier to have a partner to always fall back on?*

SPECTOR: Both. Neither. All of the above. Wow, *dejavu.* (laughs) Personally, I don't think the whole concept of working together is to say "hey, if you put in 50% and I put in 50%, we'll have 100%." I prefer to think "if you put in 100% and I put in 100%, we'll have 10,000%."

To that end, I don't view collaboration as a crutch. Crutches are tools for people who can't walk without them. John and I both could work just fine without each other, but that's hardly the point. We're engaged in a creative dialogue that began virtually the moment we met, has been happening for seventeen years, and that we both feel was pretty much destined to play out. We amplify each other's strengths, cover each other's asses, and test each other constantly. We spare our loved ones the burden of hearing us talk out our latest work-in-progress unto death. We turn an otherwise neurotically solitary lifestyle into a full-time tag-team jam session. And mostly, we do it because we like the results.

It's funny, because we're both very willfull, downright bullheaded at times, and we're about as different as night and day. But we cross-reference the same concerns, and end up arriving at a common ground from two very different trajectories. It's like we're tuned into the same frequency at a certain point; sometimes the connection is almost psychic. Invariably we come up with a very three-dimensional map, 'cause we can see through each other's bullshit. John tends to be a dreamer/empath, whereas I'm more of the hardcase/how-does-it-work type -- principally because I'm always so internally terrified that it won't. But then we'll both cross

over at any given time, jump into each other's shoes, and wail. By the time we're done it's almost impossible to tell who wrote what... even for us.

INQ: *Are there specific roles you each kind of play?*

SPECTOR: I tend to be the whip, especially when deadlines loom. I can be a real bastard in a crunch. John's a lot gentler-- if I toast out he'll generally let it slide, say "Get some rest." I'm more likely to come in and say "Get up. Get back to work. We gotta finish." (laughs) Yep. Mr. Compassion, that's me.

INQ: *The reaction from people who read you is extremely split. They either love you or hate you. There's not really a middle ground. Those that love you are in awe of the attack that you choose to take, while those that hate*

positive thing. Sometimes it's *good* to piss people off. I just want to piss them off for the right reasons.

It's not that we write to shock, per se; it's that we live in shocking times, and thus tend to write about shocking things. I'm fascinated by uncomfortable truths and dreadful possibilities. The treacherous little tripwires buried in our souls, waiting for that misplaced step to set them off. And somewhere in there, a spark of hope in that big ol' sea of darkness.

Unfortunately, a great deal of the early slams on our style completely missed out on that, took one sidelong glance from afar and filled in the rest from their own vast Rese Noirs of prejudice. Hell, some people couldn't even get past the leather pants (laughs). And some of those people really were flam-

ing buttwads with nothing better to do than gossip and bitch. Short of killing them, they really weren't worth the time it takes to respond. It's like, "gee, I'd really like to spend hours on Genie or Compuserve or in one of the 'zines, diligently responding to your back-biting gutless sniping, but I have a life to live." Most of that is old news by now, and good riddance. There are far more important things to disagree about.

As far as I'm concerned, anyone who accuses us of simply writing "gore for gore's sake..." has completely missed the point of splatterpunk... at least *our* brand of that dreaded sub-genre. Because the issue for us is not *and*

never has been about simple excess. Explicitness is not the point, either, though we tend to be pretty extreme. And *loud vs quiet* is such a retarded non-argument that it barely warrants mentioning.

The issues, for me, are and always have been passion and clarity. I want to achieve as clear and honest a dialogue as I can within myself, and within the work itself. And I want to *feel* it as intensely as I can. Granted, this is not the filter one is expected to don when approaching Shocking Things. One is supposed to remain at a polite distance, to draw the smokescreen of Common Decency and averts one's eyes at all the proper moments, particularly when broaching taboo subjects like sex and death and moral corruption. Common Decency is a real



Beth Gwinn

you find it very offensive. What do you think is offensive?

SPECTOR: Cowardice is offensive to me. Spinelessness. Deception. Categorically, I'd say ignorance, apathy, hypocrisy, domestic and sexual violence, racism and sexism also suck the Big Weenie. And anything that promotes them is offensive to me in kind.

But isn't that what America is all about? The God-given freedom to hate the opposing opinion of your choice. (laughs) Actually, I rather enjoy the fact that we foster such a reactionary environment. I would much rather have people loving and hating us passionately than merely engendering a bland indifference. Obviously, we're here to make contact, and hopefully it will be positive. But sometimes negative contact is a

Spector Speaks

sanitizer, a veritable cornerstone of western civilization; it keeps one's mind in the gutter and one's skeletons in the closet, where of course we all know they belong.

Personally, I need to *see and touch and taste* the thing that make us cringe and flinch, as well as the thing that lifts us up; I need to get intimate with both the shadowy forces that give the dark side dominion, and the forces that strengthen and ennoble us. We're all caught in a perpetual power game between our higher and lower selves. And I think the moment you give the dark side the power to make you look away, it wins.

And in pursuit of that, folks, all bets are off. As an artist I reserve the right at all times to play hard, soft or anything in between -- *pianissimo* or *fortissimo*. Whatever it takes, whenever it takes it. And if in doing so I move out of the neat boundaries of categorization -- hey, sorry. Time to remember who defines *who* around here.

And if you can connect with this, if it speaks to you, if I produce a single thing that touches you or makes a difference in your life, then I'm deeply and genuinely glad. Climb on board, and I hope you enjoy the ride. And if you can't... hey, that's okay, too. It's a big world.

But if you think you're gonna stop me, kindly get the fuck outta my way. 'Cause I don't brake for weenies.

INQ: *So what do you say to those people who attack your work? What kind of message are you trying to convey to your readers, even the ones that don't like you?*

SPECTOR: Get a life! (laughs) Actually, what I'd like to say to fan and foe alike is this: Splatterpunk as a codified marketing rubric is not important; the issues that *empower splatterpunk are*. The minute you forget that, you got a problem. The work comes first. Always, always. The work, I take seriously.

But the flash; hey, it's *flash*. Lighten up, already! Flash as a component of style is great, and I love it. But flash as a substitute for content is lame and boring, and ultimately pointless. You've got to keep your perspective clear on what really matters.

I don't know; we seem to create controversy just by existing, and that's okay. When you take confrontational stands, it tends to come with the territory. I love taking people by surprise, and subverting their base assumptions. John and Dave Schow and Richard Christian Matheson and I have been doing some college lectures lately, and we recently did the NACA conference to audition in front of buyers from about three hundred colleges. So we show up in leather and shades, looking the way we usually do at these things. And these students, who were very nice and clean-cut and collegiate, take

one look at us and go "Oh my god," and "Yeah, right, like *you* have something intelligent to say!"

Then we did our gig. We started to read from our stuff, and you could *hear* the saliva drying up in their throats, they were so shocked. We spoke for our allotted twenty minutes. And when our time was up, they didn't want to leave. After all the insular industry piss-pots trying to declare that *horror is dead. splatterpunk is dead. there's nothing new. blah blah blah blah*, it was refreshing to make contact with people whose ears weren't tainted and whose minds were still open. It was all very new to them, and they found it challenging. And there are a lot of them out there, in the real world.

It's very stimulating, thwarting provincial prejudice and playing against type. It's tons of fun. And I think it's good for us all; it keeps us on our toes.

INQ: *In the past, drug use has been connected with horror, Poe and King among others. Do you think that's true today, and do you use hallucinogens to derive some of what you write?*

SPECTOR: Alan Watts once said something to the effect of, "once you've gotten the message, hang up the phone." I spent most of my wayward youth in one form of altered states or another. (louder) Of course, *nowadays*, in strict compliance with all local, state, and federal laws, I Just Say No! (laughs) Uhhuh.

My real drug of choice is caffeine. I brew tea like coal tar, and then drink buckets of the stuff. I've been doing this since I was about eight years old, which probably helps explain why I'm *such a mellow guy*. I drink coffee *and* tea simultaneously for breakfast. I'm thinking of having my digestive tract made into a nice belt-&-wallet combo, from all the tannic acid.

As for most other drugs -- they're simply a distraction to me, these days. I like strange and exotic beer, but that's about it. But even so, I respect other people's right to use drugs responsibly. I think it's true that a certain percentage of the population has always used drugs, and they probably always will. Many of them use drugs excessively, and granted, some drugs are just bad news from the git-go.

But some drugs can be very useful. They underscore the fact that *reality itself* is little more than a default setting in the delicate chemical balance of the brain. And I think that's a good thing to remind yourself of from time to time. The hard-and-fast boundaries that we're led to believe are there are a lot like a photograph in a magazine: solid from a distance, but as you get closer you see it's just *a lot of little dots*, not so

much connected as *juxtaposed*. And if you get closer still it seems like you could go right on through, just slide between the dots and be... someplace else. There's a lot more to reality than we know, and drug use is one way to help illuminate that.

The key word is *moderation*. Unfortunately, in our knee-jerk, binge-tinge culture, people aren't raised to practice moderation, or even *discernment*. Relatively benign drugs are lumped under the same umbrella as truly awful ones, as if there were no fundamental difference between pot and smack and crack.

And newer drugs, like MDMA -- which has actual therapeutic value -- are miscast as 'designer highs', made to seem frivolous and placed in the same schedule as heroin, which greatly restricts their access to researchers. For example, before the Schedule 1 crackdown, "Ecstasy" was being researched as a possible tool to help the terminally ill and their families come to terms with their own deaths. Now, most of that research has been rendered almost impossible.

I think the whole *War On Drugs* is an exercise in monstrous simplemindedness. We're outgunned, we're outfunded, and we're not even aiming at the right target. Without understanding of why people *choose to use*, without making a clear distinction between casual use and chronic abuse, without simultaneously accepting that there really is such a thing as acceptable limits while addressing the *issues* that fuel wide-spread destructive consumption, all you can get from this little cultural firefight is escalating violence and social upheaval coupled with a completely unacceptable encroachment of civil liberties.

Look at how many neighborhoods have been turned into virtual war zones, without even putting a dent in the problem. Look at how many people have to piss into a cup in order to get -- or keep -- their jobs. *Never mind* that you're now answerable at work for what you did on your own time and in the *privacy of your own home* -- none of that matters, as long as we strike a blow against the enemy! Police kick down doors and rough people up as they conduct search-and-destroy missions; in some states they can seize your car for finding a roach in the ashtray or a joint in your purse. In Pennsylvania now they'll suspend your driver's license for *any* drug offense, *regardless of whether it involved a motor vehicle*.

INQ: *That's pretty bizarre.*

SPECTOR: I dunno, guys... If it boils down to a choice between being terrorized by well-armed gangs of thugs on the one side, and well-armed gangs of *political thugs* on the other, I think it's time to rethink the whole

equation.

INQ: *At this point in your career you've written short stories appearing in many magazines and anthologies, edited your own anthology, written best-selling novels and several scripts, all of which are doing extremely well. What other directions are you interested in going?*

SPECTOR: I like to keep trying new things. We're already expanding our work in film, developing scripts based off of our novels, plus some original scripts written expressly for the screen. Last year we formed a production company, Dark Dawn, to maintain a better percentage of creative control on our projects.

I'd love to do some theatre. And I'm still determined to make the music/fiction/film synthesis come together. The music we've been doing lately is very fresh, with a post-modern industrial edge, and a hell of a lot more fun than it's been in ages. We came *this close* to getting the soundtrack gig for the remake of *Night Of The Living Dead*. And we're looking into putting out an independent release CD of our stuff. Who knows? I'd like to do another band at some point, when I can afford the time. I miss playing out.

So, there's that, plus another couple of novels, a second *dead* anthology, a graphic novel, some audio story tapes, the Uncle Skipp & Spector's Splatterpunk Coloring Book, and... uh, did I mention we want to direct? (laughs) Anything else?

INQ: *Well, you've recently done cameo appearances in Nightbreed, and the remake of Night Of The Living Dead. Has that prompted any interest in acting?*

SPECTOR: Absolutely! I'm particularly interested in roles in which I'm not already *dead*. This is the third movie John and I have died in, and though I thoroughly enjoy being a "celebrity stiff", I'd like to stretch a little, before I'm typecast.

I love the whole movie-making process, and I've always felt comfortable in front of the camera as well as behind it. So if anyone out there is *looking*.... he said, ever-so -subtly.

INQ: *Is there any interest in working outside the horror genre?*

SPECTOR: (shrugs) Not per se. Even given the current weeding-out phase, horror has

been veddy, veddy good to me. Bust periods are the inevitable results of market saturation, which is what happens when publishers looking for something new and hot to exploit start to overpublish, and everybody and his/her grandma start cranking out possessed child or deal-with-the-devil novels by the board foot.

Inevitably the boom dies out, as one house after another realizes anew that there isn't an audience for their wheezing formulaic product. Then they go off in search of something else to strip-mine, and don't come back until someone heats it back up again.

INQ: *What's your attraction to horror?*

SPECTOR: Personally, I'm not writing horror because it's this year's favorite flavor. I



Beth Gwinn

feel like I'm tapping into something vital, both in myself and in the culture. Horror is a very fluid, open-ended form. We get to write whatever we want about whatever we want, and we sell a lot of copies, so I don't really feel very constricted by the tag. I prefer to define my own limits rather than let them define me, anyway. So why worry about what it's called? It is what it is. Horror suits me just fine.

Besides, fear is a renewable resource. Last time I checked, it was still pretty damned scary out there.

INQ: *If you were to separate your life from*

your work, what would you say are the most interesting aspects aside from your work? Intense hobbies or interests? Sexual fetishes? Things you do well, or don't do well? Social or community involvement such as Save the Ocelot? Bizarre cults, politics, home economics?

SPECTOR: Jesus, nosy little fucker, aren't you? (laughs)

INQ: *It's a dirty job...*

SPECTOR: The truth is, if you tried to surgically separate my work from my life, I don't think I'd survive the operation. My life is a "whole cloth" kind of affair: all the threads weave together to form one thing. The hopes and dreams and desires weave together with the dreads and nightmares and despairs. They all feed the dream. My work is a direct expression of all that.

When I'm not actively writing, I like to be an animal, get as physical as possible. It's an antidote for all the hours of sitting on my butt staring at a screen and getting varicose veins in my brain. I run, ride mountain bikes, work out, go jet-skiing and slam around on waves until I can't walk straight.

INQ: *Sounds like you're a mobile kinda guy.*

SPECTOR: I have a need for speed. I like to drive -- head out on the highway or down some twisty back roads, crank up the music, open up the sunroof, and fly. It's a very visceral metaphor, controlling something that goes very fast and can kill you if you fuck up. It clears my head; some of the coolest ideas come when the needle pushes the redline.

Other than that, I read. Go to the movies. Make music. Work on my space. Add to my skull collection. Torture the cats. Rewrite the future. The usual stuff.

INQ: *What's it like at home with you? Are you a family man in the classic sense, or are things a bit more unconventional?*

SPECTOR: I'm sort of a Domestic Psycho, a very private extrovert: I have a public persona that's very open and very accessible, and a private side that's none of your fucking business. (laughs)

My life is deceptively abnormal... by normal people's standards, anyway. I've got a real strong home sense. It's that Cancer coding, coming through. I like to have cool space to live and work in. But I keep very odd hours when I'm working, and I get very

Spector Speaks

strange. I'm at the eye of the storm, so crazy feels *normal* to me. But periodically I get signals from the world around me; that *y'ain't from 'round here. 'r ya'. boy?* kinda thing.

INQ: *You and John have a persona, an attitude you seem to exhibit at conventions, signing and social gatherings. Most people look at it as cockiness or intimidation. Kind of like a rock star. Is this persona intended for media purposes or is it just you? Do you feel like you should be treated like a rock star and do you enjoy the treatment?*

SPECTOR: Well, it's very genuinely who I am under those circumstances. Put me in front of strangers and under a spotlight and that's who I become. I love performing and working crowds, and I've got a natural arrogant streak. I don't really try to intimidate people; but I don't go out of my way to *not* intimidate them, either. (laughs)

There are always the weasels and the toadies, and the people who want to manipulate you into underwriting their insecurities. I have about zero tolerance for them. There's a perverse side of my character that likes watching 'em squirm.

But, on the other hand, I love really genuine human contact. I've met some of the greatest people doing this, some of whom will be my friends for life. So ultimately you get out of me what you come in with. I'm pretty approachable, if you're reasonably polite. If you're an asshole... *Later!* (laughs, waves) How's that for diplomacy?

As for being treated like a rock star... No, please, ignore me! Make me go to the back of the line! (laughs) What, are you *kidding?* People sucking up to you all the time, gorgeous women catering to your every twisted whim, yacht races with Robin Leech... I mean, *yeesh!* What would you do? I usually feel like Tom Hanks in *Big*; when I ride in a limo, I like to play with all the buttons and stick my head out the sunroof.

The first time John and I came to Hollywood the studio had a limo pick us up; there was a TV and a stereo and a fully-stocked bar in the back, *but no beer*. We made the driver stop at a 7-Eleven and pick some up.

INQ: *If at the beginning of your career you had a portrait of yourself and it served the Dorian Grey purpose, what would it look like now?*

SPECTOR: (groans) God, more trick questions. I dunno... a charred pile of gristle with a light bulb burning over it.

INQ: *What's the saddest thing that has happened to you, that you fell may have left a few emotional scars?*

SPECTOR: (laughs) Uh, remember what I said about my private side? *Well...*

INQ: *I know, but... indulge me?*

SPECTOR: I think the saddest thing would be my relationship with my father. There's a sense of powerlessness in the face of someone else's fatal choices. He ultimately chose the instruments of his own undoing. I had to distance myself in the last years, simply because it was too excruciating; I had to get out of shrapnel range of his self-destruction. I just hope he knows: I always loved you, Dad. I always will.

I don't know; I've been going through a lot of serious life-changes these last few years. Some of it I never would have expected, a lot of it is incredibly painful, but all of it feels necessary, like it's teaching me something. One thing that it's hammered home is that nothing -- *absolutely nothing* -- is more important or essential than finding your own life on your own terms, *and then living by those terms*. That's the ground zero of destiny. It's an ongoing, lifelong process, and the sooner you embark on that mission, the sooner you'll have something of genuine worth to offer the world. And the sooner you'll have a chance in hell of real happiness.

INQ: *Okay. What's the happiest thing?*

SPECTOR: The people that I love. I'm really lucky to have found people that I care about fiercely. They're what keep me sane. Basically, to me it's like the beating of your heart is a spark in the darkness. And it burns your whole life long, trying to find enough other sparks to make a flame. That flame is love. I've found some people that I love so much that the flame is a fire now. It's that tribal thing that John mentioned.

It's something that I believe in, and I'll fight for it; I'll take on anyone who tries to put it out. 'Cause it's a cold, fucking world out there, and the only thing that can keep you from freezing is the fire in your heart and the people you love. And if you

want to go back to *why* we do what we do, we just want to show how cold the world is. And how hot the flame can burn.

INQ: *What would you say is your deepest phobia?*

SPECTOR: That somehow, against my best efforts, that the fire will go out anyway. I know I can be really cold sometimes; cruel, even. It's my dark side, and it's pretty scary. The fear of my own innate capacity for lovelessness, bitterness and anger is always at my back, the thing that says *if you ever give up, this is what awaits*.

INQ: *If you could change into any monster or horror creature at will, which would you choose, and why?*

SPECTOR: (groans) Monster?! Who the hell needs to be a monster? I'm a goddamned *human being!* You don't get any scarier than that. If you want sheer godawfulness and planet-ripping, soul--sucking abominations, the human race is the place to be! If I were gonna be a monster, I'd do it just to take a break. A vampire or a werewolf would be a walk in the park by comparison. (laughs) God, these questions are really going downhill fast...

INQ: *With no brakes! How about this one: Between you and John, which of you has the longest flesh popsicle/ trouser snake/ white worm/ groin appendage/ smeg peg/ baloney pony...?*

SPECTOR: Well, *John*, of course. I think it goes without saying that... Oh, wait, you mean which of us *has* the biggest dick? I thought you meant which one of us *is* the biggest dick! (laughs) No comment.

INQ: *Okay, one more and I'm out of your face. Give me two words that best describe you.*

SPECTOR: Oh, I don't know. I'm intense. (laughs) That's two words. In. Tense.



Beth Gwi.11



The Slimelight, and How To Step Into It

by Robert Hood

Illustration by
Craig Spector

When Harry Freemaker came across a monstrosity in the lane off Queens Park Road, he knew that at last his luck had changed for the better.

He didn't realize his good fortune straight away, of course. At first he was dead scared, fainting rather theatrically into the refuse from an overturned bin. He'd been picking a tentative course along Raleigh Lane after a night of boozing in the Queen's Bar, his belly and head shifting lazily under the liquid weight of a dozen or so beers. The laneway was dark, but Harry had never been scared of ghosts and murderers, except maybe when he was eight or so and the shadows behind garbage bins and posts had been bigger than he was. Now in his prime there were few murderers who were bigger than Harry's twenty-five stone, and the insubstantiality of ghosts held few terrors for someone as fleshy as Harry. But if thoughts of spectres and killers didn't make him nervous, the idea of amorphous creatures from Outer Space did. Once, when Harry was younger, a school-buddy had dropped a container full of custard over his head right smack in the middle of the movie *The Blob*. Ever since then Harry had nurtured an aversion for living heaps of slime somewhere in the broom cupboard of his psyche, though he considered there wasn't much need to worry about the problem--amorphous creatures from Outer Space being largely confined to 1950s Sci-Fi films. So when Harry saw a movement under the smeared glimmer thrown behind an overturned bin by distant streetlights, and went and looked, the sight of the massive greenish Slimeball froze his heart and made his sinuses pop. Blood rushed in his ears. A single eye at least as big as Harry's hand appeared out of the ooze and blinked at him. A mouth dripping with muck opened beneath it and made a few sounds that would have revealed themselves as the initial syllables of ordinary English words if Harry had managed to stay conscious long enough to hear them.

What the creature said was: "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks!" --and it said it with feeling; unfortunately the creature's only available audience was catatonic before the third syllable was uttered.

When Harry awoke, the nightmare hadn't gone away. Somewhere deep in his delirium he'd been hoping the greenish lump of living slime was an alcoholic will-'o-the-wisp. No such luck. The thing was grinning at him as he opened his eyes; when his mouth contorted into a scream, it said; "You're not gonna faint again, are you?" The voice sounded so normal, so familiar, that it arrested Harry's terror on the spot and filled him with something resembling indigestion. The Slime-heap's words were formed immaculately, the inhuman lips moving like huge slabs of greasy bacon, but releasing the sound as smoothly as cream from a jug. Another eye, a smaller one, had decided to join the first through the surrounding tide of ooze, wobbling uncertainly like a piece of fruit in a custard jelly, and though neither looked very stable, both seemed benign enough.

"Who are you?" said Harry, still lying flat on his back.

"I don't have a name." The creature burped and a fetid tang wisped toward Harry's nostrils.

"Where are you from then?"

Slime!ight

"Somewhere dark. A place that doesn't have a name."

Harry tried not to notice the dripping and quivering of the creature's jellied flesh-- if it was flesh. "Well, what do you want?"

The Slime-thing sidled closer, the squirming globules that were its features rising and sinking through the ooze with no apparent rhythm. "I want to be a famous Shakespearean actor," it said, "And I need your help to do it."

Harry was not easily sold on the idea. Sure, it was clear enough the Slimeball wasn't going to make it as an actor on its own-- Harry tried to imagine it playing Romeo or Hamlet ... or even Richard the First ... but his imagination didn't extend that far. Even ignoring this problem, how on earth could Harry help it achieve its ambition? Despite the fact Harry was a member of the South Coora Coora Amateur Dramatic Society, he never got any roles, and was never given any responsibilities, because he was too fat and ugly and interested in eating--and was a lousy actor to boot. And if Harry couldn't make it because of his appearance, what chance did the Slime-thing have? Compared to the ugly creature, Harry looked like Robert Redford.

"Besides," explained Harry, sitting with his back wedged against a warehouse wall, "I only joined S.C.C.A.D.S. so I could perve on Wendy Smidmore in the change rooms."

"Oh, no you didn't." The thing extended a tentacle of translucent slime and tapped Harry on the nose. "You can't fool me, you know. You want to be an actor, you want fame, you want fortune. You hate being held in contempt by all the little people that surround you, though naturally you've given up admitting it to yourself long ago, because it's easier to give in to appetite and obesity than it is to struggle for acceptance knowing it might be turned against you at any time, knowing that perhaps in the long run the contempt is justified anyway. So you fulfil your own self-loathing, your self-contempt ... you wallow, and give yourself sordid excuses for pottering around the edges of a life you'd love to make your own."

Harry nodded. It was true, brilliantly true. And he didn't mind admitting to the truth when he was dealing with something that was probably a figment of his imagination anyway. He did want to be a famous actor, someone people not only respected, but who entertained them, uplifted them, changed their lives; someone who gave them meaning by expressing the true nobility of the human soul; someone who stood in immortality's limelight. But why in the ordinary course of events would you admit to feelings like those? It was too ridiculous to contemplate. People would laugh.

"So?" he said. "What if I do?"

"So," said the creature, "You help me, and I'll help you. I'm a great actor--the best. A genius to rank with Lawrence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Richard Burton..."

"But you're a bloody slimeball, if you'll pardon me for saying so. How can you play Hamlet?"

"That's exactly the point. I can ... with your help."

Harry knocked aside the Slimeball's jellyish tentacle, was repulsed by the slimy feel of it, and drew himself back against the wall. "How the hell can I help? I'm not a theatrical agent."

"No, but you've got a body, and I need one." It globbed into motion, squishing backwards and forwards in front of Harry. "For god's sake, use your imagination, Harry! You've seen all those B-grade monster pictures. What does the invader from Outer Space do? It possesses a human being, of course. What else?"

"You're going to possess me!"

It pushed Harry's chest, forcing him back into a sitting position. "Relax! I can only take over your body if you let me. And you'll still own it anyway. We'll just be sharing it."

"And how does all this help me?"

"Ah! Therein lies the rub! Once I'm in you you'll have my acting ability. I'll make you into a star before the year's out. You'll rocket to the top! Everyone will love you. You'll be adored!"

"Adored?" Harry considered the possibility. He'd never been adored, not that he was aware of anyway. His mother had tolerated him, even hugged him occasionally, but such spontaneous acts of affection had usually come only after the gin bottle had been emptied and the soapies were over. She'd never been particularly willing to touch him when he was a kid; then his father had left home to live with a girl he'd met in the launderette and for a while Harry had been a poor substitute. But once Harry developed pimples she started locking herself in her bedroom with the TV on whenever he came home.

"How do you take me over then?" Harry said.

The Slime-thing smiled--at least it looked like a smile, a wet, viscous slash in its heaving bulk. "That's the easy part, Harry my dear. You just eat me."

"Eat you?"

"Sure. I taste a bit raspberryish, I'm told."

How he managed the task, Harry couldn't say. Yet, oddly enough, once he got started it was quite easy. The first few bites were the worst: the exquisite anticipation, revulsion lurking in each swallow, his awareness of the creature's eyes watching him as he lifted the mound of scooped up muck to his mouth, then the texture of slime on his tongue. But as the living muck squished between his teeth he discovered the taste was quite pleasant, very pleasant in fact; and if he asked the creature to sink its eyes out of sight he forgot he was eating something sentient, and could pretend he was pigging out on a huge serving of raspberry jelly. Toward the end he drifted into a Dionysian stupor and must have fallen asleep as the last morsel slid down his gullet. He remembered thinking that the creature was quite uniform in taste and consistency; he found no sign of eyes, nor mouth, nor bones, nor nasty gristly bits. Only jelly. Lots of jelly. And that was just as well, he reckoned, because otherwise he might have involuntarily sicked up the masticated creature all over the alleyway.

Harry woke as the light of dawn granulated the air, pushing shadows into dim corners and turning the smog yellow. As his eyes opened he remembered everything, and looked around for evidence of the feast. There was nothing. He felt slightly bloated, that was all--probably the result of too much beer. "Struth," he muttered, pushing his bulk into a

sitting position, "What a revolting nightmare!" He swayed onto his feet, brushing garbage from his clothes. I must have tripped on this stuff, he thought, tripped and then fallen asleep. What a nightmare!

He considered the adoration the dream-blob had offered him, and drew himself up as though to deliver a speech. Instead of dramatic epigrams, a cough hacked from his lungs, setting his belly wobbling. It nearly knocked him down. "Ridiculous!" he groaned, and heaved himself into motion. When he got to his flat he went straight to bed; he felt too wretched to eat and the thought of doing anything physical drained the remaining strength from him instantly and completely. His sleep was dreamless.

When next he opened his eyes he felt a lot better. The extra weight had gone from his belly, his head was clear, depression had withdrawn like a retreating tide, leaving only

Harry looked up,
startled. The voice
had come from ...
well, he couldn't
tell for sure.

a few minor stains in the sand to mark its passing. He had a shower, got dressed and decided in favor of breakfast--but there was nothing he wanted to eat in the fridge. The bacon looked disgustingly fatty, the piece of leftover pavlova reminded him of something he'd seen in the rubbish he'd slept on top of yesterday, and the eggs were off. He slammed the fridge door. That was when he caught sight of the notice pinned there by a magnet shaped like a hamburger:

SOUTH COORA COORA AMATEUR
DRAMATIC SOCIETY

AUDITIONS
MARCH 14 and 15 at 7:30 pm

S.C.C.A.D.S. announces auditions for actors and actresses to take part in a production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (scheduled for June and July). All parts open. Ring Barbara on 254-6970 for details of audition pieces, or come to the Town Hall Theatre on either day and you might end up a star!

GIVE YOURSELF A GO!

Give yourself a go, Harry thought. Today was March 15. He pondered the coincidence of his having had that particular nightmare last night, and wondered whether it was

an omen. Should he try out for this production? It'd be the first time he'd ever auditioned. Naturally he wouldn't get Macbeth or what's-'is-name, Macbeth's nemesis, but maybe the other one ... the one who ends up a ghost. Or one of the bit parts ... something fairly minor. He might have a chance.

"Go for the lead!"

Harry looked up, startled. The voice had come from ... well, he couldn't tell for sure. The kitchen tidy maybe.

"It's me, Harry. The Slimeball. I'm inside you."

Harry looked askance at his stomach. "Oh, no. I'd just convinced myself it was all a nightmare and I wasn't going mad after all."

"Nevertheless, it's me. And we're going for the lead--Macbeth, the murderer king. It's a great part."

"I couldn't do it."

"You won't have to--I'll be doing all the work. There'll be no problem. You know Macbeth off backwards."

"I do not. I've never even read it."

"You know it backwards! Believe me!"

"I do not. And I don't intend to audition at all. I wouldn't have a chance. You might--or might not--be inside me, but either way I'm still fat, awkward Harry, and no one in their right mind's gonna give me a part like that, or any other part either."

"I make more of a difference than you think, Harry. Try it now. Do the 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' speech."

"I don't know it."

"You do."

"I don't, for god's sake."

"Try it, Harry. If you can't do it, I'll stop bugging you. If you can do it, you audition. What do you say?"

Harry, his blood boiling at the sheer nerve of this incorporeal voice, nodded, adopted a mock stance and made gulping noises. "See? Nothing!"

"Just start, Harry. It goes 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps...'"

Harry felt an instantaneous rush of verbiage leap up his throat, as though propelled from somewhere deep in his gut. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death." The words flowed easily, not simply remembered, but uttered with passion and despair--Macbeth's despair. "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Harry was non-plussed. "I do know it!"

"You know the whole play," said the voice, and chuckled.

Somebody snickered when Harry came up to the table where Barbara Sharkey was taking down the names of those wishing to audition. "You want to audition?" she said, "What for?"

"For a part in *Macbeth*, what else?" replied Harry, glancing nervously around the foyer. Steve Rackmeyer was there, lounging against the tea-serving bar: handsome, slim

Slimelight

and cool--a certainty for the lead role if ever there was one. He always got the male lead in S.C.C.A.D.S. productions. People liked him. Wendy Smidmore was there too, hovering around Steve. She would be Lady Macbeth no doubt, although Barbara herself would possibly want that role. Barbs was larger than Wendy, who was shapely and youthful; Barbs wasn't a very good actress, but she held the reins of political power within the theater group, and generally got what she wanted. "They're open auditions, aren't they?" Harry whispered.

"Sure, Harry, sure. But what role were you thinking of auditioning for?" Barbara looked at him from under her thick eyebrows, disapprovingly, as though she thought this inclination to challenge his part in the status quo quite vandalistic. "One of the soldiers?"

"Um, I was thinking of Macbeth himself."

"Macbeth?"

"I can try for it, can't I?" he said.

She looked at him, as if deciding whether or not he were joking. In fact, everyone within earshot was looking at him. He felt a suffocating urge to run away. "Stick with it," said the Slime-thing's voice, "Don't be put off by these jerks."

"Okay, okay!"

"Pardon?" said Barbara.

"What do you want me to do?"

Barbara gestured uncertainly toward a table covered in photocopied extracts. "We're using audition pieces. You can just read them."

"No need for that," he muttered, and stalked through the door into the theater.

They sent Harry up onto the stage third, which was last. Only three people were trying out for Macbeth. Steve Rackmeyer was first; watching him Harry felt the irresistible futility of his Slime-appointed task. Rackmeyer wasn't brilliant or anything, he wasn't even particularly good, but he had style and grace and a track record that went back through successful productions for several years. Barbara rather fancied him. All during his performance she watched him with a slackness at the edge of her mouth that made her seem to be dribbling. "He'll get her vote for sure," Harry said--as it turned out, Barbs was going to direct the show, so her vote meant a lot.

"She's not the only one on the selection panel," commented the Slime-voice, "And besides, she hasn't seen you yet. She might want to get into Rackmeyer's pants, but she'll want you as Macbeth even more."

Colin Petrie, the local poultry supplier, went next; he was quite good, but reminded everyone of a chook worrying about the sky falling on its head. Then suddenly it was Harry's tum. "You're on, Freemaker," Barbs growled at him, "If you still want to go through with this."

"Go for it, Harry!" said the voice inside him, "I'll be with you all the way, old man. All the way."

Harry closed his eyes and stood. He swallowed. Someone snickered, a few people choked back their comments; Harry involuntarily glanced up at Wendy Smidmore on the stage--she was reading in the Lady Macbeth parts--and noticed a look of sheer disgust on her face. Then he'd made it

up the narrow stairs at the side and was standing gazing down at the dimmed auditorium, trying to give features to the dark blotches that were the selection panel and the other auditionees. The space was vast and fearsome. "What bit do you want?" he managed to say, though his throat was dry and constricted.

"Have you got the audition sheet up there, Harry?"

"No, I won't need it. Just tell me which scene you want."

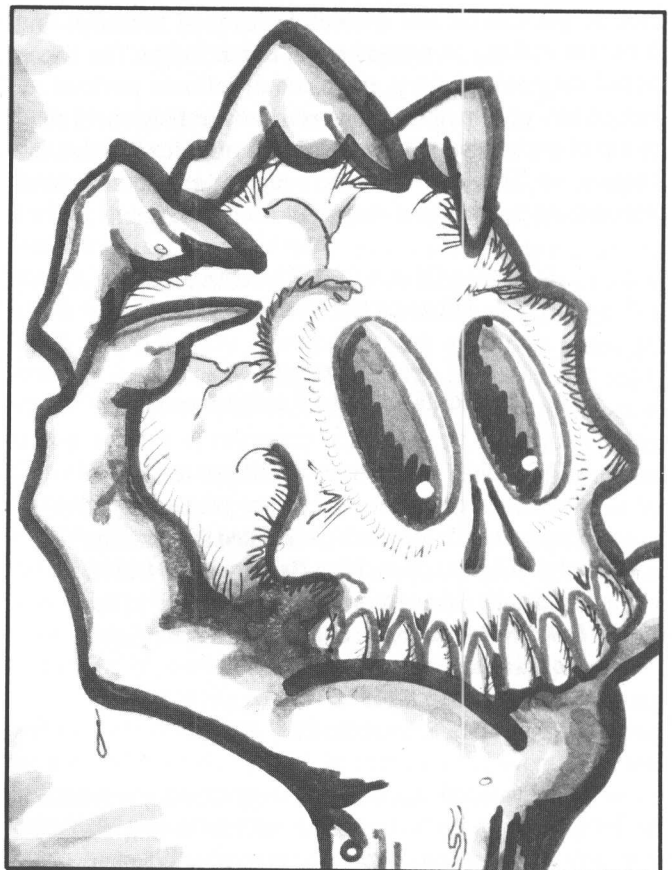
The whole theater had gone quiet, waiting for him to entertain them, not in the way he would have liked, but unintentionally, by making a fool of himself. "Right then. The scene where Macbeth's come from murdering the King. Start from where you speak, Wendy."

"Do your best, fatboy," a cry came from the darkened auditorium, "And we'll try not to laugh."

Harry was about to run off-stage when the sound of Wendy's voice saying, "I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry. Did not you speak?", grabbed his thoughts in a fist of steel, pushing emotion into his heart, his eyes, his voice. He spun toward Wendy, and suddenly he was a Scottish warrior...

"You were absolutely amazing, Harry. I've never seen you like that before. I forgot who I was while you were speaking, forgot who you were. It was fantastic!"

Wendy Smidmore's enthusiasm stayed with him all week. He hugged it to his heart like a love letter and re-lived it continually. He remembered her face, alight with some emotion he couldn't put a name to ... perhaps it was adoration; he



wasn't in a position to tell. But the light in her eyes made him hot. For the first time in his life he felt he could proposition her and not be mocked. He would have done so on the spot, but it was too soon. He needed to get used to the idea first.

He was offered the part of Macbeth, of course; they almost begged him to take it. Everyone was extremely enthusiastic. Even Steve Rackmeyer came up to him afterwards and shook his hand. "Congratulations, Harry," he said. "You're a rotten bastard; if I'd known what sort of a show you were gonna put on I would've tried harder."

It was the beginning of a new life for Harry. Rehearsals started the next week, and it quickly became apparent that Harry needed little direction; in fact, his interpretation of the character molded the style of the whole production. Eventually, despite her essential arrogance, Barbara Sharkey was seeking Harry's advice; and Harry gave it freely, even humbly, the Slimeball whispering its instructions in his ear. Every rehearsal night was a gratifying exercise in being adored; the

It was the beginning of a new life for Harry.

other actors watched him carefully, stunned by his power even during single line deliveries. When they interacted with him on stage they showed diffidence and respect. They sought his opinion--and afterwards asked him around to their houses, or to the hotel, or to the late night pizza joint, so they could talk to him, get enthusiastic with him, simply be with him. He was invited to S.C.C.A.D.S. parties, asked to come to private dinners, made the center of the in-crowd. Harry stopped eating and drinking so much (though he didn't lose any weight), went out in the sunlight more often, and was introduced to several prominent politicians. He was recognized.

The usual rehearsal schedule of three months proved to be far too long. "The Scottish tragedy" was ready to go public in a month; in fact cast and crew were itching to start. Under strong pressure from everyone, including Barbara Sharkey, S.C.C.A.D.S. management committee pushed publicity coverage forward and announced a May 1st opening night. The group was restless with suppressed excitement. Dress rehearsals ran smoothly.

At their first public performance Harry was even better than usual. No one had thought it possible. His thespian skills extracted good performances even from those members of the cast who couldn't perform to save their lives. To Harry Wendy Smidmore was dazzling, her prettiness and innocence acting in delicious counterpoint to the ruthless pragmatism of her character's ambition. During the murder scene Harry nearly lost his composure, getting distracted by a smile Wendy threw his way. "Cut it out, Harry!" the jelly-voice shrieked. Once Wendy pressed up against him, speaking her lines in a husky whisper. His hand moved down the contours of her body, and for a moment she wasn't Lady Macbeth and he wasn't the usurping warrior; an electric current shot across the

minimal distance between them. "After the show, Harry," she hissed in his ear. Then they raged back into their Elizabethan personae.

The large crowd gave Harry a standing ovation. He stood before them with tears in his eyes. "We did it, Slime," he choked, leaving those nearest him to puzzle at his emotion. But the Slime-voice was silent.

At the opening night party Harry was idolized, his entrance generating spontaneous applause. Everyone wanted to be recognized by him, spoken to, and he spent an hour just reliving the magnificence of his performance. Wendy came in wearing a slinky green dress, off-the-shoulder and open most of the way down her back. Her auburn hair was frizzed out and her eyes caught at every spark of light in the room, capturing it and throwing it out again enhanced. Harry fell in love with her instantly. He wanted to go to her, but the crowd held him back.

Barbara Sharkey came up to him and kissed him demonstratively on the cheek. "Congratulations, Harry!" she said, "I've got some good news for you--bad news for us, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"Quentin Phipps was in the audience tonight. Theater critic for the Coora Coora Globe. He loved your performance, Harry, wanted me to tell you that. He had to get back to the office so his review would be in tomorrow's issue. But he knows a lot of prominent people in the theater world, Harry. Reckons he could get you an interview with one of the professional companies, if that's what you want. How's that grab you? Instant fame, eh?"

The news brought on another round of adulation from the crowd.

Later in the evening, his fans momentarily satisfied and drifting now into a late night alcoholic stupor, Harry found Wendy sitting alone on a garden chair in the backyard, the breeze shifting her hair like reddish mist around her shoulders. Music pounded dully behind him. He watched her for a while without speaking, entranced by her melancholy and the sensuous curve of her neck; then he moved toward her, reaching out to touch her gently.

"I'm sick of this, Harry!" said the Slime suddenly, smashing Harry's silence, though not the girl's. "Sick of the bloody fawning, the sycophancy, all the boring, contemptible mooning for that bloody tart you insist on indulging in. I wanna go home."

"Shut up, will you!" yelled Harry, before he could stop himself. Wendy glanced around, startled.

"Harry!"

Harry flushed. "I didn't mean you, Wendy, honest. It was ... someone else." She nodded doubtfully.

"She's stupid, Harry, and a crummy actress. Forget her. Let's go home!"

"No!"

"Pardon?" said Wendy, slightly alarmed now.

"Nothing," replied Harry. "Wendy, I wanted to talk to you, to thank you for your efforts. I couldn't have done it without you."

"What? You must be joking! You could've done it

Slimelight

better without her. It's me you should thank!"

She grinned wistfully. "That's nice, Harry. But it's not true. We're provincial, and limited. You made it the great show it was." She reached out and touched him. Even through his sweater sleeve Harry could feel the flow of excitement rushing from her fingers.

"Give me a break, Harry! Look at her! She's ugly, she's clumsy. There's not an ounce of fat on her, and what's life without a bit of blubber?"

"She's wonderful!"

Wendy drew back her hand. "Who is, Harry?"

"You are." Harry had broken into a sweat; he could feel a runnel of moisture trickling down the sensitive flesh on his side. His stomach quivered. "I've grown very close to you, Wendy. Very close. I care for you very much."

"Oh, puke! I can't stand this. What's the matter with you, Harry? I offer you theatrical greatness and you fart around seducing this nobody, this small-town slut!"

"I warn you!"

"Warn me?" said Wendy.

"Warn you... um... I'm out to get you, Wendy. I love you." The words came quickly, given audacity by Harry's sense that it could all go wrong any minute. The bloody Slime-thing was confusing him.

"Oh, Harry. I thought you'd never notice me." Wendy pressed herself against him; he felt her breasts against his chest, her thighs drawing him in.

"Now I warn you, Harry," the Slime-voice said, cold and menacing. *"I haven't enjoyed any of this. I want to be a great actor, and I thought you could empathize with me enough to overcome the seductions of this backwater sewer-tank. I thought you wanted to be a great actor more than anything else. I thought the desire for it burnt in your soul."*

Harry's mouth trembled over Wendy's; his tongue searched for hers.

"Bloody S.C.C.A.D.S! What philistines! That production has got to be the greatest travesty I've ever seen. Awful! I hated every minute of it. And you, you're holding me back, Harry! All you want is to fornicate with this thing that couldn't even play Lady Macbeth if her life depended on it! I thought you had vision. Well, I was obviously wrong."

Harry was lost in the warmth of Wendy's closeness; he barely heard the bleatings of his suddenly-unwilling lodger.

"Okay, then, that's it, Harry! It'll take me forever to get you out of this place--and there's no fame to be had in bloody South Coora Coora. I'm off!"

Harry suddenly felt sick. A heaving groan rose from the depths of his stomach, churning his innards like a bad case of colic, muttering in his guts, making his intestines whimper. Pain jerked him away from Wendy.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

He'd gone white, as though someone had doused him in baker's dough; his belly bloated like a huge roasting bread loaf. The Slime-thing, he thought desperately, what did it say just then?

"Sit down, Harry, you look awful. Probably the excitement."

I'm off! I'm off! That's what the voice had said. *I'm*

off! "Oh, my god!" Harry muttered, feeling sudden panic bloat him further. It wasn't so much the Slimeball's departure that worried him, but how it might do it. Harry had seen *Alien*, had been nauseated along with everyone else as the foetal creature burst from the unfortunate spaceman's abdomen. He recalled the blood, the thrashing about, the agony. "Not that!" he yelled, "Oh, please, not that!"

"Sorry, Harry," the Slime-voice said, "But when you've gotta go, you've gotta go."

"I might've known amorphous slime-creatures from Outer Space couldn't be trusted!" Harry shrieked; and threw up all over the back lawn.

Next morning it was raining. Harry woke hearing the sound of water cascading down his bedroom window; the thud of it made his head ache. All that had happened last night flooded back--Wendy's friendliness, the Slime-creature's sudden temper tantrum, its decision to leave him, the awful heaving sickness in his gut, the first glob of green muck that spewed from his mouth. Harry remembered seeing it strike the ground; it quivered as though adjusting to its renewed freedom. He remembered the tiny eye that surfaced from the muck to wink at him. He remembered Wendy screaming something. Then Harry had run. He'd run as more Slimejelly was ejected from his throat; the miniature creatures had oozed along after him, joining up, getting bigger. He'd finally taken shelter in a reserve that backed onto the house where the S.C.C.A.D.S. celebration party was still in progress. In the distance Wendy was yelling; Harry, wrenched by involuntary convulsions, sicked up a huge mass of green goo, so much that the twitching



seemed to go on forever. The contortions were making his whole body ache.

Then it was over. The Slime-thing, whole again, loomed over the wasted Harry, who was weeping and drawn in upon himself on the ground, like a child who'd been punched repeatedly in the stomach by a school bully. "Sorry, Harry, but you were a bit of a disappointment to me, you know," the Slime said. Harry just nodded. "Actually the whole business of acting was a bit of a disappointment. I'm beginning to wonder if it's worthwhile. Not much fun being stuck in someone's innards during a long rehearsal period, not to mention the inevitable extended run."

"What'll I do about the remaining performances of *Macbeth*?" Harry gasped out, the difficulties he must now face clarifying out of the misty frenzy of his shock.

"You'll be okay," the Slime said, "Not brilliant, but okay."

With that it fell silent. Harry had been looking at the ground; he glanced up and the thing was gone.

"Harry, open the door!"

It was Wendy. Harry forced himself to his feet, feeling as though the weight of the entire house was resting on his shoulders. He had no idea how long he'd been slouched there; the stiffness in his joints suggested it had been quite some time.

"Come on, Harry! Are you all right?"

He slumped against the door, listening to himself breathing in the wood.

"I'm not going to go away, Harry. If you don't answer me, I'll get the landlord to open up. I'm worried about you."

Worried about you? Being worried about was another new sensation for Harry. He didn't quite know what to make of it. What he did know was that something disgusting had happened on the night of *Macbeth*'s opening, right in front of Wendy, and that as a result he no longer had the Slime-thing inside him. He was just Harry now--fat, ugly Harry.

"Go away, Wendy," he said, "I'm okay. I just want to be left alone."

"Open the door, Harry."

Her voice was so insistent, his desire to see her so intense, that he reached out before he could stop himself and released the catch. He stepped back as the door opened. Wendy peered in, frowning slightly. "Harry?" she said, "What's happened to you?"

For a moment he was afraid to look. Then he glanced down at himself. His belly was smaller.

"I... um... don't know. I seem to have lost weight."

"Yeah. I think you have." She gripped his arm. "Are you really okay? You looked awful when you ran off last night. Positively green."

"I... I... threw up."

"I know. Too much grog, eh? Still, you've had time to get over it. I just thought I'd call by to check on you. You want to come with me to the theater?"

Harry felt his heart thud hollowly, once, and deflate like a leaky balloon. "Theater?"

"Sure. We've got a performance in an hour. Have you forgotten?"

Ashamed, he turned away, moving for protection toward the kitchen. "I can't, Wendy. I can't get up on that stage again."

"What? Why not, Harry?"

What could he say? The heap of muck that was doing the acting has packed up its toys and gone home? No, she'd think him mad, as well as an idiot. "I'll make a fool of myself. I can't act that well ... ever again."

Wendy's hand rested on his shoulder. "I understand, Harry. But it'll be okay. You'll be terrific. No one expects you to get better each show."

"No, you don't understand." His head slumped. He wanted to explain, but the only words he had were someone else's. "Had I but died an hour before this chance I had lived a blessed time: for, from this instant, there's nothing serious in mortality, all is but toys; renown and grace is dead, the wine of life is drawn ..." He stopped, realizing what he was saying. "Good god," he muttered, "I still know it."

"Of course you do. Did you think getting pissed would blot it all out?"

"No ... but I never really knew it."

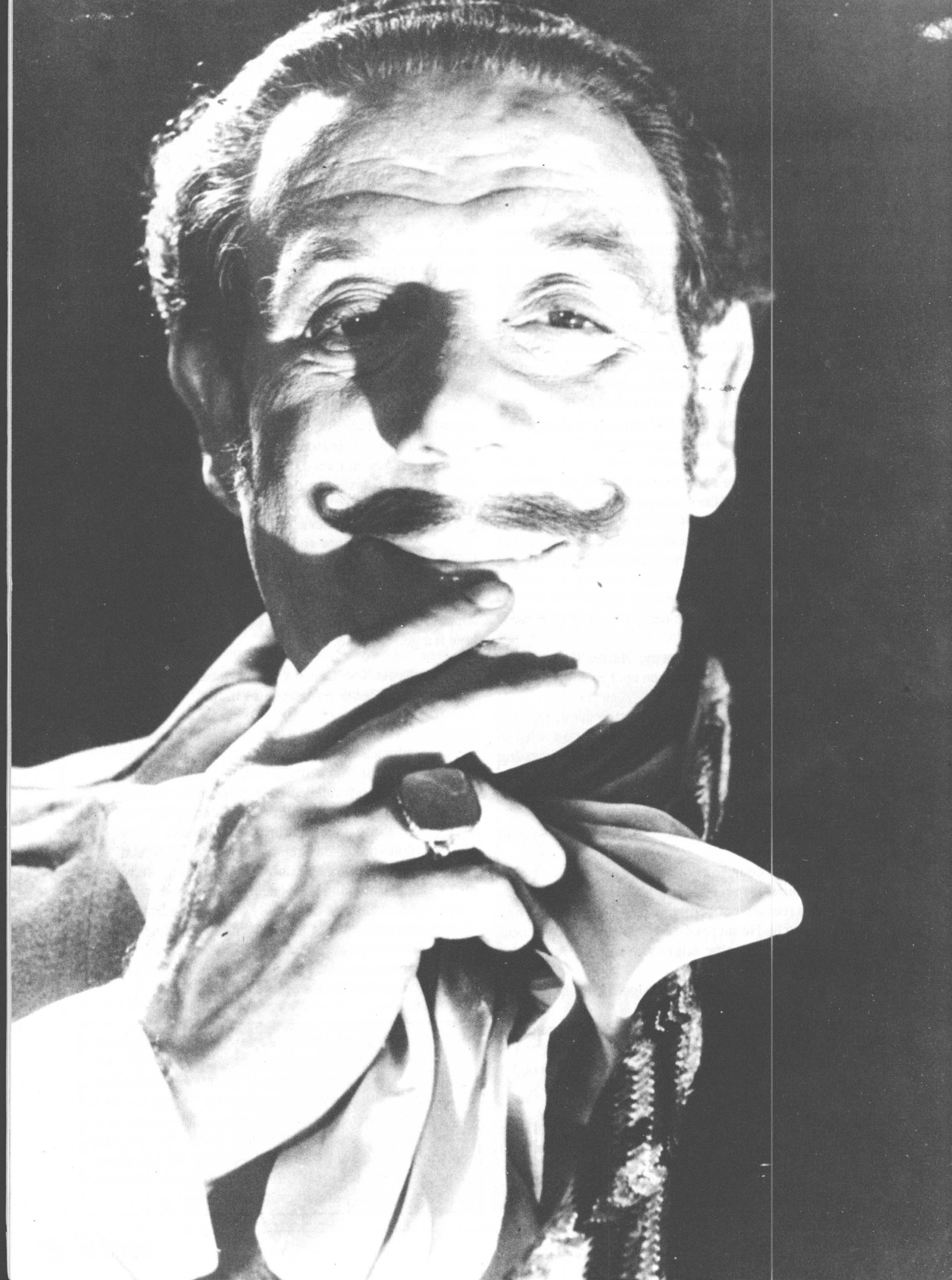
"Well, it sure sounded like you did to me." She hugged him. "Come on. We'll be late."

Maybe I can do it, he thought. Maybe it was me all along. He turned to Wendy, smiling wanly. What could happen? At most, he could fail. It didn't matter any more. "I'll give it a go," he said.

From The Coora Coora Globe: *Theatrical Highlights* by Quentin Phipps

"The S.C.A.D.D.S. production of *Macbeth*, which is causing a sensation throughout town, has, for this critic at least, improved with every performance. Harry Freemaker's opening night portrayal of the murderer king was certainly a tour de force. But it seems to me that since then Freemaker has really settled into the role and is now bringing to it a mature and stunning elegance. His second-night *Macbeth* was not simply a villain caught on the cleft stick of his own ambition, but a man desperately struggling with the spectre of powerlessness. Freemaker's *Macbeth* has, for this critic, become more human..."

Robert Hood is the author of some 30 published short fiction pieces. He has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and his story "You're a Sick Man, Mr. Antwistle" will appear in Karl Edward Wagner's *Year's Best Horror* later this year. He also has fiction due out in *Dark Voices 3* (Pan) and *Eldritch Tales*. He has one collection of short fiction *Daydreaming On Company Time* (Five Islands Press, 1988). He works as a research assistant in history and lives in Australia.



Slaughter

by Bill Warren

"So you wanted to be a bride, did you? And so you shall be -- a bride of death!"
Tod Slaughter in *Crimes at the Dark House*.

I've been told that I can write about pretty much what I want to in this column. Last time, I talked about recent horror movies, but partly because 1990 has produced so far damned few horror movies *at all*, much less ones worth writing about, I'm taking a step backward. I'm writing about actor Tod Slaughter, whose best films were all made by 1940.

You haven't heard of him? Well, thank god for videotape. It has freed us at last from the shifting schedules of local TV stations and from our own arrogance. Each new generation looks with scorn -- for a while -- on the pulp fiction and equivalent movies of the previous, feeling snidely superior to that drivel.

But still almost entirely overlooked are the films of Tod Slaughter, the ripest villain in movie history and one of horror movie history's greats. All of his films are medium-to-low budget, all are from minor British studios, and all of them that are really worth seeking out were made in a five-year period, from 1935 to 1940. They are lurid, old-fashioned, "Strong Meat melodramas," as they were known at the time. Though they are not what we call "horror movies" today, they certainly were thought of as that at the time.

These films were shown on U.S. TV in the late 1960's, and then vanished, except in the memories of those who, with wide eyes and drooping jaws, had happened upon *The Face at the Window*, or perhaps *The Crimes of Stephen Hawke*. Only one of Slaughter's titles is at all

well-known today, but it's not for his movie version: *Sweeney Todd*, or the *Demon Barber of Fleet Street* was pumped up by Stephen Sondheim into an over-inflated musical lacking the purity and honesty of Slaughter's movie.

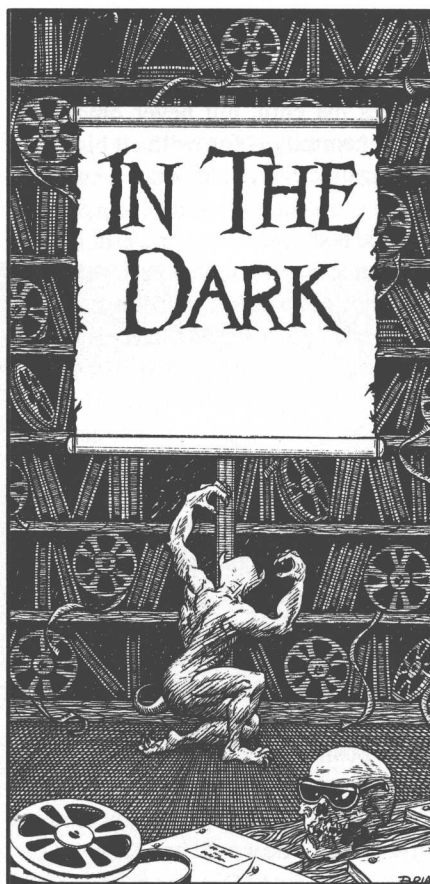
But thanks primarily to Greg Luce of the public-domain videotape company, Sinister Cinema (P.O. Box 4369, Medford, OR 97501-0168 -- write for a catalog, and say I sent you), the best of Tod Slaughter has been made avail-

able. I have heard that Luce has made a deal with Rhino Video to distribute his prints of the Slaughter *oeuvre*, and that's good -- it will make the films more widely available than Sinister Cinema could on its own. But it's also bad, as Rhino will no doubt market the films as high camp.

Now, it's true that in the classic definition of camp, some consider these old potboilers to be camp, made as they in an old-fashioned or otherwise outdated mode, hilarious for their innocent corniness. People usually point at Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930's as the greatest examples of camp, but of course, Berkeley was an enormously skilled choreographer and a very imaginative director of dance numbers; it's not his fault that fashions changed.

This is *not* true of Tod Slaughter, who was consciously archaic *then*, completely aware that his florid melodramas -- the kind in which he can actually say "Upon my word, you're a delightful little baggage" -- were ludicrous. At the beginning of one of his greatest movies, *The Face at the Window* (1939), a title tells us that it is a "melodrama of the old school -- dear to the hearts of all those who unashamedly enjoy either a shudder or a laugh at the heights of villainy."

At this delicate tightrope act, balancing between shudders and laughs, Slaughter not only has no superiors, there's no one else even in the race. When others perform these extravagant old pieces, they play them as straight actors sometimes do when called upon to play



Slaughter

a gay role: they wink at the audience, telling them that since *they* aren't taking the roles seriously, there's no reason for *us* to. Slaughter *always* played his villains straight -- but also in an accurate recreation of the style of acting of the 19th century. And so, to our later eyes, the result can be funny.

Slaughter was a terrific actor who could have stepped readily into more "significant" plays and movies, but he would have just been another of the legion of great British character actors, another Alan Mowbray, perhaps. Instead, he stuck resolutely to this otherwise outdated style, and so has endeared himself forever to those with enough imagination to get by the creaky trappings of the movies and embrace his brilliance.

Slaughter was born N. Carter Slaughter on March 19, 1885, in Newcastle-on-Tyne, and by 1905, was already an actor, appearing as Karnaphus in *A Wrecker of Men* at the Grand Theatre, West Hartlepool. Until World War I, he performed in the West End, taking over ownership of some theaters himself. After the War, in which he served in the Royal Flying Corps/The Royal Air Force, he returned to the stage.

In the mid-20's, he made a decision that changed his career forever. He began appearing in revivals of the barnstorming melodramas of the 19th century, the kind of play in which a lascivious aristocrat, often secretly a despicable criminal, covets a nubile young woman who herself is in love with a decent young man with a slightly spotty background. These old plays were hits for Slaughter; the working-class audiences responded to them as they always had, taking the exaggerated villainy of Slaughter absolutely straight, while those a bit more sophisticated appreciated the plays for their absurdities.

Those who come to love Slaughter usually get other people turned on to him by quoting the wonderful, over-the-top dialogue that turns up so often in his films. "Just step into the arbor," says Slaughter in *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, twirling a garrotte, "and we shall come to terms." In *The Face at the Window*, he warns a pair of slimy underlings, "Don't attempt to open this package, for if you do, your bodies will be found

floating in the Seine, *ripped from throat to belly!*"

In *Crimes at the Dark House*, the greatest trove of classic Slaughter lines can be found. "I've a mind to shake the breath out of your greasy little body!" "I'm not a man to betray a maiden under an idle promise of marriage, but..." "Curse your trousers! Curse you! Oh, curse everything!" He accuses the chambermaid he's made pregnant of "going about the house like a glass of sour milk!" And this fine speech, made to his confederate Dr. Fosco (he of the greasy little body): "Now just one final word to you, Dr. Isidor Fosco. Be loyal to your trust, and it will pay you handsomely. Betray it, and I'll feed your entrails to the pigs!" Then Slaughter chuckles -- he does that a lot -- and downs a glass of sherry.

Though these lines often do lure people into seeing a few of Slaughter's movies, they soon discover the real joy is Slaughter himself, not the dialogue. You can't take your eyes off him -- he's a true star. He is a master of the telling gesture; his hands are rarely entirely still, and he adopts new gestures for a new character. In *Ticket-of-Leave Man*, for instance, he drums his fingers on the cuff of the other arm. He points, he smooths his occasional mustache, he strokes his chin, but never obviously, never hammily -- for, with all his florid performing, Slaughter is not a ham.

His control of his large, barrel-chested body is deft and graceful and his movements are somewhere between vaudeville and ballet. He's tall, but often walks with legs bent and shoulders sloped, bringing him down to the level of others, only so he can deal with them. He often walks with a springy step, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Every movement is smooth.

His villains are always full of the joy of power, though they are never *driven* to these ends; the cads have *chosen* them. He's usually a figure of respect or authority -- a nobleman, a squire, a justice of the peace, a kindly moneylender -- but his power resides not only in his position, but in his energy and in his awareness of the hypocrisy of others.

Slaughter can be as unctuous as Uriah Heep -- he would have been splendidly cast in many Dickens roles -- when

he chooses to be, but his unctuousness is *always* a pose. Forever and always, he is a powerful man who loves his villainy. His characters are what we would call sociopaths today, those who not only do not know the difference between right and wrong, but don't think there is a difference. (Only in *The Crimes of Stephen Hawke*, where he truly loves his foster daughter, does his character have any redeemable traits at all. And even there, the first thing he does on screen is to kill a little boy.)

His vocal delivery is of the "declamatory" school, with each syllable perfectly pronounced, and his voice is rich and mellow. His style is as florid and archaic as the films themselves, and he's not only perfectly aware of this, it's the reason he did this stuff in the first place. Almost always, the juvenile leads are played in very straight, typical late-thirties fashion. Only Slaughter, and the "colorful" types, play the parts in the old style. And none play it better than the star, although as Dr. Fosco, Hay Petrie comes damned close to rivalling Slaughter.

His films are now available on tape from Sinister Cinema. Of the few that aren't, only *Darby and Joan* (1937) and *The Curse of the Wraydons* (1946, well after his great period) give any indication that they offer something for the Slaughter devotee. In 1952, he appeared in three films, but since two of the three consist of three stories each, and since the third is only half an hour long, I suspect they are actually episodes of a TV series, packaged for theatrical release, and are presumably of little interest.

His first movie was based on one of the great classic melodramas, which Slaughter frequently played on stage, and which had been filmed several times in the silent era (the author of the play is unknown). *Maria Marten, or The Murder in the Red Barn* (1935) was directed by Milton Rosmer and adapted for the screen by Randall Faye. Slaughter played Squire William Corder, who seduces poor Maria Marten (Sophie Stewart), then heads off for London to gamble himself heavily into debt. When he returns to the country, preparing to marry into a wealthy, pious family, Maria, turned out by her father, demands Squire

Corder marry her, but instead he murders her in the red barn, burying her body there. When the man who loves her, ambitious Gypsy farmer Carlos (Eric Portman), realizes what has happened but is suspected of the murder himself -- an idea pushed by Corder -- he leads them to the red barn. Corder brings suspicion on himself, and is forced to unearth Maria's body; he goes mad, and is led away by the police. He awaits hanging, calling out to taunting crowds, "Yelp, you curs, yelp! I'll beat you yet!" But he's hung by volunteer hangman Carlos.

The film established the formula for the best Slaughter films to follow, a formula that doesn't wear itself out, because of Slaughter's skill as an actor. In *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1936), *The Crimes of Stephen Hawke* (1937), *It's Never too Late to Mend* (1937), *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1938), *The Face at the Window* (1939) and *Crimes at the Dark House*, (1940) Slaughter goes mad at the climax, his plans shattered, his evil revealed. In all of these except *Sweeney Todd*, he holds a gun on those who have found him out before trying, futilely, to flee. Giggling and chuckling, he perishes in flames (*Sweeney Todd*, *Dark House*), dies in a fall (*Stephen Hawke*, *Ticket-of-Leave*) or drowns (*Face*). Only in *Never Too Late*, based on a novel considered to have brought about prison reform, does Slaughter survive the climax, ending up in prison himself, turning the crank on a grist mill, muttering the title. It's appropriate for the story, but ignominious for the magnificent Slaughter, who always should have been allowed the glorious dignity of a satisfactorily final -- and colorful -- death.

Sweeney Todd is Slaughter's best-known film, but it seems to have been when new, as he often played the role on stage, and later reprised Todd in a short on the history of shaving (!) called *Bothered By a Beard* (1946). It's not the best of Slaughter's films; for one thing, being a barber lowers him in the social order, and

he's required to be to servile everyone except Mrs. Lovatt (Sheila Rho, very good), his partner in murder who runs a pie shop next door. The film suggests that Todd never shaves anyone, but instead dumps every customer into the basement with his trick chair, rushing down to slit their throats and rob their purses. (He has also -- heh heh -- gone through seven boy orphan helpers in seven weeks, and the parish council that sends him the orphans is peeved.) There are some very good, and uncharacteristic, scenes between Todd and Mrs. Lovatt, who cooks the corpses into her meat pies (not explicitly stated, but clear); they were once lovers, and now hate each other, but neither sees a clear way out of their arrangement.

Slaughter has some wonderful lines, as when he regards a boatload of sailors (his shop is near the wharfs): "A lovely lot of throats... beautiful throats, rich and mellow, to a razor. I love my work!" Later, to a customer/victim: "When I'm finished with you, you won't know yourself" and "You have a beautiful throat for a razor, sir." As the Demon Barber, Slaughter is wonderful, oily and unctuous to those above him, arrogantly imperious to those below, and he does indeed love his work, but he's even better when he's a figure of authority.

And in *The Crimes of Stephen Hawke*, that's what he is, grandly. Slaughter appears as himself in an amusing

wrap-around segment set in a radio station, as he tells the story of his latest film which, of course, we then see. *Hawke* was not based on one of the old melodramas, but was rather a "new old melodrama," as Slaughter says, written directly for the screen, but you couldn't tell, as it has all the requisite elements. Here, Slaughter leads a double life, as kindly moneylender Stephen Hawke, and as the vicious jewel thief and murderer "The Spine-Breaker," who indeed breaks spines, with his bare hands. This "secret" is revealed in the first scene, allowing a lot of amusing double-entendre word play later. For example, Hawke suggests to a potential target that he come by some night, alone, so "we can get to grips with the matter."

Hawke is the most event-laden of Slaughter's films, with him being exposed as The Spine-Breaker halfway through, then fleeing London, pursued by the hero (who loves Hawke's daughter -- this is the only one of Slaughter's classics in which he isn't chasing the heroine), then taking refuge in jail, finally breaking out for a big confrontation scene on a rooftop, where he breaks off chunks of masonry with his hands and flings them at his pursuers, before falling to his death.

The movie provides Slaughter with some great scenes, but he's also required too much of the time to be a frightened fugitive, and at one point, when he thinks a victim is rising from



Tod Slaughter with Sylvia Marriott in *Crimes at the Dark House*, (1940)

Slaughter

the dead to accuse him, he grovels on the floor, whimpering "Mercy! Mercy!" This is fine for a Slaughter *climax*, but not for halfway through the film.

With the back-to-back pair of *The Face at the Window* (a genuine Old melodrama, already filmed several times) and *Crimes at the Dark House*, Slaughter reached his peak as a horrendous villain. Director George King did most of Slaughter's films, including these two, and by this point, had learned a great deal; the films are still only slightly better than routinely made, but they center entirely on Slaughter, with other elements related directly to his activities.

Face at the Window, the most horror-movie-like of all Slaughter's films, is set in France in 1880, and is the one that opens with the title suggesting that audiences are free to enjoy "either a shudder or a laugh" at Slaughter's rich antics. He is the Chevalier del Gardo, a respected nobleman who is actually the fiendish criminal "The Wolf," who leaves his victims with a dagger in the back and the words "the face at the window" on their dying lips. He has targeted Cecile (Marjorie Taylor), the daughter of a wealthy banker as his wife, or lover if necessary, frequently catching her in unexpected and passionate kisses. The bank is robbed, and del Gardo tries to pin the crime on Cecile's fiance, Lucien Cortier (John Warwick, who turns up in a couple of Slaughter films).

When the banker accidentally learns that del Gardo is The Wolf, The Face (Harry Terry) appears at his window. While the banker is transfixed by horror at this vision, del Gardo stabs him in the back. The Face really is almost ugly enough to bring this about: shaggy-haired, warty, with strange dark smears across its cheeks, the Face presses its flat nose against the window and drools through jagged teeth.

The busy plot progresses, and at the climax, we learn -- in an impassioned, insane monologue by Slaughter -- that The Face is his half-brother whom he promised his mother the world would never see. So he's used the Face's ugliness to freeze people in their tracks while del Gardo stabs them in the back. When Lucien and the Forces of the Law burst in on him, del Gardo goes mad, the Face grabs him through the bars of his cage,

and both tumble into the Seine.

In *Crimes at the Dark House*, based Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, King and Slaughter tiptoe up to the very edge of openly spoofing their material, but never quite topple over. This allows Slaughter a lot of villainy. He kills five people on screen, he seduces one woman, rapes his own wife, threatens to rape her sister ("Out in Australia, I used to break in fractious horses; now I'm going to break in a fractious mare! heheheh"), he's in debt, he lords it over the servants, he throws his wife in the booby hatch and murders the poor mad Woman in White, he goes mad and he perishes, shrieking, in a blaze in a church tower.

This is Slaughter at his very best, ripe, majestic and brilliant. In these melodramas, he was lord and master and absolutely unique. Some actors have had performing styles almost as broad, such as Robert Newton, Vincent Price at times, Aubrey Morris and, particularly, Freddie Jones, who even resembles Slaughter, but few had Slaughter's control of his actor's instruments, and none made movies like he did. In his best films, he never misjudges, he never goes too far -- under the circumstances, that would be difficult -- and he never fails to please.

World War II apparently halted production of Slaughter's florid melodramas, and when he tried to revive them afterward, they were weak and cheap. *The Greed of William Hart* (1946), a thinly-disguised version of often-told the Burke and Hare tale, is claustrophobic and utterly torpid. Slaughter is not in his element as the working-class Hart, and the classic formula is not followed. The film is wretched. (John Gilling, who wrote this, himself later did another Burke & Hare movie, *Mania*.)

He made a few more movies, but continued to tour the provinces in England in the melodramas that had made him famous in Great Britain. On February 19, 1956, as he was appearing in a revival of *Maria Marten*, Tod Slaughter died at the age of 70.

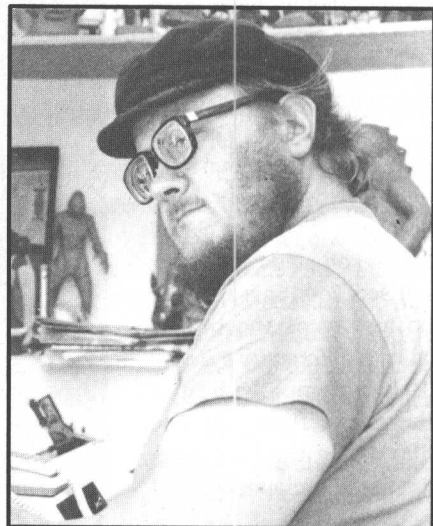
But his films live, thanks to indefatigable fans such as Greg Luce and his Sinister Cinema, and again, I urge you to get his catalog (he has 300 or so old movies for sale, at low prices). Don't make the mistake of thinking if you've

seen fine, fun, old-fashioned actors like Bela Lugosi, you've seen what Tod Slaughter does. Slaughter really is one of a kind.

His villains are more majestic than anything around them; they understand the workings of their society, but eventually are caught in its gears when they extend themselves too far. And when they go down, they go down grandly, chuckling, grinning, holding a gun on us all. This is not villainy as it ever has been in real life, this is what we *want* villainy to be, at least in our melodramas: powerful, attractive, arrogant and, at last, destroyed.

When these films first played on Los Angeles television, local horror movie fans fretted: were they supposed to take them straight, or did Slaughter know he was funny? Seeing the films now makes the question academic. Of course Slaughter knew he was funny, but of course he played it straight, for that is what *made* the films funny -- but they were never *merely* funny. They are classics of their kind.

There has only been one Tod Slaughter in movie history, and that's our loss. He loved those lurid old melodramas, and he loved the blackhearted, irredeemable villains he played; he enshrined these strange little plays on screen, providing us both with a glimpse into the past, into the kind of plays that the working class loved in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and into his own artistry. Tod Slaughter was indeed an artist, working on his small, wicked canvas, and one of the most enjoyable, and finest, actors in horror movie history.



LANSDALE RAVES!



Beth Gwinn

by Joe R. Lansdale

Part 1

Where do you get your ideas?

So they ask you right off, "Where do you get your ideas," and though it's not exactly a question up there with why is there air, it's a lot more common if you're a writer.

It's one of those questions that at first seems valid enough, but after a time becomes more and more foolish. But the truth of the matter is, you do get your ideas from somewhere, but the where is a large canvas with lots of paint and lots of styles and it all runs together to form a creation quite unlike what you, the writer, would have expected, and in fact, more often than not, you're not even aware you're looking at the canvas and that the paints are flowing.

But let me tell you, I get my ideas from what's around me, and what's around me is pretty fucking weird.

Now, I hasten to add that I'm often thought of as a Texas or Southern writer, and to a great extent this is correct. I live in East Texas, which is trees and lakes and creeks and rivers, and geographically doesn't have a thing to do with Monument Valley, Utah, which is what most folks think of Texas as looking like since so many good Westerns were filmed there and said to be in Texas. A lot of Texas is dry and hot and barren and ugly as a shaved cat's ass, but there's so much variety here it's amazing, and again I come back to my part of the state, East Texas, which houses The Big Thicket, one of the biggest and densest wooded areas in the United States, or was before the loggers and pulp wooders decided that the only good tree was one that could be made into a paper cup and filled with Lone Star beer then tossed down when the beer was sucked up so a new paper cup could be brought into play.

All right, forgive me. I'll come back to where do you get your ideas, but I'm going to pause here to explain about pulpwooders, just so you'll know, as one of my wife's associates used to say. And perhaps we can disguise this diatribe a bit by saying, you also get your ideas from what makes you angry. I've yet to write a story about pulpwooders, but I am writing this article, and that serves to prove that nothing has to go unused if you write for a living.

PULPWOODER: Species: Extinctus Treeus Assholes, sometimes referred to as Idiots With Chainsaws.

Guess there are some pulpwooders who are good folks, just trying to make a living, but I got to tell you, that on the whole, next to a pork chop smothered in onions and turnip greens, dumbest thing in the world is a pulpwooder. Loggers are bad, but the pulpwooders are a special breed. They make loggers look like conservationists. If a pulpwooder ever had a

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thought besides "is thar enuf gas in that thar chainsaw," or "let's quit fer lunch," "and thots all there trees there is here, let's go find some more," or "let's clear-cut this here motherfucker," it has not been recorded by non-pulping humanoids.

A pulpwooder is easy to spot. If leaving wooded areas, their oily trucks are forever full of precariously chained-down pulpwood, and one can hear their mufflerless rigs approaching well before they are within scan of the fearful eye. Sound of those mufflers will make women, children, dogs, the rarely intelligent armadillo, and grown, husky men abandon cars and dive for bar ditches or climb any tree not pulpwooded -- not a wise move really; any standing tree is a pulpwooder's challenge, and if you choose a tree as your hiding place, you may find yourself viewing the world faster and faster, closer and closer. Bar ditch diving is the preferred safety measure, and can be practiced by any East Texan at home by leaping suddenly over the couch or by hitting the floor and rolling under the bed.

But once in a ditch, prayer is recommended to whatever God or Gods you believe in, and if that doesn't work, make up one or plenty. There's a certain consolation in mythology during moments of stress; a human need to believe that there's some place to go after you get through here with humanity's lounge act; you know, a bigger ballroom in the sky to work your show. This mythology could be especially comforting if you consider that a pulpwooder -- usually driving without a license because he lost it due to a DWI -- may wheel into your area of hiding during one of his intermittent moments of loss of vehicle control, something that often happens when they reach for another can of beer, try to light a cigarette or cigar, adjust the radio, or get out their dick.

If returning from wooded (or formerly wooded) areas, the pulper is certainly a dangerous breed, usually driving the full of his speedometer, anxious to get those goddamn logs to the mill so they can be turned into paper cups and such. And if they're on their way to work in the morning, or worse yet, they've made a few loads to the mill and are anxious to get back out there before sundown to finish off anything left over a foot tall, and run over anything shorter with their bald tires, then you had better be especially wary, for here is the pulpwooder at his most ambitious, nose forward, ears back, eyes the color of fresh pine sap.

The pulpwooder himself is usually noted by a greasy work cap, a psychotic look in his eye that would make Leatherface appear as benign as the local butcher, and a nub of a cigar sticking out of his face, the fire of which went out about the time the ecology movement died on college campuses in favor of break dancing and toga parties. That's another reason he's hurrying and hasn't taken time to relight his cigar. He's trying to get those goddamn trees out of there before there's another back to the land movement and it's discovered that there are no more trees under which to shelter our hot heads, or enough topsoil to raise a bad crop of weeds, let alone a field of spuds, beans, peas or the ever-hardy Homestead tomato. No sir, that once fine topsoil is no longer contained by roots. It is now residing at the bottom of some polluted creek nesting chemically-dosed turtle eggs.

Another thing about the true pulper, as opposed to the part-time tree cutter, is that he's never discouraged by the decimation of a forested area. There's always posted land. Barbwire fences are no barrier. That's why God invented a good pair wire cutters. And if you've ever watched the speed at which a pulper can take down a tree, load it, and get out of Dodge, you'll understand that the idea of posting land as a deterrent against pulpers is ridiculous. Far more effective would be land mines, or perhaps missiles designed to home in on chainsaws, six packs of Lone Star and the most recent issue of Hustler, all of which are forever in the handy reach of the tireless pulper.

After a days work of cutting- down trees, the pulper remains unsatisfied. He's still got a hard-on for those goddamn trees. His own yard, usually rented, has some goddamn trees on it, and he wants these cut so he can "mow". Every evening after butchering our woodlands, he is apt to come home and whittle a few of the pesky bastards off his lawn to give the Johnson grass sun. He'll be the one forever coming over to your place, asking if he can "trim" some trees for you. To him, your trees always look unattended. Too natural. Not sculptured. He thinks they ought to be "landscaped."

Landscaping to these ignorant bastards means this: Once they quit renting, they'll buy a piece of property full of trees, go in there and cut them down and burn out the stumps and then bulldoze down to the red clay; I mean dried blood couldn't be any redder then this clay.

Next they'll bring in a double-wide -- you know, one of those finer mobile homes, because they are really living now -- and put that can out as close to the road as they can get it, leaving room for a six-foot walk made of cheap brick, bordered on either side by about four anemic bushes -- hedges, he'll call them -- and out to the side of the place will be a satellite dish about the size of Cuba, and out front beneath the bald heat of the sun, will be one those plastic bird-feeders that's so goddamned ugly you'll never see so much as a lowlife bluejay lighting on, or even circling it. Besides, if they did land on one, the pulper would probably pick them off with a BB gun.

Out back of this, our Ace of Landscaping will have put him in a barbecuer (a grill or barbecue to you Yankees) and a bench so he can sit out there in the broiling, hundred and ten degree summer heat, read the Weekly World News and watch a hunk of dead chicken blacken and smoke.

This kind of landscaping ought to be a clue to you should he want to trim your trees. Cause once that dude's chainsaw tastes sap, Katie bar the door. The pulper becomes like Pac Man, and nothing short of a nine-pound sledge between the eyes or two full loads from a twelve gauge pump can stop him from making every tree, bush, vine, yard gnome, front porch, dog house or slow pet, into so much buzzed shit that he'll call "kindlin'."

The pulper has his defenders, and I suppose I ought to mention that. These are the fools who like to know all that goddamned woods is gettin' out of the way, and they hope the same is happening to that tacky rain forest down South America way. They want to see that go too, so the South Americans can mow. This is the same bunch who defend the

pulper on the basis of him having to make a living like any other Tom, Dick, or Harry, but they can't see that at this rate the pulper will soon be happily changing tires or hosing down oil at a local filling station, reveling in the environment he loves best--one of concrete and grease smudges--while the rest of us stand out in the hot sun without shade or beauty, or even those knot-headed bluejays to look at.

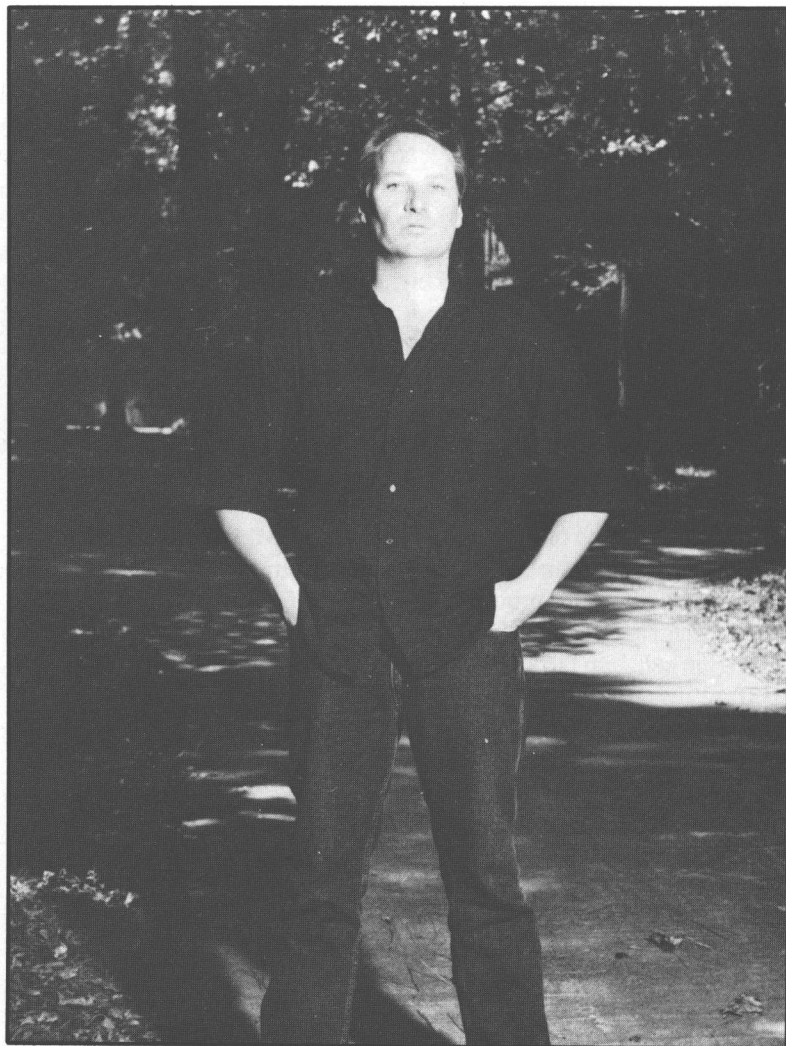
And the paper companies who've been hiring these rapists, will still be wondering what happened to their sources, and will finally start recycling all the crap out of the dump yards -- including paper cups -- that they should have been recycling in the first place.

Okay. Let's give the pulpsters a rest, and steer our pick-up truck, the interior of which is decorated with ball bat and gun rack, back on course, and drive back to Where Do You Get Your Ideas? To make it even more valid, let's change that to Where Do You Get The Background For Your Ideas? At least in my case, that's more important than the idea. The background and the characters highlight almost any half-assed idea, and the way you discover the background and learn how people act is simple. You look out the window.

I'll try not to bore you here, but to go back to where I was before I so rudely went off on pulpwooders, I was talking about how culture and geography effect my fiction, and the same should be true of any writer, wherever they live. In my case, I live in East Texas, and to set up my discussion here, I need to explain that East Texas culture, contrary to what some may think, owes more to the South than to the Southwest. The Southwest starts below and to the West of Beaumont, or over on the other side of Dallas. Those other Texas folks might as well be Yankees. Okay, they're not that strange, but you get the idea.

We've got some Western influence here, more than the classic Southern states, but not as much as, say, Oklahoma. Toss in the Black culture, Cajun and Mexican cultures, and this makes for some interesting and weird doings. This is not to say because I write about it, all of Texas and the South are full of wierd folks. Most are normal and dull, and some are normal and interesting, and then there's, you know, them other folks, the weird ones, and being like I am, that's who I write about. If I lived in Maine or Los Angeles or New York, or wherever, I'd still find the weird people to write about. They'd be a different sort of weird people, but that's who I'd be attracted to.

Then maybe not. Being Southern may be why I'm attracted to weirdness. Here you pick up on it early and learn to relish it. Southerners have this problem of finding the weirdest and most horrible disasters funny, least in retrospect, and we've never quite lost our distrust of the Damn Yankees who invaded our land and raped it and pissed on it and...Pardon me, but you see what I mean. Hell, I'm mad, and I wasn't even



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there when it happened.

Point is, we've learned to revel in destruction and defeat and feel as if we are constantly undergoing reconstruction. This creates a viewpoint that allows us to see weird everywhere; here, up North, out West, the East, Overseas. But when we talk about our own weirdness, somehow we really know how to roll, and therefore, though there is weirdness everywhere, and it is constantly chronicled by writers from East to West, North to South, what is best remembered both by Southerners and Yankees, is Southern weird.

Think about it. You can write about the weirdos in Los Angeles (the streets team with them), the weirdos in New York (they fall out of the sky there), point out the horrible racist activities in both those cities, or any other state and city, and it sort of fades by the wayside and the South is the one remembered for weirdness and racism and ignorance. Three horrible things that we as Southerners must lay claim to, and are willing to lay claim to, as opposed to other parts of the country that fail to claim these liabilities as their own.

Bottom line: the North and the South are both full of weirdness and assholism, but Southern weirdness may be remembered best, because, for whatever reason, we appreciate and take a joy in weirdness that is unprecedented.

I look for it. I appreciate it.

I don't drive around town asking door to door for weirdness, but I keep my eyes open. There's some super

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fucked-up stuff out there, and if you want to write, want to bring part of yourself and your culture to your work, which, along with your background and viewpoint is what makes for unique fiction, then you got to learn to observe, and if your main interest is horror fiction, then you got to know weird when you see it and you got to know what to do with it when you see it.

For example, my old neighbors. I don't live in the neighborhood I'm talking about anymore, and that's all right with me, though sometimes, late at night when I need a story idea, I sort of miss that piece of lunacy. I got to shop a little harder these days. Used to be, stuff like that turned up on my doorstep.

Think I'm kidding?

Let me tell you about one of many incidents.

It was one of those mornings when I woke up on the bad side of the bed, feeling a little out of sorts, mad at the wife over something I've forgotten, and she was mad at me over something she probably hasn't forgotten, and we grumbled down the hall, into the kitchen, and there's our dog, a Siberian Husky--my wife always referred to him as a Suburban Husky because of his pampered lifestyle, though any resemblance to where we lived and suburbia requires a great leap of faith -- and he's smiling at us, and then we see why he's smiling. Three reasons: (1) He's happy to see us. (2) He feels a little guilty. (3) He has reason to be guilty. Not far behind him, near the kitchen table, was a pile of shit. I'm not talking your casual little whoopsie-doo, and I'm not talking you're inconvenient pile, and I'm not talking six to eight turds the size of large bananas. I'm talking a certified, pure-dee, goddamn prize-winning SHIT. There were enough dog turds there to shovel out in a pickup truck and dump in the lawn and let dry so you could use them to build an adobe hut big enough to keep your tools in and have room to house your car in the winter.

And right beside this sterling deposit, was a lake of piss wide enough and deep enough to go rowing on.

I had visions of a Siberian Husky hat and slippers, or maybe a nice throw rug for the bedroom, a necklace of dog claws and teeth; maybe cut that smile right out of his face and frame it.

But the dog-lover in me took over for this article, and I'll just say I put him outside in his pen where he cooled his dew-claws for a while. Then I spent about a half-hour cleaning up dog shit while my wife spent the same amount of time keeping my son, who I guess was about two then, out of the shit (Yep, he was up now, and any parent out there knows how this works: in times of greatest stress, in time of the greatest need for privacy or contemplation, the kid shows up and suddenly it's as if you've been deposited inside an ant farm and the ants are crawling and stinging. Good thing they're fruit of your loins and you love them, or they might be a diaper-wearing throw rug, positioned opposite the one made out of the Suburban Husky, cat, hamster, **FILL IN THE BLANK.**)

By the time I finished cleaning up the mess, it was time for breakfast, and I got to tell you, I didn't want anything that looked like link sausage that morning.

So Karen and I eat, hoping that what we smell while eating is the aroma of disinfectant and not the stench of shit

wearing the coat of disinfectant, and we watch the kid spill his milk eighty-lebber times and throw food and drop stuff on the floor, and we're fussing at each other more and more, about whatever it was we were mad about that morning --a little item intensified by our dog's deposits-- and by the time we're through eating our meal, and Karen leaves me with Fruit of My Loins and his View Master, and she goes out to the laundry room to do what the room is named for --probably went out there to beat the laundry clean with rocks or bricks, pretending shirts and pants were hubby's head -- I'm beginning to think things couldn't get worse. About that time the earth passes through the tail of a comet or something, some kind of dimensional gate is opened, and things go weird.

There's a knock at the door.

At first I thought it was a bird pecking on the glass, it was that soft. Then it came again and I went to the front door and opened it and there stood a woman about five-feet tall wearing a long, wool coat, untied, flared-at-the-ankles shoes, and a ski cap pulled so tight over her ears her face was pale. She could have been twenty-two or forty-two.

She said, "Can I use your phone, mister? I got an important call to make."

Well, I don't see nobody in the bushes, and I figure if this woman gets out of line I can handle her, so I said, "Yeah, sure. Be my guest," and let her in. Later I couldn't help but think about how it is in vampire legend where you have to invite the vampire in before he can do you damage.

The phone was in the kitchen, on the wall, and I pointed it out to her, and me and Keith went back to doing what we were doing, which was looking at the View Master. We switched from Goofy to Winnie The Poo, the one about Tigger in the tree, and it was my turn to look at it, and I couldn't help but hear that my guest's conversation with her mother was getting stressful -- I knew it was her mother because she addressed her by that title -- and suddenly Fruit of My Loins yelled, "Wook, Daddy Wook."

I turned and "wooked", and what do I see but what appears to be some rare tribal dance, possibly something having originated in higher altitudes where the lack of oxygen to the brain causes wilder abandon with the dance steps. This gal was all over the place. Fred Astaire with a hot coat hanger up his ass couldn't have been brisker. I've never seen anything like it. Then, in mid-dossey-do, she did a leap like cheerleaders do -- one of those things where they kick their legs out to the side, open up like a nut-cracker and kick the palms of their hands -- then she hit the floor on her ass, spun, and wheeled as if on a swivel into the hallway and went out of sight. Then there came a sound from in there like someone on speed beating the bongos. She hadn't dropped the phone either. The wire was stretched tight around the corner and was vibrating like a big fish was on the line.

I dashed over there and saw she was lying crosswise in the hallway, bawling her head against the wall, clutching at the phone with one hand and pulling her dress up over her waist with the other, and she was making horrible sounds and rolling her eyes, and I immediately thought: this is it, she's gonna die. Then I saw she wasn't dying, just thrashing, and I decided it was an epileptic fit.

I got down and took the phone away from her, took hold of her jaw, got her tongue straight without getting bit, stretched her out on the floor away from the wall, picked up the phone and told her mamma, who was fussing about something, that things weren't so good, hung up on her in mid-sentence and called the ambulance.

I ran out to the laundry room, told Karen a strange woman was in our hallway pulling her dress over her head and that an ambulance was coming. Karen went out to direct it and I stayed inside with the woman, to watch in case she might injure herself or choke. Fruit of My Loins clutched my leg and kept asking what was wrong.

After what seemed a couple of months and a long holiday, the ambulance showed up with a whoop of siren, and I went outside, and on either side of my walk were all these people. It's like Bradbury's story "The Crowd", or something. I've never seen but two of these people before in my life, and I've been living in this neighborhood for years.

One lady immediately wanted to go inside and pray for the woman, who she somehow knew, but Karen whispered to me that there wasn't enough room for our guest in there, let alone this other woman and her buddy, God, so I didn't let her in.

All the other folks are just a jabbering, and about all sorts of things like: "Mildred, how you been?"

"I been good. They took my kids away from me this morning, though. I hate that. How you been."

I swear, that's an exact quote, except for the woman's name which I've made up because I don't remember it.

Then here comes the ambulance boys with a stretcher. One of the guys knew me somehow and he stopped and said, "You're that writer aren't you?"

I admitted it.

"I always wanted to write. I got some ideas that'd make a good book and a movie. I'll tell you about 'em. I got good ideas, I just can't write them down. I could tell them to you and you could write them down and we could split the money."

"Could we talk about this later? There's a lady in there thrashing in my hallway."

So they went in with the stretcher and after a few minutes the guy I talked to came out and said, "We can't get her out there and turned through the door. We may have to take your backdoor out."

That made no sense to me at all. They brought the stretcher through and now they're telling me they can't carry



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it out. But I was too addled to argue and told them to do what they had to do.

Well, they managed her out the back door without having to remodel our home, and when they came around the edge of the house I heard the guy I'd talked to go, "Ahhh, damn, if I'd known it was her I wouldn't have come."

I thought they were going to set her and the stretcher down right there, but they went on out to the ambulance and jerked open the door and tossed her and the stretcher inside like they were tossing a dead body over a cliff.

I had to ask: "You know her?"

"Dark enough in the house there, I couldn't tell at first. But when we got outside, I seen who it was. She does this all the time. She don't take her medicine on purpose so she'll have fits when she gets stressed, or she fakes them, like this time. Way she gets attention."

And the ambulance driver and his assistant were out of there. No lights. No siren.

Well, the two people standing in the yard that we know were still there when I turned around, but the others, like mythical creatures, were gone, turned to smoke, dissolved, become one with the universe, or whatever. The two people we know, elderly neighbors, said they knew the woman, who by this time I had come to think of as the Phone Woman.

"She goes around doing that," the old man said. "Her mother don't live on this side of town, and she usually stays on the other side, but they get in fights and she comes and

Lansdale Raves!

tries to stay with some relatives over here, but they don't want her, poor girl. She's nutty as a fruitcake. Goes back on behind here to where those trailers are and knocks on the doors where the wet backs live, about twenty to a can, and they ain't got no phone and she knows it. She's gotten raped a couple times doing that, poor girl. Sad thing is it's what she wants."

The old couple went home then, and another lady came up, and sure enough, I hadn't seen her before either, and she said, "Did that ole crazy girl come over here and ask to use the phone, then fall down on you and flop?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Does that all the time. She likes to go over to them wet backs there, you know. Fall down, kind of get them to want to, you know, go after her."

Then she went around the corner of the house and was gone, and I never saw her again. In fact, with the exception of the elderly neighbors and the Phone Woman, I never saw any

of those people again and never knew where they came from. Next day there was a soft knock on the door. It was the Phone Woman again. She asked to use the phone.

I told her we'd had it taken out.

She went away and I saw her several times that day, walking the street, and it was hot too, maybe a hundred degrees and humid as an armpit, and she was still wearing that coat and hat and those sad shoes.

I made some calls, found out a little about who she was, but not a lot. I tried to see what kind of help was available for her, but there didn't seem to be much. She was getting some medicine for her epilepsy, which she didn't always take, and that seemed to be the end of it, all anyone could do.

One night not too long after all this, I went out on the front porch to smoke one of my rare cigars (about four to six a year), and I saw something coming down the dark street, and from the way she walked, I knew it was her. She went on by the house and stopped down the road a piece and looked up and I looked where she was looking, and through the trees I could see what she saw. The moon.

We both looked at it a while, and she finally walked on, slow, with her head down, and I put my cigar out well before it was finished and went inside and brushed my teeth and took off my clothes and tried to go to sleep. Instead I lay there for a long time and thought about her, walking those dark streets, maybe thinking about her mom, or a lost love, or a phone, or sex in the form of rape because it was some kind of human connection, and then again, maybe she was thinking about the Ranger's game.

Joe Lansdale's short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies including *Silver Scream*, and *Book of the Dead*, along with many magazine appearances. His novels include *The Drive-In*, *The Night Runners*, *Cold In July*, and *The Magic Wagon* which has recently been reprinted by Borderlands Press. He is also the editor of the western horror anthology *Razored Saddles*.

Incidentally Joe Lansdale's Story "The Phone Woman" now out in *Night Visions 8*, is based entirely on the events he talks about in this column. The column for *Iniquities* was written first, then the story was created from it. Cool, isn't it?



Beth Gwinn



The Last Snowman

by John B. Rosenman

All morning, as clouds massed in the west and spread like a dark cancer across the sky, Michael built his snowman. He built it out of snow so white it stung his eyes, out of lumps of coal and a gnarled stick which he pressed like seeds into fertile soil. Shortly after noon he finished. His breath pluming the frosty air, he gazed up at his creation, which towered above him and lacked only the spark of faith to make it real. He provided that spark gladly, touching the snowman's heart with his fingers.

Before him, like Adam from the dust, a living soul was born.

But not just any soul, he saw at once. This was a soul pregnant with significance, a being who would be the focus of immense, contending forces. As he reached up to pat the snowman's chin, his conviction existed not in the realm of words which his father and other adults used in church to structure and explain their reality, but in the mute one of pure belief. He *felt* that it was so. Felt that his snowman was the whole wealth of the world, and that *he* had shaped and molded it with his own hands.

Above, high in the darkening sky, a single bird winged its way. He peered up at it, following its course till he could not distinguish its tiny form any longer. At some point between here and infinity, it simply passed from existence.

When he lowered his eyes to the snowman, he found he had lost his faith.

He stood before it an infidel, studying a form that was only snow and a few objects pressed in place to resemble a face. And not even a good face, he saw now, but only a pathetic mockery of one. Indeed, the whole thing was a crude joke. The right leg was half again as large as the left, and it leaned too far to one side. He knew that when the sun's heat rose, the snowman would melt and eventually topple. The dead coals of its eyes which he had snatched from the storage bin in the cellar would gaze blindly up at the equally blind sky. Later it would be a mere puddle, then nothing.

He wanted to weep, mourn it.

Instead he turned to look about at his family's farm.

A stone's throw away rose the faded red barn where he had so often played in the hayloft and milked their cows. Beyond it and to both sides, cornfields stretched into the distance. Revolving slowly, he saw the ancient, mossy stone well whose water was ice cold in summer and the gabled, two-storied frame farmhouse where his father, mother, and Luke lived. Michael frowned as he thought of his brother, who at eleven was only a year older but who already seemed to be stamped out of the same spiritual tin as his father, a rigid replica who compensated for his smaller size by, if possible, intensifying his father's stern-lipped piety. With Luke, everything

Snowman

was Hell, Fire, and Brimstone and an imminent Day of Judgment. Sinners danced endlessly on the edge of damnation and were never given even a second's rest. In New Hope Church where their Baptist brethren worshipped, Luke's eyes gleamed with the same zeal as the preachers, and it was already common knowledge that his brother had a "calling." Last Sunday Michael had seen Deacon Wilder place a hand on Luke's small shoulder and call him "a soldier for the Lord."

Michael blinked, his small, intelligent face wary as he watched Luke and his father emerge from the farmhouse. With regret, he thought of a different Luke of a short time before who had loved to play games of make-believe with him in the barn. Then, the hayloft had been a magic frontier filled with lurking Indians or an uncharted planet inhabited by multi-headed aliens. Michael remembered that if anything, his brother's imagination and inventiveness had surpassed his. Now to Luke all fantasy was suspect and smelled of the Pit, and the only stories worth telling were found in the Scriptures.

When had his brother changed? Six months ago? A year? Or had he been changing all along, only he hadn't noticed?

Luke and his father paused on the porch and looked down at him with dour expressions. If he were a little older, Michael would have thought, *I don't belong. I'm different from them.* Now their displeasure with his playing ("Satan finds mischief for idle hands," his father was fond of saying) filled him only with tension and a sense of loss and alienation. Through the kitchen window, as if to comment on the frivolous act of building a snowman, his mother moved busily about. Perhaps she was baking pies, or already preparing this Sunday's supper.

His father's lips opened in the thick bush of his beard. "Michael, have you completed your chores?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes, sir."

"You've ministered to the stock, gathered the eggs, swept clean the stalls, and performed your other appointed tasks?"

Ministered to the stock. Appointed tasks. It was the way he talked, and Michael found it difficult even to look up into his father's eyes and stern, prophet-like face. It was as if he always lied and were profoundly unworthy of his father's trust, yet Michael knew he had diligently begun his chores at a quarter of five and completed them by eight. Long before he had learned painfully that working in the cold before breakfast was preferable to his father's strap, let alone his displeasure.

"Yes, father," he said, "I finished them." Something made him add: "Just as always."

His father grunted and shared an iron look with Luke. Moving his head a bare half inch, he indicated the farmhouse.

"You might see if your mother requires your assistance."

"Yes sir."

He watched them leave the porch and march toward the truck. Where were they going? To his father's hardware store, or to print some more tracts? It hardly mattered. Banished from the bond of their communion, Michael could only turn and trudge toward the house to obey his father's order.

Then the world opened up to him.

He had heard about visions. Ezekiel, who saw glory in the sky. Paul, whom God had touched on the road to Damascus. Michael's vision, in contrast, was a wave of growing, sublime certainty.

He had glanced back at the snowman as he walked, and it seemed to him that it was beautiful. Misshapen or not, it was splendid and all the more glorious because it served no practical function. It would never sweep clean the stalls, as his father said, and would end up as a muddy puddle. Yet its very lack of utility imbued it with a beauty that transcended this realm, and as Michael marvelled at it, the conviction that he'd had before returned even stronger. He sensed again that his cold creation was a living soul infused with significance and that it would be the focus, the prize of some great conflict. Yes, that was it. There was another...who sought to destroy it, who would move Heaven and Earth to raze it to the ground. But who was its defender, the one who would protect it from harm?

He turned from the house. Took a step forward on rubbery legs.

He was the defender.

And with this knowledge he saw Preacher Fullson gesture furiously from the pulpit, the spirit powerfully upon him as he told of that last battle when all souls would be called to judgment. On that fateful day, the godly and the demonic would assemble in the eyes of God Almighty to determine whether good or evil would prevail and possess the world. Only this time Michael knew there would be no legions of the blessed and the accursed. This time only two foes would meet and decide the outcome. One would be Satan, and the other would be himself. And this time the prize sought would not be the other army's destruction but this icon of snow and beauty, this being who was...the last snowman.

Yes, the *last* snowman, for Michael knew suddenly, just *knew*, that throughout the world all snowmen had been abruptly removed by God's hand. This one, the one that *he* had created, was the sole survivor and all the more sacred as a consequence. Therefore Satan, that old adversary, must surely hate it, and he would do anything to steal its pure white soul and level it to the ground.

Pale light flickered in Michael's grey eyes, and he had to tear them away to scan his surroundings. This drab, ordinary farmyard was Armageddon, and the ultimate battle was about to begin.

He tottered forward and stood before his creation, gazing up into his coal-bright eyes. Are you my defender?, he seemed to say, and Michael answered yes. *If that be so*, the snowman responded, *how shall you defend me? You are no match for the Prince of Darkness, only a frail, little boy.* Michael shivered and for a moment his certainty waned. Then he remembered the final battle depended not on might alone but on faith and greatness of heart. So he told him, *I shall protect you by standing here as the guard of God. He shall not dare touch you as long as I remain before you as your champion.* And the last snowman was silent for a moment and then replied, *Beware then, for he cometh as a thief in the night.*

Michael turned and braced himself before the snowman. Glancing at the farmhouse, he noticed that his mother was still busy in the kitchen and remembered his father's

order. Doubt seeped into his heart. How did he know that this wasn't just another game of pretend like he and Luke had used to play? How did he know that it wasn't another childish illusion which his brother had so efficiently grown out of? He studied the yard, seeing the well and snow-covered grass in all their sorry mundanity. Could this pathetic plot of soil really be the scene of Armageddon? Wasn't he--

Beware then, for he cometh as a thief in the night.

He caught himself on the brink of apostasy and silently blessed the snowman. Yes, he must be vigilant, for the Adversary was a wily trickster and the Prince of Lies. He could defeat you a thousand ways, and chief among them was to undermine your faith in yourself and in your own mission. He must not let it happen again.

Spurning the thought of helping his mother, Michael looked straight ahead again. All he had to do was stand here for however long it took and not be seduced aside, and he would win. He would protect the last snowman and therefore the world would be saved.

Pride bloomed sweetly inside him. Wouldn't Luke and his father at long last be proud of him! He thought of the

*Beware then, for
he cometh as a
thief in the night.*

Deacon's praise of Luke. What would the Deacon say to him when he learned that he, Michael, had been a soldier for the Lord too? Indeed, when he learned that God had chosen him as his *only* soldier, as the one He pinned His hopes on?

But this was pride, and as his father had intoned at supper just the day before, "Pride goeth before a fall." Turning up his collar, Michael resolved to be humble. If he was to be successful in performing his appointed task, he must purify his heart. He must not fall from within.

He settled himself, and waited.

He did not have to wait long, for three small figures turned onto their driveway from the road and trudged toward him. He saw instantly that their progress was difficult. The driveway was little more than a trail worn by shoes and vehicles over the years. Buried under snow as it was, the three had to struggle, and Michael saw one of them get his boot stuck and shout at the others. He looked away.

Overhead, the sky had darkened. While he'd had his revelation and grappled with it, gloomy clouds had crept like hermit crabs across the firmament and by now had possessed over half of it. He studied the murky patterns, feeling in a wordless part of himself that they bore a mystic significance, as if the corrugated texture was actually an intricate maze or

mandala and it was important for him to solve it.

To his right a crow abruptly broke from the cornfields and rose into the sky with a hoarse caaw! Silence returned, and he turned back to the driveway.

The figures, he saw, were almost upon him, and he recognized three boys from nearby farms with skates draped over their shoulders. For a moment he thought of the Three Wise Men, then forgot the connection as one of the boys threw a snowball at him.

"Whoopee! Mikey's built a snowman!"

"Big 'un too, ain't it?"

"Hey, Michael, you build that thing?"

Their chorus washed over him, and Michael caught himself on the verge of running to them. "What you guys doing?" he asked slowly.

Ned, the largest, placed a gloved hand on one of his skates. "Goin' skatin', over to Nelson's pond."

"Yeah," said Matthew, a chubby boy with red hair protruding from beneath a stocking cap. "Hey, you wanna come?"

"Can't." Michael shuffled his feet. "Got to help my mother." Feeling that the excuse was lame, he added: "Besides, I don't have any skates."

"No problem," Aaron, the third boy said. He was lean and wore a red scarf that wound around and around his neck like a serpent. He flicked a bare thumbnail against a skate, making a hard metallic sound. "Got an extra pair of skates right here for you."

Michael looked, feeling his heart falter. He could have sworn there were only three sets of skates, not four! He wet his lips.

"His brother was gonna meet us at the pond, but changed his mind," Ned said quickly. "A kid up the road told us."

Michael nodded, his senses alert as he glanced sharply at each of them. Was it his imagination, or had Ned spoken up too quickly, as if he had realized the slip? And if so, if they *weren't* what they seemed, how diabolically clever it was to use three of his friends or what looked like them to deceive him. Why, Satan had even made them stumble in the snow and bundled them up like they had been dressed by over-protective mothers. And when they had arrived, he had nearly fallen for it!

But then doubt came. How could he be sure they were a trick and not what they simply appeared to be? The preacher might say that the devil was the master of disguises, but that didn't mean these boys were hollow imitations, did it? Maybe Aaron had had an extra pair of skates from the beginning and he just hadn't noticed.

He forced a grin. "Hey, Aaron, you like my snowman?"

Aaron glanced casually (too casually?) at it and shrugged. "It's all right."

"Would you...like to touch it?"

The boys glanced at each other. "Well, sure," Aaron said.

Michael planted his feet wider apart, resisting the temptation to look behind him to see if the snowman was still

Snowman



there. "Go ahead," he said.

A heartbeat, then another. Finally Aaron kicked the snow with a boot whose snaps jingled. "Ain't you gonna get out of the way?"

"What difference does it make?" He felt as if he were about to faint. "Just go *around* me."

Aaron spat. "Naw."

"Why not?"

The boys traded looks, then one of them, Matthew, swore coarsely and motioned to the others. "C'mon, you guys. Let's ditch this asshole."

Michael watched them part around him, giving the snowman a wide berth. As they left, he felt wild elation, then doubt once again. Had he foiled the Dark One's trick or was Matthew right? Was he an asshole? A hundred yards away, one of them turned back near a stand of corn and shouted something.

As soon as they were gone, Michael felt cold even though he was as bundled up as the...boys. Not only that, but his bladder was full. He shifted from foot to foot, resisting the urge to urinate. Either reason, he knew, was ample justification under other circumstances for going into the house for the minute or so it would require. But he knew that even a minute might be fifty-nine seconds too long. Again there came to him a feeling that vast forces were trained on him and that the fate of the world was in his hands. He must not betray that trust.

Glancing cautiously at the house, he opened his fly and urinated with shuddering relief into the snow, hearing a faint hiss that reminded him of a snake. Zipping up, he stamped his feet, finding them beginning to go numb.

He waited.

After a while boredom came, but he forced himself to fight it. That too was a trick of the Prince of Lies, who was all

too willing to use his own frailties against him.

Michael opened his mouth and started to sing a song he had heard during services. "Onward, Christian soldiers..."

At the end of the driveway, a car appeared and lumbered toward him.

Michael felt something touch his shoulder and spun around. The snowman's eyes bore into him.

As a thief in the night, boy. Don't you forget it.

"Yes, sir," he answered, feeling as if he were in the presence of ancient wisdom. "I won't."

He turned to face his next challenge, which he saw now was not a car at all but a small van with lettering on it. *MOTHER MARY'S HOMEMADE PIES*. The van, equipped with snow tires, reached the yard and swung slowly about so that the bright cheerful face beamed at him through the window.

"Hi there, Michael. Your ma at home?"

"Hello, Mrs. Acheren. Yes, she is."

Mrs. Acheren smiled, not looking at the snowman. "Your ma asked me to bring her out a blueberry pie, Michael. Would you take it to her?"

"I--" He made an awkward gesture. "Can't you uh, take it to her yourself? I mean, I'm sure she would like some company."

"What's the matter with you, boy?" The smile remained, but a frown had etched lines in her forehead. "My arthritis is acting up mighty fierce and I'm in no mood to go gallivantin' up to your house in this snow." She turned to pick something up from the seat and thrust a green and white box out at him. "Now you be a good little man and take this to her."

He almost obeyed her, so thoroughly had the commandment that he mind adults been instilled in him. But the words *good little man* checked him, and as his heart pounded he remembered his mother's pride in her own baking. She would never order a store-made pie. Besides, the whole idea of someone driving out here just to deliver it was so implausible.

The faded blue eyes, no longer so merry, watched him. What was really behind that sweet, dimpled face? Was there nothing the Evil One wouldn't do or use to achieve his ends?

"Michael? I'm *waiting*, boy."

"You'll have to leave it on the snow, Mrs. Acheren. I--I'll take it to her in a minute."

"Well, I never!" But her hard eyes seemed to convey a different message than just outrage. "I'm going to call your mother as soon as I get back to my store. Just you wait till she hears about this! Your pa will lay a strap to your backside so hard you won't sit down for a week!"

Uncertainty combined with his fear of punishment made him hesitate. She looked so real! Could he really be treating her with such disrespect and going against everything he'd been taught? But if she were *really* angry, why didn't she just press her horn till his mother came out? No, surely the answer was that he had to be deceived and tricked away from his post. For some reason, God would not let his enemy use force.

Mrs. Acheren's cheeks purpled. "You just wait!"

she sputtered, and angrily started the motor.

Michael watched her slowly head out the way she had come in.

The phantom hand brushed his shoulder again. *Well done.*

He turned, looking up into the face which *he* had molded. He remembered rolling the snow for it into a great mound, lifting it onto the shoulders. It was only frozen water.

"I--I'm finding it hard to believe in you," he said. "I mean, I want to, but I keep--"

You must believe. Hold on to your faith.

"Yes, but--"

Your real test is soon to come, Michael. Remember: he cometh as a thief in the night.

Michael fidgeted, feeling cold. He could barely feel his feet now. What could it hurt if he went inside for a few minutes? Besides, his father had told him to ask his mother if she needed help.

He stepped closer to the snowman. "You're not really talkin', are you? *I* am."

I speak through you.

He spun and looked
up at the snowman.
"What'll I do?"
he cried.

The response silenced him, but as soon as he faced the road again, he heard the cold voice of logic. How long was he expected to stand here? All day? Tomorrow too? What would he do when his father and Luke came back? He had repelled the boys and Mrs. Acheren, but what would he say to *them*?

Your real test is soon to come, Michael.

He squared his jaw. Stamped his feet. So be it.

Alertly, he scanned the yard, the driveway, the barn, his senses tuned for the slightest deviation from what was normal. He cometh as a thief in the night, but *HOW* will he come? Now and then he felt his vigilance flag and sharpened it on the edge of his will. When he began to get sleepy in the cold, he pinched his cheek till it stung. When hunger made his belly rumble and he thought of the lunch he'd missed, he stooped and scooped up a handful of snow. It tasted airy and unsubstantial, yet heavy with visions.

Growing numb in the cold, he had one consolation. The enemy was coming soon. *Had* to come soon. It was not just that the last snowman had told him that. He himself sensed

that the Adversary was running out of time.

He raised his eyes. Above, from horizon to horizon, the entire sky was black. An icy wind lashed his cheek.

He braced himself, his breath cloudy streamers in the air. Slowly, he started to count. One...two... three...

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement and turned to see a wisp of smoke rise from the barn. Heartbeats later, just when he thought he'd imagined it, another appeared. Soon a curtain of smoke unfurled across the yard.

Sounds came from inside the barn. The bass protest of their cows and the whinny of Jenny, the old packhorse who had outlived her usefulness. Michael remembered riding her when he had been small.

Hooves rang sharply against the barn's wall.

He spun and looked up at the snowman. "What'll I do?" he cried. "I never expected this!"

His snowman looked mutely down.

"Tell me what to do, please!" Michael's grey eyes pleaded, desperately searching the snowman for a response or sign, but there was nothing.

He swung to the barn.

More hoofbeats rang against the walls, and he heard the rising din of panic, of animals trapped in a burning death house. His face contorted; he took a step toward the barn. How had it started? It was *winter!* But he had heard stories about straw igniting.

The low complaints of the cows had turned shrill now, and Michael saw red and yellow flames lick at the roof. This was no trick. Their animals were dying!

With a cry, he ran around the corner of the barn to the front doors. Shoving the wooden bolt back, he pulled the doors open.

Inside all was calm. He saw Jenny contentedly chewing a mouthful of hay.

He cometh as a thief in the night....

Michael stumbled around on half-frozen legs and ran back. As he did, it seemed to take forever to reach the corner of the barn. He knew that when he turned it, he would know the worst, and part of him wanted to stop and never find out. But he continued on and at last reached the corner and rounded it.

He stopped. Screamed.

The thing he had dreaded most was just landing on the snowman's head, its wings so vast their movement buffeted him even where he stood. A hideously evil, decrepitly ancient face turned to him, and its vile lips parted in a triumphant grin.

"He's mine!"

Michael shook his head. "No!"

"You deserted him. He belongs to *me!*"

Michael saw the being's talons grip the snowman's head between them like a walnut, yet they did not crush it. Dazed with horror, he staggered forward on legs that threatened to collapse.

"I--"

The mighty wings, beating, drove the wind against his face so hard he could barely speak. Trembling, he megaphoned his hands.

"I came back just in time!" he shouted.

Snowman

The great wings stilled, followed by the voice that was so deep and seductively musical. "Time for what?"

Michael swallowed. "To fight you."

The abomination laughed, a loathsome, nightmare screech that plunged Michael toward madness. Desperately he fought back.

"You? You, a mere boy, want to fight *me*?"

Michael met the thing's eyes, which glowed like fiery embers. For a moment, despite the unspeakable horror, he felt that he had seen him before and that they had met many times in some distant past. Recognition blazed too in his adversary's face, along with a glimpse of a sublime loveliness that even now was not wholly lost. Then his enemy rose from his icy perch and settled in dark majesty to the ground, his wings arching above him on both sides.

"How will you fight me?" he mocked in deep, resonant tones. "You...a mere boy!"

Michael's spirit flickered like a sick flame. It was true. How could he, a ten year old boy, conquer the king of hell? What would he use? His little muscles? The terror that raged at his throat? He started to cry, then remembered his mother, father, and Luke, whom he loved despite his difference from them. And beyond them, there was the whole world, which this supreme fiend and his legions would rule if he failed.

But surely, he thought, his small strength would be a straw in the wind before the other's tempest, and as for courage, how could that avail against the most fallen of angels? He turned to flee from the sardonic amusement in the other's eyes, and remembered that faith had the power to move mountains. What you had to do was *believe*, just as he had in games with Luke when they had vanquished savage Indians and noxious aliens. Yes, if you only believed deeply enough and had no doubt, all mountains would move, and even a grain of faith as small as a mustard seed could prevail over hell. The final battle, after all, would be won by right, not might.

As if reading his thoughts, the other leaped forward and lashed out with his talons. Michael pulled back, but not quickly enough. Blood burst onto his coat, followed by pain that drove him to his knees. Weakly, he raised his hand to his ruined cheek.

"This isn't a game, boy. Your puny faith won't save you here!"

His enemy's breath reeked of scorn and the pit, but most of all, of a hatred so limitless and inimical to Michael's kind that it sought not just to destroy his body, but his soul as well. Above him, Satan waited, savoring the moment when Michael would be just an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

This, Michael hoped, was his only chance...and the other's fatal flaw.

Abjectly, he looked up. "W-what do you want?"

Huge ruby eyes descended, and he was face to face with pestilence. "Michael, my ancient enemy, all your pain and suffering I will spare, if you will only fall down and worship me!"

"Never."

"No?" The unspeakably vile visage writhed with mockery which somehow seemed piercingly familiar. "You

won't submit? You won't pledge your soul's allegiance to me?"

Blood trickled wetly down his cheek, and Michael bowed his head, fighting off a surge of faintness. "Not if you kill me," he whispered.

"Oh, I can do far worse than that." Michael saw the enormous talons grip the ice and felt his enemy stoop above him. "Your life is the *least* I can exact for such disobedience. Gaze into my eyes, boy, if you wish to see my *full* price."

Against his will, Michael obeyed and looked up, meeting the other's eyes which sucked at his soul and revealed the bottomless depths of the damned. The perdition of the pit burned there, realms forever banished from God's favor. There, horrors swarmed that harrowed the soul and shriveled love and honor in his breast. Michael swayed on his knees, face contorted, and even though he knew that the visions before him were a trick of the Prince of Tricksters and revealed his fate only if he *did* submit, it did not matter.

"Please. Oh, p-please let me--"

"Submit!"

"N-no."

"Fall down. Worship ME, and I will grant you the supreme pleasures of this temporal realm."

Suddenly, craftily, the other's aspect changed and Michael was lured by endless seductions. Kneeling, he trembled in an insane wind, torn by lusts and desires and vanities beyond his years and experience. But far worse than all the temptations that racked him, was the bleak, infinitely despairing knowledge that he was lost.

Above, Satan smiled, tasting his imminent triumph. "Yes," he soothed, his voice transcendently alluring, "that's right. Come to ME, fair angel Michael. Submit thyself to my will."

Though weak and about to fall, Michael felt something return to him. Strange words about a mustard seed. What was it? Oh, yes. Though faith be small...

"Michael, submit!"

Despite the vast will pressing down upon him, a rift opened and strength flowed in. Infinitesimal compared to the forces amassed against him, it yet continued to grow, and for an instant, Michael remembered and knew himself completely. Yes, *he* was the archangel Michael, and down through the ages he had grappled with his adversary many times. And would again, times without number.

He drew in his breath. Straightened.

"Michael," Satan warned. "Submit to my--"

Bleeding and faint, Michael gathered all that he was and lunged, his small hands seizing the other's massive, scaly throat. A howl of rage and despair stabbed his ears even as titanic wings bore them both aloft. Grimly, Michael tightened his grip on unyielding tissue that was beyond the reach of pain, and repeated the words he had used so often in so many languages.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," he said.

His enemy shrieked and darted, trying to shake Michael's small hands from his throat. Michael felt them both rise and then dive, but kept his eyes riveted to his foe's.

"*Get thee behind me, Satan!*"

Demonic rage rent the sky as Satan swooped and plunged with a force that would have shattered and dislodged mountains, yet Michael remained fast, the wind lashing his hair and narrowing his eyes to slits. A feather broader and longer than a man ripped free and plummeted to earth. Then another.

Michael opened his mouth. Screamed.
"GET THEE BEHIND ME, SATAN!"

A final scream--the wail of the damned. Then, abruptly, there was nothing between his fingers except air. And nothing beneath him either, he saw, except spine-tingling heights.

Fainting, Michael opened his hands and fell....

A moment later, or a century, he opened his eyes. He lay on snow which stretched away in all directions like a white sea. An arctic breeze fanned his cheek.

No pain.

Instantly he remembered and climbed to his feet, fingering his cheek. It was whole, untouched. And the--?

He turned, gazing at the snowman which gleamed equally untouched in a shaft of brilliant light. He looked up. Above, a patch of clear sky had formed, framing the sun.

A dream. It had all been a dream.

He rubbed his eyes, his feet completely numb now. Yes, he must have fallen asleep in the cold. It had all been...

Something lay on the snow and he hobbled over to it.

When he realized what it was, he grinned. His heart felt suddenly joyful, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

Slowly, ignoring the pain, he knelt on frozen knees and reached out to touch the great, glittering black feather that still carried a faint scent of sulphur. As he did, though, it faded and was gone.

He pulled his hand back. No matter. He had the memory. He *knew*.

At the front of the driveway, his father's truck appeared and labored toward him. Michael watched it, trying to make the transition from all that had happened...to this. Finally he remembered his father had asked him to help his mother and would require an accounting.

Calmly, he rose and squared his shoulders, waiting for his father's arrival. Though he knew he had disobeyed, Michael smiled, for he knew also that he would never have difficulty meeting his father's eyes again.

John B. Rosenman is an Associate Professor of English at Norfolk State University where he is the editor of *The Rheorician*, the schools literary and art magazine. His novel *The Best Laugh Last* was published by McPherson & Company, and he is one of the editors of a major anthology to be released this fall by Kendall/Hunt: *Variations on Humankind: An Introduction to World Literature*. His fiction/poetry have appeared in *Aboriginal SF*, *New Blood*, *The Horror Show*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Yankee*, and others.

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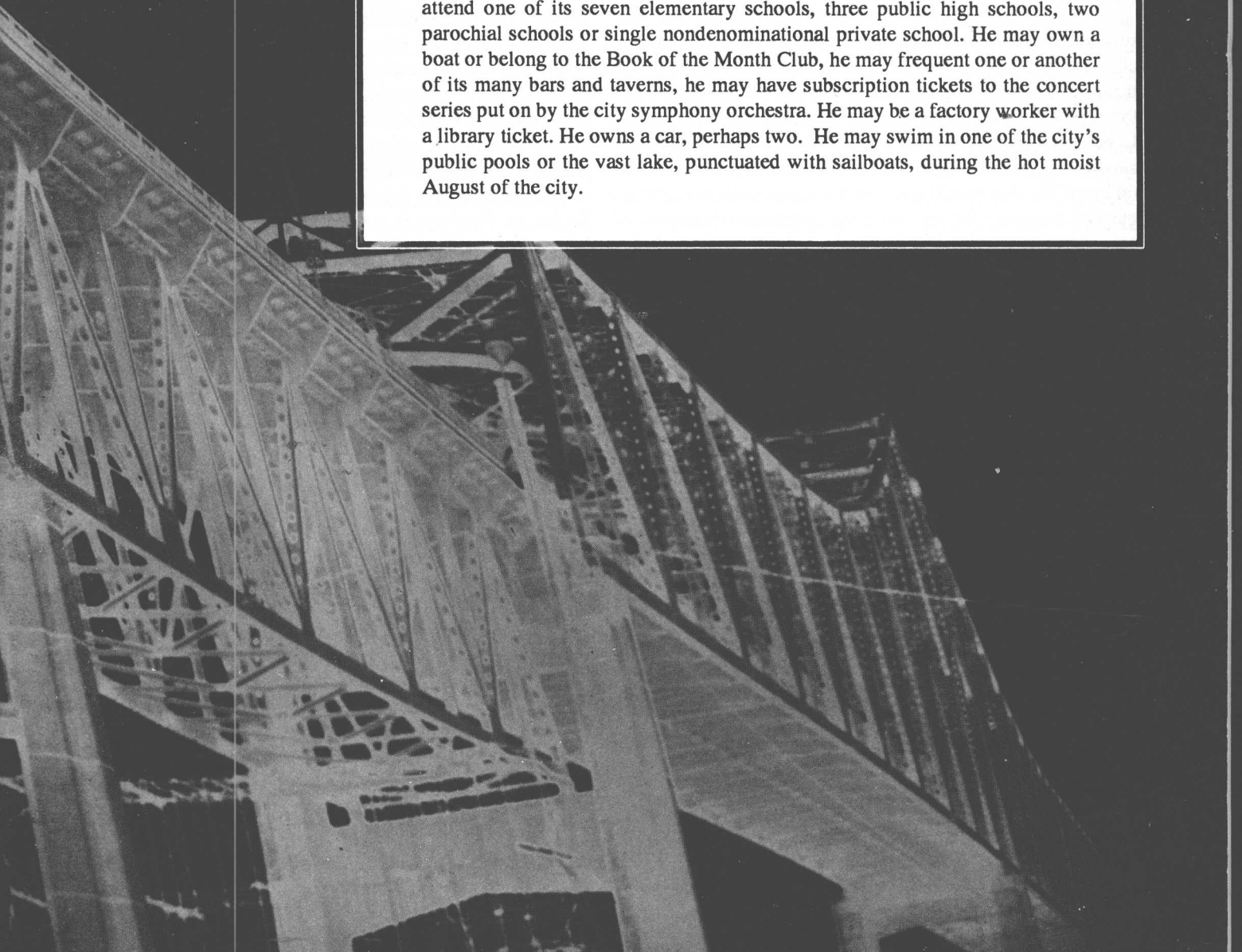
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Peter Straub
A Short Guide
to the City

Illustrations by J. K. Potter

The viaduct killer, named for the location where his victims' bodies have been discovered, is still at large. There have been six victims to date, found by children, people exercising their dogs, lovers, or -- in one instance -- by policemen. The bodies lay sprawled, their throats slashed, partially sheltered by one or another of the massive concrete supports at the top of the slope beneath the great bridge. We assume that the viaduct killer is a resident of the city, a voter, a renter or property owner, a product of the city's excellent public school system, perhaps even a parent of children who even now attend one of its seven elementary schools, three public high schools, two parochial schools or single nondenominational private school. He may own a boat or belong to the Book of the Month Club, he may frequent one or another of its many bars and taverns, he may have subscription tickets to the concert series put on by the city symphony orchestra. He may be a factory worker with a library ticket. He owns a car, perhaps two. He may swim in one of the city's public pools or the vast lake, punctuated with sailboats, during the hot moist August of the city.



A Short Guide to the City

For this is a Midwestern city, northern, with violent changes of season. The extremes of climate, from ten or twenty below zero to up around one hundred in the summer, cultivate an attitude of acceptance in its citizens, of insularity -- it looks inward, not out, and few of its children leave for the more temperate, uncertain, and experimental cities of the eastern or western coasts. The city is proud of its modesty -- it cherishes the ordinary, or what it sees as the ordinary, which is not. (It has had the same mayor for twenty-four years, a man of limited-to-average intelligence who has aged gracefully and has never had any other occupation of any sort.) Ambition, the yearning for fame, position, and achievement, is discouraged here. One of its citizens became the head of a small foreign state, another a famous bandleader, yet another a Hollywood staple who for decades played the part of the star's best friend and confidant; this, it is felt, is enough, and besides, all of these people are now dead. The city has no literary tradition. Its only mirror is provided by its two newspapers, which have thick sports sections and are comfortable enough to be read in bed.

The city's characteristic mode is denial. For this reason, an odd fabulousness permeates every quarter of the city, a receptiveness to fable, to the unrecorded. A river runs through the center of the business district, as the Liffey runs through Dublin, the Seine through Paris, the Thames through London and the Danube through Budapest, though our river is smaller and less consequential than any of these. In a sense the fables of the city radiate outward from this narrow undistinguished river, confirming its hidden uniqueness to itself -- as

does the presence of the great lake, though the lake, like the river, is not visible from most sections of the city, which has almost consciously turned its back upon it. One of its secrets is that it is not landlocked; another is that the river was not always useless.

Our lives are ordinary and exemplary, the citizens would say. We take part in the life of the nation, history courses through us for all our immunity to the national illnesses: it is even possible that in our ordinary lives ... we too have had our pulse taken by the great national seers and opinion-makers, for in us you may find...

Forty years ago, in winter, the body of a woman was found on the banks of the river. She had been raped and murdered, cast out of the human community -- a prostitute, never identified -- and the noises of struggle that must have accompanied her death went unnoticed by the patrons of the Green Woman Taproom, located directly above that point on the river where her body was discovered. It was an abnormally cold winter that year, a winter of shared misery, and within the Green Woman the music was loud, feverish, festive.

In that community, which is Irish and lives above its riverfront shops and bars, neighborhood children were supposed to have found a winged man huddling in a packing case, an aged man, half-starved, speaking a strange language none of the children knew. His wings were ragged and dirty, many of the feathers as cracked and threadbare as those of an old pigeon's, and his feet dirty and swollen. *Ull! Li! Gack!*, the children screamed at him, mocking the sounds that came from his mouth. They pelted him with rocks and snowballs, imag-



ining that he had crawled up from that same river which sent chill damp -- a damp as cold as cancer -- into their bones and bedrooms, which gave them earaches and chilblains, which in summer bred rats and mosquitos .

One of the city's newspapers is Democratic, the other Republican. Both papers ritually endorse the mayor, who though consummately political has no recognizable politics. Both of the city's newspapers also support the Chief of Police, crediting him with keeping the city free of the kind of violence which has undermined so many other American cities. None of our citizens goes armed, and our church attendance is still far above the national average.

We are ambivalent about violence.

We have very few public statues, mostly of Civil War Generals. On the lakefront, separated from the rest of the town by a six-lane expressway, stands the cube-like structure of the Arts Center, otherwise called the War Memorial. Its rooms are hung with mediocre paintings before which schoolchildren are led on tours by their teachers, most of whom were educated in our local school system.

Our teachers are satisfied, decent people, and the

You deplore violence, you do not recognize it.

statistics about alcohol and drug abuse among both students and teachers are very encouraging.

There is no need to linger at the War Memorial.

Proceeding directly north, you soon find yourself among the orderly, impressive precincts of the wealthy. It was in this sector of the town, known generally as the East Side, that the brewers and tanners who made our city's first great fortunes set up their mansions. Their houses have a northern, Germanic, even Baltic look which is entirely appropriate to our climate. Of grey stone or red brick, the size of factories or prisons, these stately buildings seem to conceal that vein of fantasy which is actually our most crucial inheritance. But it may be that the style of life -- the invisible, hidden life -- of these inbred merchants is itself fantastic, the multitude of servants, the maids and coachmen, the cooks and laundresses, the private zoos, the elaborate dynastic marriages and fleets of cars, the rooms lined with silk wallpaper, the twenty-course meals, the underground wine cellars and bomb shelters Of course we do not know if all of these things are true, or even if some of them are true. Our society folk keep to themselves, and what we know of them we learn chiefly from the newspapers, where they are pictured at their balls, standing with their beautiful daughters before fountains of champagne. The private zoos have been broken up long ago. As citizens, we are free to walk down the avenues, past the magnificent houses,

and to peer in through the gates at their coach-houses and lawns. A uniformed man polishes a car, four tall young people in white play tennis on a private court.

The viaduct killer's victims have all been adult women.

While you continue moving north you will find that as the houses diminish in size the distance between them grows greater. Through the houses, now without gates and coach-houses, you can glimpse a sheet of flat greyish-blue -- the lake. The air is free, you breathe it in. That is freedom, breathing this air from the lake. Free people may invent themselves in any image, and you may imagine yourself a prince of the earth, walking with an easy stride. Your table is set with linen, china, crystal, and silver, and as you dine, as the servants pass among you with the serving trays, the talk is educated, enlightened, without prejudice of any sort. The tabletalk is mainly about ideas, it is true, ideas of a conservative cast.

You deplore violence, you do not recognize it.

Further north lie suburbs, which are uninteresting.

If from the War Memorial you proceed south, you cross the viaduct. Beneath you is a valley -- the valley is perhaps best seen in the dead of winter. All of our city welcomes winter, for our public buildings are grey stone fortresses which, on days when the temperature dips below zero and the old grey snow of previous storms swirls in the avenues, seem to bleed with the leaden air and become dreamlike and cloudy. This is how they were meant to be seen. The valley is called... it is called the Valley. Red flames tilt and waver at the tops of columns, and smoke pours from factory chimneys. The trees seem to be black. In the winter, the smoke from the factories becomes solid, like dark grey glaciers, and hangs in the dark air in defiance of gravity, like wings which are a light feathery grey at their tips and darken imperceptibly toward black, toward pitchy black at the point where these great frozen glaciers, these dirigibles, would join the body at the shoulder. The bodies of the great birds to which these wings are attached must be imagined.

In the old days of the city, the time of the private zoos, wolves were bred in the Valley. Wolves were in great demand in those days. Now the wolf-ranches have been entirely replaced by factories, by rough taverns owned by retired shop foremen, by spurs of the local railroad line, and by narrow streets lined with rickety frame houses and shoe-repair shops. Most of the old wolf-breeders were Polish, and though their kennels, grassy yards, and barbed-wire exercise runs have disappeared, at least one memory of their existence endures: the Valley's street signs are in the Polish language. Tourists are advised to skirt the Valley, and it is always recommended that photographs be confined to the interesting views obtained by looking down from the viaduct. The more courageous visitors, those in search of pungent experience, are cautiously directed to the taverns of the ex-foremen, in particular the oldest of these (the Rusty Nail) and the Brace 'n

A Short Guide to the City

Bit), where the wooden floors have so softened and furred with lavings and scrubbing that the boards have come to resemble the pelts of long narrow short-haired animals. For the intrepid, these words of caution: do not dress conspicuously, and carry only small amounts of cash. Some working knowledge of Polish is also advised.

Continuing further south, we come to the Polish district proper, which also houses pockets of Estonians and Lithuanians. More than the city's sadly declining downtown area, this district has traditionally been regarded as the city's heart, and has remained unchanged for more than a hundred years. Here the visitor may wander freely among the markets and street fairs, delighting in the sight of well-bundled children rolling hoops, patriarchs in tall fur hats and long beards, and women gathering around the numerous communal water-pumps. The sausages and stuffed cabbage sold at the foodstalls may be eaten with immunity, and the local beer is said to be of an unrivalled purity. Violence in this district is invariably domestic, and the visitor may feel free to enter the frequent political discussions, which in any case partake of a nostalgic character. In late January or early February the "South Side" is at its best, with the younger people dressed in multi-layered heavy woolen garments decorated with the "reindeer" or "snowflake" motif, and the older women of the community seemingly vying to see which of them can outdo the others in the thickness, blackness, and heaviness of her outergarments and in the severity of the traditional headscarf known as the *babushka*. In late winter the neatness and orderliness of these colorful folk may be seen at its best, for the wandering visitor

will often see the bearded paterfamilias sweeping and shovelling not only his immaculate bit of sidewalk (for these houses are as close together as those of the wealthy along the lakefront, so near to one another that until very recently telephone service was regarded as an irrelevance), but his tiny front lawn as well, with its Marian shrines, creches, ornamental objects such as elves, trolls, postboys, etc. It is not unknown for residents here to proffer the stranger an invitation to inspect their houses, in order to display the immaculate condition of the kitchen with its well-blackened woodstove and polished ornamental tiles, and perhaps even extend a thimble-glass of their own peach or plum brandy to the thirsty visitor.

Alcohol, with its associations of warmth and comfort, is ubiquitous here, and it is the rare family that does not devote some portion of the summer to the preparation of that winter's plenty.

For these people, violence is an internal matter, to be resolved within or exercised upon one's own body and soul or those of one's immediate family. The inhabitants of these neat, scrubbed little houses with their statues of Mary and cathedral tiles, the descendants of the hard-drinking wolf-breeders of another time, have long since abandoned the practice of crippling their children to ensure their continuing exposure to parental values, but self-mutilation has proved more difficult to eradicate. Few blind themselves now, but many a grandfather conceals a three-fingered hand within his embroidered mitten. Toes are another frequent target of self-punishment, and the prevalence of cheerful, even boisterous



shops, always crowded with old men telling stories, which sell the handcarved wooden legs known as "pegs" or "dollies," speaks of yet another.

No one has ever suggested that the viaduct killer is a South Side resident.

The South Siders live in a profound relationship to violence, and its effects are invariably implosive rather than explosive. Once a decade, perhaps twice a decade, one member of a family will realize, out of what depths of cultural necessity the outsider can only hope to imagine, that the whole family must die -- be sacrificed, to speak with greater accuracy. Axes, knives, bludgeons, bottles, babushkas, ancient derringers, virtually every imaginable implement has been used to carry out this aim. The houses in which this act of sacrifice has taken place are immediately if not instantly cleaned by the entire neighborhood, acting in concert. The bodies receive a Catholic burial in consecrated ground, and a mass is said in honor of both the victims and their murderer. A picture of the departed family is installed in the church which abuts Market Square,

The ghetto's relationship to violence is unknown.

and for a year the house is kept clean and dust-free by the grandmothers of the neighborhood. Men young and old will quietly enter the house, sip the brandy of the "removed," as they are called, meditate, now and then switch on the wireless or the television set, and reflect on the darkness of earthly life. The departed are frequently said to appear to friends and neighbors, and often accurately predict the coming of storms and assist in the location of lost household objects, a treasured button or mother's sewing-needle. After the year has elapsed, the house is sold, most often to a young couple, a young blacksmith or market-vendor and his bride, who find the furniture and even the clothing of the "removed" welcome additions to their small household.

These are people both landlocked and insular, islanded within the land, to whom the great grey lake is as remote as a myth. They fear and despise the river, which they know to be poisoned by the factories in the Valley and which has flooded the South Side regularly since the founding of the city in 1768. No South Sider swims, fishes, or eats fish. The visitor will notice that whenever possible, their houses face west (or south-west, or north-west), in order that they may face away from the river.

Further south are suburbs and impoverished hamlets, which do not compel a visit.

Immediately west of the War Memorial is the city's downtown. Before its decline, this was the city's business district and administrative center, and the monuments of its

affluence remain. Marching directly west on the wide avenue which begins at the expressway are the Federal Building, the Post Office, and the great edifice of City Hall. Each is an entire block long and constructed of granite blocks quarried far north in the state. Flights of marble stairs lead up to the massive doors of these structures, and crystal chandeliers can be seen through many of the windows. The facades are classical and severe, uniting in an architectural landscape of granite revetments and colonnades of pillars. (Within, these grand and inhuman buildings have long ago been carved and partitioned into warrens illuminated by bare lightbulbs or flickering fluorescent tubing, each tiny office with its worn counter for petitioners and a stamped sign proclaiming its function: Tax & Excise, Dog Licenses, Passports, Graphs & Charts, Registry of Notary Publics, and the like. The larger rooms with chandeliers which face the avenue, reserved for civic receptions and banquets, are seldom used.)

In the next sequence of buildings are the Hall of Records, the Police Headquarters, and the Criminal Courts Building. Again, wide empty marble steps lead up to massive bronze doors, rows of columns, glittering windows which on wintry days reflect back the grey empty sky. Local craftsmen, many of them descendants of the city's original French settlers, forged and installed the decorative iron bars and grilles on the facade of the Criminal Courts building.

After we pass the massive, nearly windowless brick facades of the Gas and Electric buildings, we reach the arching metal drawbridge over the river. Looking downriver, we can see its muddy banks and the lights of the terrace of the Green Woman Taproom, now a popular gathering place for the city's civil servants. (A few feet further east is the spot from which a disgruntled lunatic attempted and failed to assassinate President Dwight D. Eisenhower.) Further on stand the high cement walls of several breweries. The drawbridge has not been raised since 1956, when a corporate yacht passed through.

Beyond the drawbridge lies the old mercantile center of the city, with its adult bookstores, pornographic theaters, coffee shops, and its rank of old department stores. These now house discount outlets selling roofing tiles, mufflers and other auto parts, plumbing equipment, and cut-rate clothing, and most of their display windows have been boarded or bricked in since the civic disturbances of 1968. Various civic plans have failed to revive this area, though the cobblestones and gas streetlamps installed in the optimistic mid-seventies can for the most part still be seen. Connoisseurs of the poignant will wish to take a moment to appreciate them, though they should seek to avoid the bands of ragged children which frequent this area at nightfall, for though these children are harmless they can become pressing in their pleas for small change.

Many of these children inhabit dwellings they have constructed themselves in the vacant lots between the adult bookstores and fast-food outlets of the old mercantile district, and the "treehouses" atop mounds of tires, most of them several stories high and utilizing fire escapes and flights of

A Short Guide to the City

stairs scavenged from the old department stores, are of some architectural interest. The stranger should not attempt to penetrate these "children's cities," and on no account should offer them any more than the pocket change they request or display a camera, jewelry, or an expensive wristwatch. The truly intrepid tourist seeking excitement may hire one of these children to guide him to the diversions of his choice. Two dollars is the usual gratuity for this service.

It is not advisable to purchase any of the goods the children themselves may offer for sale, although they have been affected by the same self-consciousness evident in the impressive buildings on the other side of the river and do sell picture postcards of their largest and most eccentric constructions. It may be that the naive architecture of these treehouses represents the city's most authentic artistic expression, and the postcards, amateurish as most of them are, provide interesting, perhaps even valuable, documentation of this expression of what may be called folk art.

These industrious children of the mercantile area have ritualized their violence into highly formalized tattooing and "spontaneous" forays and raids into the treehouses of opposing tribes during which only superficial injuries are sustained, and it is not suspected that the viaduct killer comes from their number.

Further west are the remains of the city's museum and library, devastated during the civic disturbances, and beyond these picturesque, still-smoking hulls lies the ghetto. It is not advised to enter the ghetto on foot, though the tourist who has arranged to rent an automobile may safely drive through it after he has negotiated his toll at the gatehouse. The ghetto's residents are completely self-sustaining, and the attentive tourist who visits this district will observe the multitude of tents housing hospitals, wholesale food and drug warehouses, and the like. Within the ghetto are believed to be many fine poets, painters, and musicians, as well as the historians known as "memorists," who are the district's living encyclopedias and archivists. The "memorist's" tasks include the memorization of the works of the area's poets, painters, etc, for the district contains no printing presses or art-supply shops, and these inventive and self-reliant people have devised this method of preserving their works. It is not believed that a people capable of inventing the genre of "oral painting" could have spawned the viaduct killer, and in any case no ghetto resident is permitted access to any other area of the city.

The ghetto's relationship to violence is unknown.

Further west the annual snowfall increases greatly, for seven months of the year dropping an average of two point three feet of snow each month upon the shopping malls and paper mills which have concentrated here. Dust storms are common during the summers, and certain infectious viruses, to which the inhabitants have become immune, are carried in the water.

Still further west lies the Sports Complex.

The tourist who has ventured thus far is well advised to turn back at this point and return to our beginning, the War Memorial. Your car may be left in the ample and clearly posted parking lot on the Memorial's eastern side. From the Memorial's wide empty terraces, you are invited to look south-east, where a great unfinished bridge crosses half the span to the hamlets of Wyatt and Arnoldville. Construction was abandoned on this noble civic project, subsequently imitated by many cities in our western states and in Australia and Finland, immediately after the disturbances of 1968, when its lack of utility became apparent. When it was noticed that many families chose to eat their bag lunches on the Memorial's lakes interrupted arc, the bridge was adopted as the symbol of the city and its image decorates the city's many flags and medals.

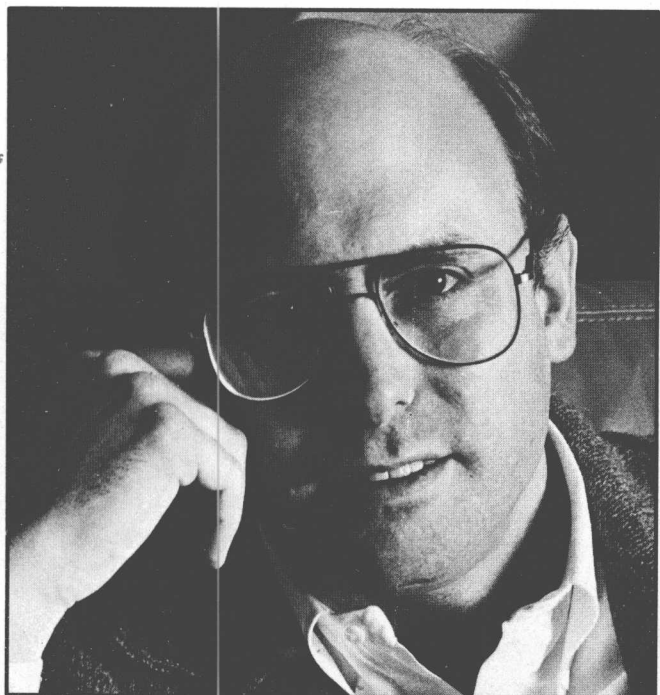
The "Broken Span" as it is called, which hangs in the air like the great frozen wings above The Valley, serves no function but the symbolic. In itself and entirely by accident this great non-span memorializes violence, not only by serving as reference to the workmen who lost their lives during its construction (its non-construction.) It is not rounded or finished in any way, for labor on the bridge ended abruptly, even brutally, and from its truncated floating end dangle lengths of rusting iron webbing, thick wire cables weighted by chunks of cement, and bits of old planking material. In the days before access to the un-bridge was walled off by an electrified fence, two or three citizens each year elected to commit their suicides by leaping from the end of the span; and one must resort to a certain lexical violence when referring to it. Ghetto residents are said to have named it "Whitey," and the treehouse children call it "Ursula," after one of their own killed in the disturbances. South Siders refer to it as "The Ghost," civil servants, "The Beast," and East Siders simply as "that thing." The "Broken Span" has the violence of all unfinished things, of everything interrupted or left undone. In violence there is often the quality of *yearning* -- the yearning for completion. For closure. For that which is absent and would if present bring to fulfillment. For the body without which the wing is a useless frozen ornament. It ought not to go unmentioned that most of the city's residents have never seen the "bridge" except in its representations, and for this majority the "bridge" is little more or less than a myth, being without any actual referent. It is pure idea.

Violence, it is felt though unspoken, is the physical form of sensitivity. The city believes this. Incompletion, the lack of referent which strands you in the realm of pure idea, demands release from itself. We are above all an American city, and what we believe most deeply we...."

The victims of the viaduct killer, that citizen who excites our attention, who makes us breathless with outrage and causes our police force to ransack the humble dwellings along the riverbank, have all been adult women. These women in their middle years are taken from their lives and set like statues beside the pillar. Each morning there is more pedes-

trian traffic on the viaduct, in the frozen mornings men (mainly men) come with their lunches in paper bags, walking slowly along the cement walkway, not looking at one another, barely knowing what they are doing, looking down over the edge of the viaduct, looking away, dawdling, finally leaning like fishermen against the railing, waiting until they can no longer delay going to their jobs.

The visitor who has done so much and gone so far in this city may turn his back on the "Broken Span," the focus of civic pride, and look in a south-westerly direction past the six lanes of the expressway, perhaps on tiptoe (children may have to mount one of the convenient retaining walls). The dull flanks of the viaduct should just now be visible, with the heads and shoulders of the waiting men picked out in the grey air like brush strokes. The quality of their yearning, its expectancy, is visible even from here.



© André Moreaux

Peter Straub has published ten novels, among them, the best sellers *Ghost Story*, *Shadowlands*, *Floating Dragon*, *Koko*, and *Mystery*. He has also had published two novellas in hard back form: *The general's Wife* and *Blue Rose*, two books of poetry: *Open Air* and *Leeson Park and Bellsizes Square*, and one short story collection *Houses Without Doors*. He is Currently at work on his next novel *The Throat*. Peter Straub lives in New York.

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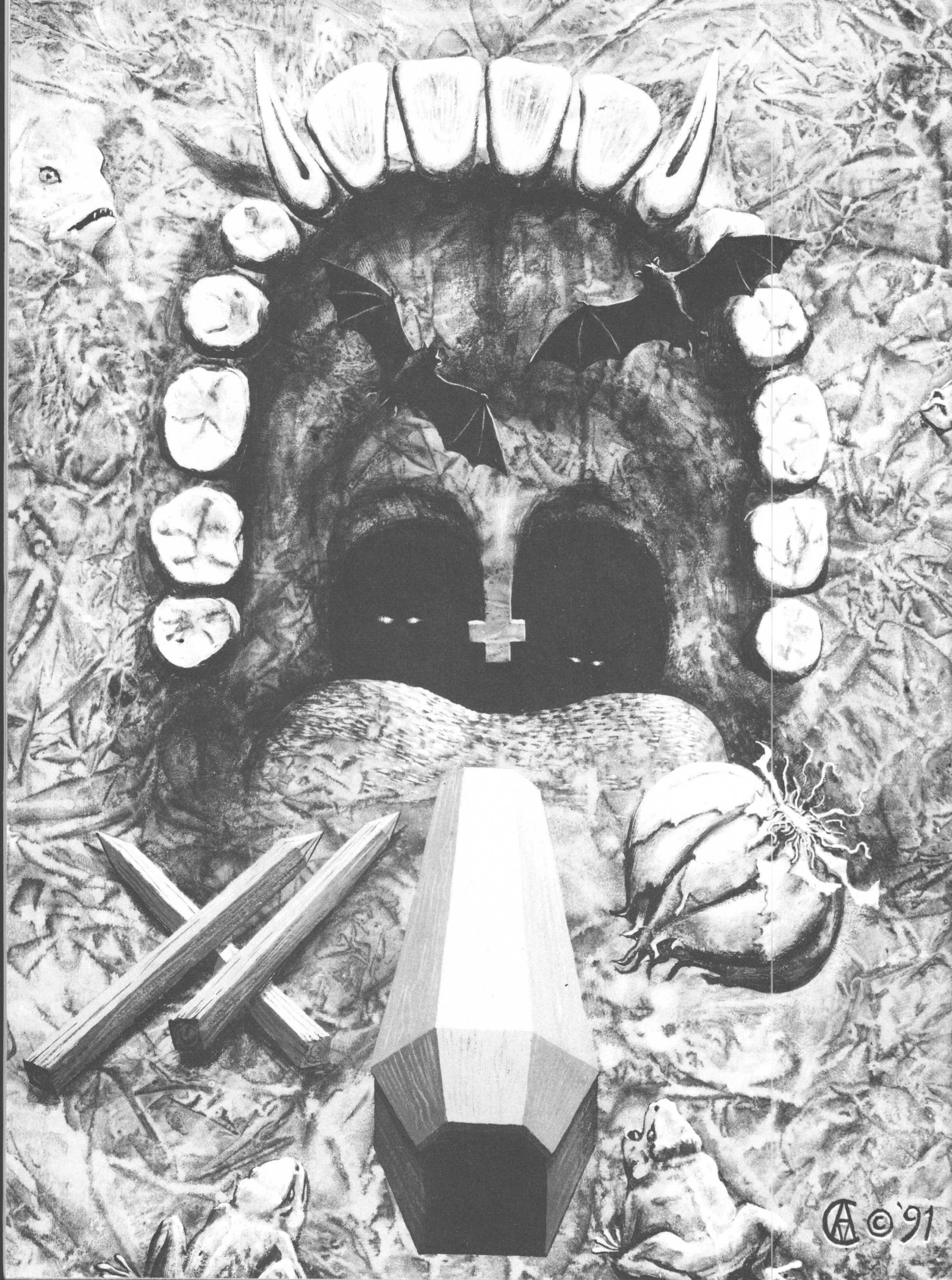
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Sneak Preview:



Two scenes from J.K. Potter's forthcoming graphic novel *Louisiana Breakdown*





Getting Dead

by William F. Nolan

He'd been trying to commit suicide for the past six thousand years. Off and on. No real pattern to it, just whenever he got really depressed about having to live forever, or when one of his straight friends died (for the most part, he found other vampires a gloomy lot and had always enjoyed outside, non-blood contacts).

But suicide had never worked out for him. His will to survive, to live forever, was incredibly intense and fought against his sporadic attempts at self-extinction. He'd locked himself out of his castle several times and thrown away the key, figuring if he couldn't get inside to his casket before sunrise he'd be cooked to a fine black ash. (He'd seen dozens of movies about vampires and always enjoyed it whenever the sun melted one of them.) Yet each time he locked himself out he found a way to slip back into the damn castle ... as a bat, or a wisp of smoke, or (twice) as a toad. His infernal shape-change ability invariably defeated these lock-out attempts.

Then, several times down the centuries, he devised ways to drive a stake through his heart -- but never got it right. Helsinki: stake through his shoulder. London: stake through his upper thigh. Dusseldorf: stake through his left foot (he limped for six months) and so on. Never once in the heart. So he gave that up.

He tried boiled garlic in Yugoslavia. Prepared a tasty stew and had the garlic dumped in by a perverted dwarf pal of his. Devoured the entire bowl, belched, and sat back to die. But all he did was throw up over the dwarf, who found the whole incident most disgusting.

In the Black Forest of Germany he leaped from the roof of a village church onto a cross, ending up with some painful skin blisters where the cross had burned through his cape -- but it didn't come *close* to killing him.

He drank a quart of holy water at Lourdes, resulting in a severe case of diarrhea.

And, naturally, he had talked several of his straight friends into attempting to kill him at various times, but either he killed them first or they bungled the job.

So here he was, Count Arnold Whatever (he hadn't been able to remember his last name for the past seven hundred years), walking the night streets of Beverly Hills in the spring of 1991, determined to do away with himself but lacking a conclusive plan of action.

That was when he saw the ad.

It was block-painted on the wooden back of a bus stop bench:

Getting Dead



ANYTHING, INC.

**Come to us if all else fails.
For the proper fee, we'll do anything.
Open 24 Hours!
We're Never Closed to YOU!**

Arnold was in a
hurry, so he
shape-changed
and flapped over.

And the address was right there in Beverly Hills. On Rodeo Drive near Wilshire.

Arnold was in a hurry, so he shape-changed and flapped over. He came through the office door as a bat (lots of screaming from the night secretary) and changed back into human form at the desk.

No appointment. He'd just flown in to demand service.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the tall man (he was flushed and balding) behind the desk of ANYTHING, INC.

"I am Count Arnold, and I am here to test the validity of your bus stop advertisement -- that for the proper fee you can do anything."

Mr. Anything (for that is how Arnold thought of him) settled back in his chair and lit a large Cuban cigar. "I got two questions."

"So ask."

"What do you want done, and how much can you pay me to do it?"

"I want to stop being a vampire. And I will pay with these." Arnold produced a bag of emeralds and rubies, spilling the jewels across the desk.

Mr. Anything put a glass to his eye and examined each stone. That took ten full minutes. Then he looked up and smiled. "How old are you?"

"I am just a shade over ten thousand years old," said Arnold. "And for the first four thousand years I was content to be a vampire. Then I got bored. Then depressed. I have not been really happy for six thousand years."

Mr. Anything shifted his cigar. "I don't believe in vampires."

"I didn't either until I became one."

"Show me your teeth."

Arnold did. The two hollow fangs, needle sharp, with which he sucked blood were quite evident when he opened his mouth.

"You live off human blood?"

"That is correct."

"What's it taste like?"

"Depends. Most of the time it tastes fine. Then again, I've had some that was downright bitter. But I never complain. I take it as it comes."

Mr. Anything got up from the desk, walked to the door and closed it firmly. "Prove to me you're a vampire."

Arnold shrugged. "The only way to do that would be for me to suck all the blood from your body over a period of weeks -- starting tonight."

"All right," said Mr. Anything with a note of sourness in his voice. "I'll take your word for it."

"I have tried literally everything to get rid of me," Arnold told him. "But I am very clever. I keep outsmarting myself, and just go on living. On and on and on. Living, living, living."

"I get your point," said the tall man.

"So ... you have the jewels. They are worth a king's ransom. In fact, at one time in Bulgaria, they were a king's ransom, but that's neither here nor there. What I wish to know is," and Arnold leaned close to him, "how do you intend to dispose of me?"

Mr. Anything took a step back. "Your breath --"

"I know. It's fetid. There's just no way to keep it fresh." He frowned. "Well?"

"I could chain you to a post in full daylight and let the sun --"

"No, no, that's absolutely no good," said Arnold. "I'd just shape-change into a sewer rat and head for the nearest sewer. Sunlight's not the answer."

Mr. Anything paced the room, puffing out cannon

bursts of cigar smoke. "I'm sure that a stake through the heart would --"

Arnold shook his head. "I've tried the stake thing over and over and I'm telling you it's a waste of time."

"C'mon, you gotta be kidding. You mean even with you all snug in the coffin and me leaning over you with a big mallet to pound it into your chest while you sleep?"

"Won't work. Vampires are light sleepers. When we feel the point of a sharpened stake tickle our skin we jump." Arnold sighed. "I'd just reach up from the coffin and tear your throat out."

Mr. Anything thought that over. "Yeah .. well, that would not be so good."

He kept pacing. Then he stopped, turned to Arnold, and clapped him on the shoulder. "I got it." He grinned. "Your troubles are over."

"Really?" Arnold looked skeptical.

"Believe me, you're as good as dead. I mean *dead* dead. My word on it."

And they shook hands.

A week later, on a clouded night, Arnold woke up. Mr. Anything had obviously used some kind of drug on him. So he couldn't shape-change.

His neck was sore.

He reached up to touch it. Something had bitten him. The wound was newly-inflicted; there was blood on his fingertips.

This was stupid. You don't kill a vampire by having another vampire bite him (or her). That's how it all starts in the first place.

He felt the wound again. Multiple teeth bites -- not just the usual twin fang marks.

Something else had bitten him ... *changed* him.

The clouds parted and the moon was full.

Hair was sprouting out of his skin in rough brown clumps. And he felt his jaw lengthen.

Arnold howled.

And he happened to be knowledgeable enough about the real world of Night Creatures to know that a silver bullet was totally ineffectual.

Damn!

William F. Nolan's short fiction has appeared in over 125 anthologies including *Shadows 3*, *Whispers VI*, *Modern Masters of Horror*, and *Masques* to name just a few. He is the co-author of the novel *Logan's Run* (with George Clayton Johnson) and author of parts 2 & 3 of *Logan: A Trilogy*. His screen and television credits include *Burnt Offerings*, and *Trilogy of Terror*. Among his many honors, Nolan is the twice winner of the Edgar Allen Poe Special Award for his contributions to the mystery genre. Nolan also informs us that out of the hundreds of short fiction pieces he has written, this is his first vampire tale.



The Real Horror Show

Edited by Tom Elliott

LAKE CITY, FLORIDA

Five young Dungeons & Dragons players are arrested and charged with grave-robbing after they reportedly dig up the body of a suicide victim and use it as a centerpiece for a ceremony in the fantasy game. (submitted by Ed Yarb)

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

A woman who told police she couldn't find a babysitter she could trust is charged with criminal restraint after she locks her 5-year-old daughter in her car trunk while she worked in a local shopping mall. (submitted by Cary G. Osborne)

WEST BEND, WISCONSIN

A 38-year-old man is arrested shortly after he reported to police that his 11-month-old son was abducted. Police say the man killed his child by burying him alive; an autopsy of the corpse finds that the boy died of asphyxiation as he struggled to claw his way up through the earth. (submitted by Lyn Venable)

NORTH COVENTRY, PENNSYLVANIA

An 18-year-old man is arrested after his mother tells police that he raped her in the early morning hours. Police say the man was charged with rape, involuntary deviate sexual intercourse, indecent exposure, recklessly endangerment, simple assault, and harassment. (submitted by Donald F. Surr)

PINE BLUFF, ARKANSAS

A Florida man distraught over family problems, tells patrons of a roadside diner here that although he doesn't know them, the pressure has gotten to him and they'd better get out. According to police, the man then went outside, got in his car, stepped on the gas, and drove through the front of the building. The restaurant manager said that the car stopped only when it collided with the back wall and a cigarette machine. "If it hadn't been raining," the manager said, "he would have made it all the way through." (submitted by Ed Yarb)

HILLSDALE, MICHIGAN

Jeffrey Van Patten is arrested and accused of murdering his live-in girlfriend. Police say relatives of the girl became suspicious when she didn't show up for her 19th birthday party, and an investigation revealed that Van Patten killed his girlfriend with a shotgun, then burned the body along with some tires. The fire did not completely consume the torso, police say, so Van Patten pulled it from the embers, used a chainsaw to cut it into smaller parts that could be easily eaten by his three Great Danes and an Alaskan husky. (submitted by Marie Lazzari)

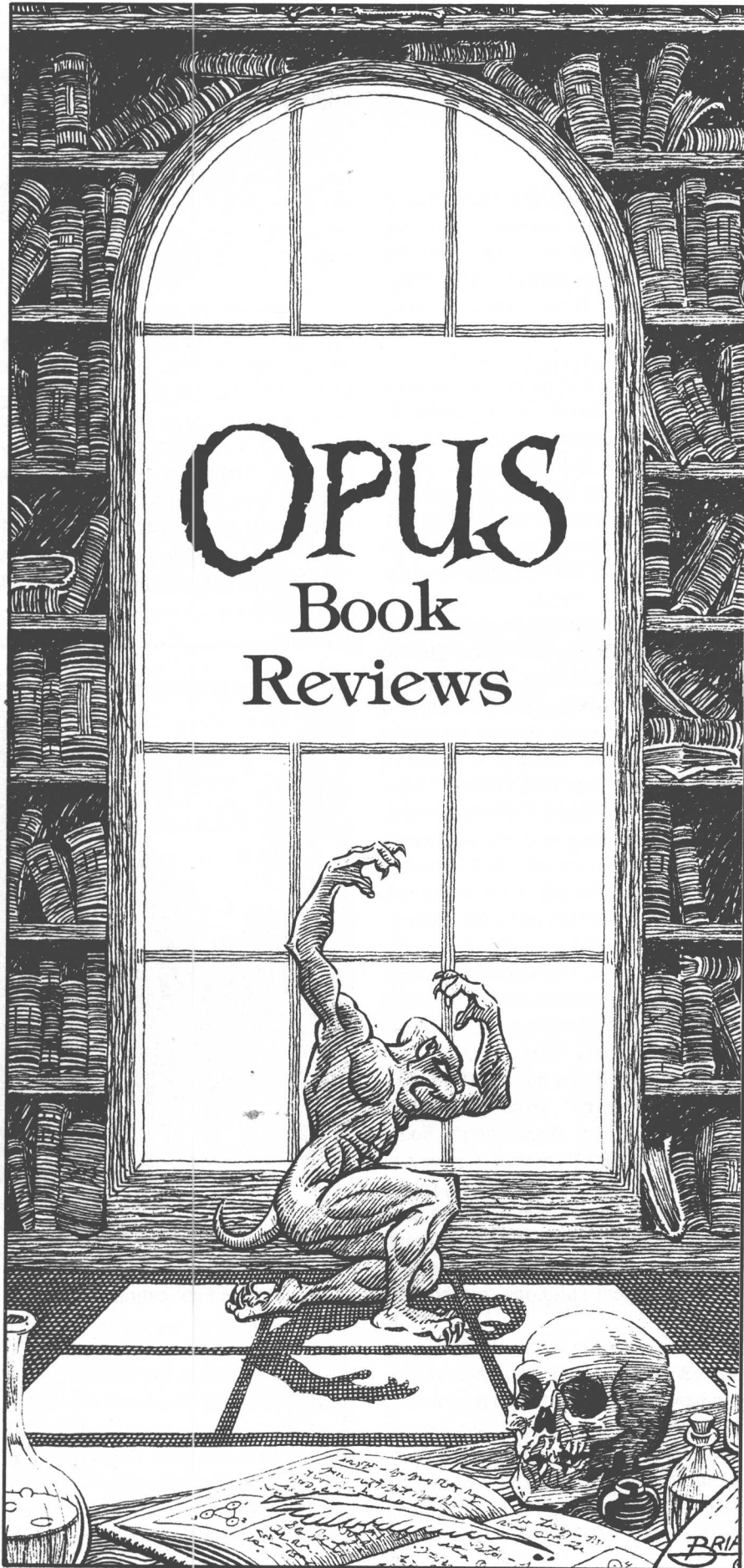
OMAHA, NEBRASKA

The IRS has decided it will not act on its notion to dig up the corpse of a man who it claims owed the government \$157,000 in back taxes. The IRS said that in addition to his convenient death, the man also paid an IRS agent \$4,000 to reduce his tax liability. (submitted by Ed Yarb)

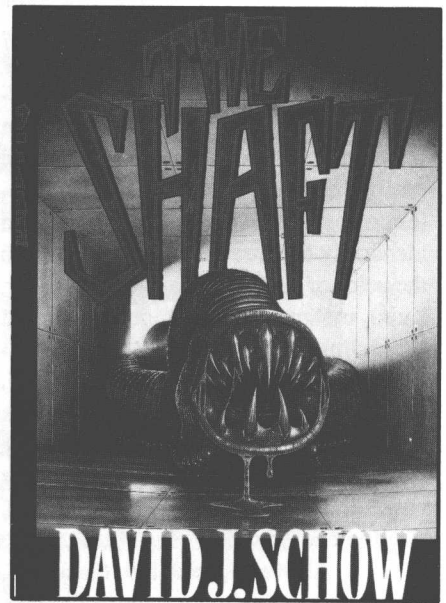
NAPLES, FLORIDA

Four elementary school boys are arrested for torturing and killing a kitten. Police say they smashed in it the head and repeatedly threw it into a canal until it drowned. (submitted by Ed Yarb)

[Iniquities will pay \$2 for each item used in "The Real Horror Show." Submit items to: Tom Elliott, "The Real Horror Show," 2170 South Harbor, #270, Anaheim, CA 92802. When submitting, include original or photocopy of article, name and date of publication, and your own name, address and phone number. Multiple submissions welcome. In case of duplicate submissions, the article with the earliest postmark will be credited. No material from supermarket tabloids will be considered. Elliott regrets that he cannot acknowledge unused items.]



by
Linda Marotta



The Shaft

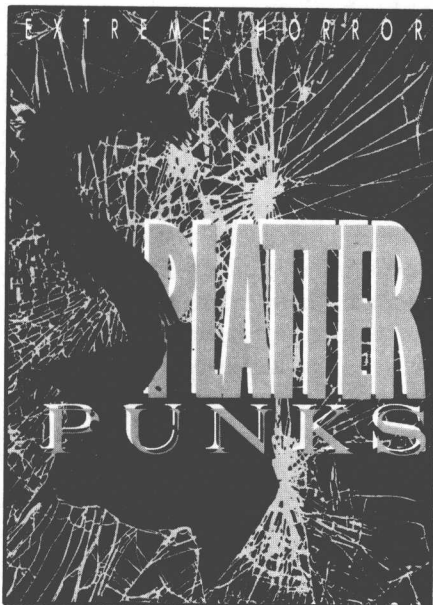
by David J. Schow
361 pp. MacDonald & Co. (Publishers)
Ltd. £12.95

Mama always told me never to discuss a man's *Shaft* in public, so I'll try to behave myself. Without question, David Schow is one of the finest writers of contemporary short horror fiction. *The Shaft* demonstrates considerable growth in his skill as a novelist since his first novel, *The Kill Riff*. The language is as turbo-charged as ever but the testosterone level has thankfully dropped, with far less macho posturing and ubiquitous phallic references (except of course for the monster depicted on the lurid British cover, described by Schow as a "big dick-eating turd worm"). *The Shaft* plunges the reader into a nasty, atmospheric tale of a grotesquely dilapidated apartment building, or rather, of a cancerous living organism and its parasites.

The Kenilworth Arms is a rotten subdivided nightmare of a dwelling. Walls move, windows seal themselves and tenants disappear, leaving body parts behind. Its extended-play soundtrack is the pulsing heartbeat that rises from the septic depths of its ventilation shaft. Outside, the relentless snow of a Chicago winter "shrouds [the city] in the

deceptive numbness of a lethal injection." Inside, the snow is even deadlier in the violent world of cocaine politics. The three main characters--good guy Jonathan, drug dealer Cruz and prostitute Jamaica--dodge murderous drug lords and confront the nauseating hungry creatures puked up by the Kenilworth. They each hope to improve their shabby, ineffectual lives and finally take a stand in the slime where they live. For some reason, most of the characters, regardless of age or background, speak in an identically hip, streetsmart banter (though the voice of that loveable cartoon butcher, Lupu, makes a cameo appearance) and the ending leaves most of the supernatural questions frustratingly unexplained. Shit happens, I guess. This is a book where romantic aspirations continually slam into the pavement of reality. Life is painful. But often it's a "Cleansing pain, like the cauterization of a wound."

Above all, read it for the words. They drip: "Clabbered mucoid paste voided from the raw hole of the esophageal tube in thick pumping spasms." They hurt: "headaches that whacked chrome spikes into his brain." They surprise: "letting Camela jab a 24-karat circle pin through his ballbag." They smirk: "the room filled up with cheeseburger-breathing Jell-O dragons doing the frug." Schow's gooey prose is protein-rich and good for you. Get it from a dealer or a specialty store that imports and give someone you love *The Shaft*.



Splatterpunk: Extreme Horror

edited by Paul M. Sammon
346 pp, St. Martin's Press,
\$14.95

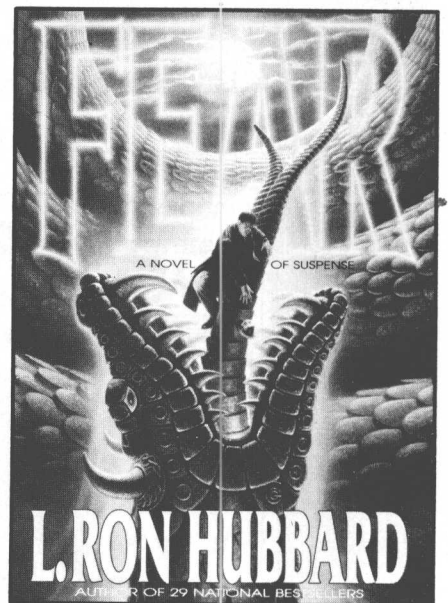
"Black pools welled up in the sockets of the woman's still staring *o god why couldn't he have just raped me and masturbated in my face instead of KILLING me eyes.*" from "Rapid Transit," by Wayne Allen Sallee.

Splatterpunk is that notoriously graphic subgenre of horror distinguished by confrontational fiction drenched in blood, semen, drool and excrement. *Splatterpunk* gathers together 16 stories (2 originals) and 2 essays into one convenient volume presenting a provocative introduction for the uninitiated and the brave.

The selection of stories range from the sublimely subversive (Joe R. Lansdale, Clive Barker, John Skipp) to the crudely shocking (Mick Garris, Rex Miller, J.S. Russell). Among the superior offerings are: Douglas E. Winter's elegant satire "Less Than Zombie," about typically brain-dead Californians "And, oh yeah, the thing with the zombies"; Philip Nutman's original "Full Throttle," about aimless British teenagers speeding towards oblivion and Chas. Balun's hilariously erudite piece on the nastier of splatter films. Unforgettable images are found in the corpsehandler of George R.R. Martin's "Meathouse Man," caught between love and "female meat," and the woman in Roberta Lannes' "Goodbye, Dark Love," lazily putting out cigarettes on her dead lover's body. Common elements are pain, viscera and (defenders' claims to the contrary) overwhelmingly female victims, with only the exceptional heroines of Ed Bryant, John Skipp and Lannes breaking free through violent solutions to their victimhood.

There are those who feel, controversially, that Mr. Sammon should not have been the one to edit this particular anthology -- notably Craig Spector and David Schow, whose boycott prevents it from being definitive. Indeed, rather than clarifying the subject, Sammon's essay, "Outlaws," is mostly a lot

of confusing PR. He refuses to define s-punk (then does so repeatedly), claims it's not a movement (while tracing its origins) and acknowledges that more than half of the contributors are not splatterpunks (resulting in overuse of the annoying adjective 'splatterpunklike'). His analysis is all over the place, citing the influences of punk rock, pornography, Ellison, Burroughs, serial killers, Vietnam and the Bible. He makes a few fine critical points about specific works, but it's difficult to separate the healthy blood from the bile. Obnoxiously, he gives away endings, inserts himself into even the stories' intros and includes three (!) separate bios of himself. Still, this enthusiastic splatterpunk wannabe must be credited with spotlighting some excellent, deserving, *outrageous* works of subversion by some of the most gleefully enthusiastic gore-gangstas this side of the Styx.



Fear

by L. Ron Hubbard
182 pp. Bridge Publications, Inc.
\$16.95

From the 1930's to the 1980's L. Ron Hubbard produced a vast amount of stories in subjects ranging from adventure to western to mystery to science fiction. Anyone who hasn't yet found the time to dig into the massive *Battlefield Earth* or ten volume *Mission Earth* should defi-

nitely experience Fear and find out just what all the noise is about. When a Stephen King quote *urges* us to read something, it ain't just another blurb. Written in 1940, this classic of one man's descent into paranoia is considered by many to be a seminal work of horror fiction.

Professor James Lowry's nightmare commences when he returns from Mexico with a case of malaria and publishes a newspaper article in which he offers "his head in a basket" to anyone who can show him an actual demon. A skeptical ethnologist, he believes devils are the invention of manipulative witch doctors bent on controlling others through their fear. When the article causes his dismissal from his university post, a friend suggests that the demons may be punishing him for his sacrilege. Soon after, Lowry finds he cannot account for four hours in his day and his entire grip on reality starts to slip. The wind blows cold, mists snatch at him, ghostly voices call his name and his wife seems to have sprouted yellow fangs. Shadowy phantoms flickering just out of sight and full-fledged visions of hangmen and pagan ceremonies cause him to reconsider the validity of superstitions and the possibility of a human psychic sense.

Is his dilemma due to madness, the supernatural or illness? We can all recognize how a fever affects our very consciousness and how any sort of an altered state can knock us off our feet and into a spiritual crisis. Yet, even the reader's profound identification with Lowry's plight little prepares one for the truly surprising ending. Cinematic images like the random marks on a wall that slowly turn into an emerging figure prevent this fine work from being dated and help horror fans acknowledge their roots while being frightened out of their wits.

Iniquities is both proud and honored to have reviewer Linda Marotta on our contributing editor staff. Her reviews have appeared in *Fangoria*, among other magazines.

Issue #3

Ray Bradbury!

New fiction by:

Douglas Winter

Mick Garris

Wayne Allen Sallee & H. Andrew Lynch

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Steve Rasnic Tem

Plus!

Interview with Richard Christian Matheson

And a special feature on KNB EFX GROUP by David J. Schow!

INIQUITIES
The Magazine of Great Terror and Wonder

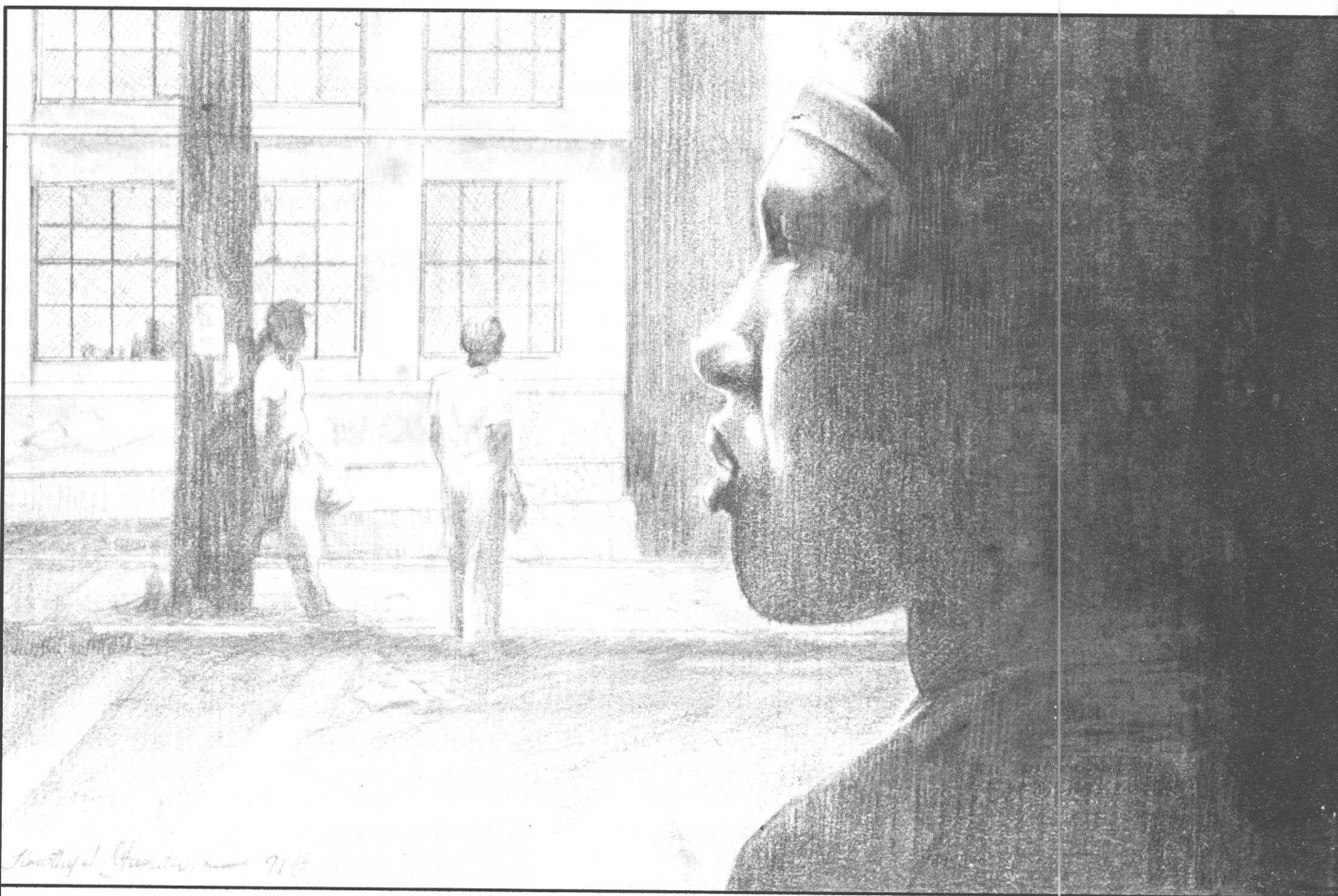
On Sale: July 1991

Hey!

Clive Barker Portfolios are still available!

With a one year subscription to *Iniquities*, you can receive a limited edition Clive Barker Portfolio containing the original illustrations for "The Yattering and Jack" from issue #1, plus one never before published illo. Just send a clear copy of our ad on page 47, completely filled out with a check for a one year subscription, and you are eligible to receive the portfolio. Act now, only 100 are left!

First come, first served!



by Brian Hodge and William Relling Jr.

The madness percolates, like something molten and red-hot and growing hotter. Pressure builds until it becomes critical, and the madness explodes.

This way:

“Say, man, whadda you call this muthafucka?”

“Check it out, m’man. That’s a AR-15 se-mi-au-to-ma-tic.” Each syllable is carefully enunciated, waterfalling off the tongue.

“Where’d you get it?”

“My brother, Stanley, he know this dude owns a gun shop over by the freeway. When you a special customer, y’understand, he sell you somethin’ you can’t get over the counter.”

Laughter.

“Yeah. Stanley, he a *special* customer.”

More laughter.

Then: “So how you work the muthafucka, man?”

“How the fuck you think it works? It’s like a fuckin’ garden hose, man. You just point it and spray.”

“Like this?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Impatient. “Only don’t be pointin’ the muthafucka at me ...” A pause. Then urgently: “Get down, man. Hide.”

Moments later a hand slaps the side of the car, rapping for attention. A voice calls to a pair of figures moving up the sidewalk, “Yo, Homes! Yo, Homey! Say, man, you

Eight-Trey Crips, man? C’mon over here! Say, man, you know Curtis? He’s Eight-Trey Crips! He my Homeboy, man! C’mon over here ...”

One of the figures separates from the other and crosses the street.

A whisper from the back seat: “They comin’ this way man?”

A hiss: “Shut up, muthafucka. Stay down.”

A smile to the approaching victim: “What’s the haps, man?”

A whisper to the assassin in the back seat: “Now.”

The assassin is a Jack-in-the-Box, showing himself unexpectedly. He jams the snout of the weapon out of the back seat window and opens fire. The weapon chatters. The figure crossing the street does a grisly tap-dance, chopped to pieces by the bullets. There is no time for him to react. No time to run. No time to scream.

The chattering stops, and the car squeals away. Leaving behind, in the middle of the boulevard, a broken marionette whose strings have been cut. The marionette lies still, in a spreading pool of blood.

Another place, hours later:

“Curtis, man, I was *standin’* right there! The muthafucka drivin’, he shouts out, ‘Say, man, you know Curtis? He Eight-Trey Crips, man! Curtis my Homeboy!’ So



Illustrations by Timothy Standish

Stymie, he starts crossin' the street, even though I say to him, 'Yo, Stymie, man, I don't know that dude. I ain't never seen him before.' Only Stymie, he don't listen to me! He starts 'cross the street, and that's when this other muthafucka sits up in the back seat! Chowta-chowtachowta-chowta! Muthafucka sits up, and he got this fuckin' *machine* gun, man! Check it out! As soon as he start firin', man, I'm down on the sidewalk. Like I'm tryin' to crawl *underneath* the concrete, y'know what I'm sayin'? Stymie, man, he dead 'fore he hit the street, and I'm lyin' there on the ground, shittin' in my pants ..."

A low voice, chill as dry ice: "The dude drivin'. You say he knew my name?"

A nod. "I heard him. He say, 'Curtis. Eight-Trey Crips.'"

"What about the car, man? You see what kinda car it was?"

"Yeah. One of them ... what the fuck you call it? A BMW. A new one."

"You see what color it is, man?"

"White."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah." A death's-head smile. "I seen the license plate. It say 'S-T-A-N-L-E-Y.'"

"Stanley?"

"Yeah."

"Who the fuck is Stanley?"

"I don't know, man."

For a time there is silence. Then the chill voice once more: "We gonna find out. We gonna find out real soon."

The wolfpack prowls, seeking prey. The hunt lasts for a night and a day.

"Check it out, man. We just like the Green Berets!"

"We fuckin' in-fil-tra-tors, man."

Then: payback.

Camouflaged, wearing the despised colors of the enemy, three red-topped figures cross a dim parking lot. One has on an unseasonably long coat, taking pains to hold it shut. They approach the white BMW. They pause fifty yards away, scouting. A lone figure sits in the front seat of the car, dealing to a group of young customers. Business is good.

The customers disperse at last. The three draw near.

Curtis takes the lead. "Say, Homes!" he calls to the figure behind the wheel of the BMW. "You know us, man? We South Crenshaw Bloods, man." He flashes the hand jive of the enemy: more camouflage. There are dozens of enemy groups, dozens of signals. He knows them all.

A whisper from behind him: "Yo, Curtis. That dude ain't one of the muthafuckas who did Stymie, man."

Over the shoulder: "Shut the fuck up." Then to the driver: "Yo, Homes, you Stanley?"

The dealer: "You check out the license plate,

Turf

muthafucka?" Wary. "You know how to read, man?"

"Yeah, man, I know how to read."

"That's my name, man. What the fuck you want?"

A disarming smile. "You got ice, man? We hear you got ice."

"You got money, m'man?"

Curtis flashes cash. Stanley's eyes widen: dollar signs. Profit motive overcomes caution. A return smile. "I gots ice, Homeboy. Big as your ... mothafuck!"

Curtis has stepped aside. Behind him, the long coat has been opened. A twin-barrelled, sawed-off shotgun is leveled at a spot between Stanley's eyes.

There is an instantaneous flurry of activity. Doors flung open. Passengers scramble into the car. Stanley is shoved aside. "Move over, muthafucka!"

Curtis gets behind the wheel. The other two are in the back. Stanley is in the passenger's seat. The cool metal of the shotgun presses against the base of his neck.

Doors slam. The engine roars. Curtis turns to Stanley. Smiles. "Say bye-bye, muthafucka."

A squeal of tires. Gone.

"Hey, man, he's wakin' up."

Curtis nods. He whispers sweetly to his prisoner, "Yo. Stanley."

Stanley's eyelids flutter.

Then sing-song: "Staaaaaanleeeeeeey ..."

The eyes open. The head lifts. Taking stock.

Fear.

"He checkin' us out, Curtis. He checkin' out his predic-a-ment."

Laughter.

The warehouse is a pressure-cooker. Dark and shadowed, lit by a circle of small fires. The flames illuminate a dozen surrounding faces. The heads are adorned in blue: true colors now.

Stanley squirms. No use: his wrists and ankles are bound. He is naked, draped ass-up over an empty oil drum. He trembles.

"M'man," says Curtis in a friendly tone of voice. "We need to be havin' us a *serious* discussion."

"F-f-fuck you, man." Dead bravado.

Curtis's voice is a caress. "Tell me somethin', Stanley. Tell me who be usin' your ride the other night. Hmm? Who be drivin' your car who knows my name?"

No answer.

Curtis snaps his fingers. One of the watchers steps forward and presents him with a sacred bundle of oily cloth. Curtis unwraps the bundle, tosses the cloth aside. He hefts the contents.

He shows the prisoner: a Ruger Redhawk .44 Magnum. Its ten-inch long, nickel-plated barrel gleams in the flickering light. Stanley recognizes the gun: it is his own.

Without hurry, Curtis opens the cylinder, unloads all of the bullets, save one. He spins the cylinder, a clattering whir. Snaps it closed.

He puts the gun to his own head. Pulls the trigger. *Click.*

He smiles at Stanley. "I don't give a fuck 'bout my own life, man. Guess how that makes me feel 'bout yours?"

He points the gun at Stanley's head. Whir. *Click.* Urine trickles down the side of the oil drum, forming a puddle on the concrete floor. Stanley whimpers.

The watchers laugh.

"Do 'Dirty Harry,' Curtis! Do 'Dirty Harry,' man!"

"Hey, Stanley! Make my day, muthafucka!"

"Yo, Stanley! You feelin' lucky, punk?"

More laughter.

Curtis: "Stanley, I axed you a question ..."

He snaps his fingers once more. Two of the watchers move forward, placing themselves on either side of the prisoner.

Voices: "Be showin' us the round brown, Stanley!"

"Yo, Stanley! Just like injuvie, man! Got to be givin' up the boo-tay, man!"

The two grasp Stanley's buttocks, spreading him wide. He thrashes. They hold him firm. He screams.

Another of the watchers hands Curtis a jar of Vaseline. Seductively Curtis slathers the petroleum jelly along the length of the gun's barrel.

He comes forward. "Relax, Stanley," he coos. "Take it easy, man. You just makin' it harder on yourself ..."

A voice: "He makin' it hard all right ..."

Curtis says, "Yeah ..."

And slides the barrel into his prisoner like a ramrod, as far up as it will go.

Stanley bucks desperately, a wild animal making a futile attempt to escape the jaws of a trap. His tears begin to flow now: deep, wracking sobs in symphony with his deep, wracking shudders. "You good, Stanley," Curtis says with admiration, slowly working the barrel in and out like a gentle lover. "You take it in the ass real good."

Voices: "Stanley a fag, man!"

"Yeah, yeah! He a fag all along, man!"

"He like it a lot!"

Curtis: "You hear what they sayin' 'bout you, Stanley? They call you a fag, man. You gonna take that shit from them? You are? Then you *must* be a fag ..."

Stanley screeches.

Curtis: "You like me to wiggle this around like this, man? I bet the muthafucka feels *cold*, don't it?"

Stanley begs: "Oh please, sweet Jesus, please ..."

Curtis: "Answer my question, man."

Stanley: "Please ..."

Another whir. Curtis pulls the trigger. *Click.*

"Who had your car the other night, man?"

"Please ..."

Whir. *Click.*

"IT WAS TYRELL, MY LITTLE BROTHER TYRELL!"

"Tyrell?"

"IT WAS TYRELL, I SWEAR IT! HE SAID HE HAD BUSINESS! I SWEAR--"

Curtis: "Shh-shh-shh." Soothing.

Stanley's breaths come short and fast. "My brother, man," he rasps. "Tyrell. He come to my crib two nights ago

an' ax me can he use my car. He say he got some business to take care of. I say okay, just so he don't fuck it up or nothin' ...' He begins to cry once more.

"Stanley?"

No answer.

Curtis jams the gun into him. Insistent. Stanley bites hard on his lower lip. The lip bleeds.

Curtis: "Where's Tyrell live, man?"

Hesitation.

Click.

The words gush out: "My family. He still live with my family. He still in school, man. He only sixteen years old. Same as you --"

"I need an address, man."

Stanley blurts out the number. "On Sixth Avenue, man. Right off Manchester. I swear." A pause. "Let me loose, man, I-I take you there myself --"

Curtis: "Hey, man? You think I need you like you some kind of motherfuckin' road map?"

He pulls the trigger. Repeatedly.

Until there is a muffled bang.

Stanley's body spasms violently, then slumps over the oil drum. Limp. Still.

The watchers: "Whee-oooh ..."

"Check it out, man. Stanley farted."

Laughter.

"Yeah. He farted loud."

"Yeah."

There are three of them in Stanley's car. Froggie the Driver. Spanky. And Curtis. Riding shotgun.

Spanky: "The family, man. They see this car, they be thinkin' Stanley comin' to pay them a visit."

Laughter.

Froggie: "So Curtis, man, you know this muthafucka Tyrell, or what?"

"He's a chump, man. A chump tryin' to make a move."

"Tryin' to cut in on our ter-ri-to-ry."

"Only we gonna be cuttin' *him* out."

"Like we did his brother, man. Like we did Stanley."

Curtis smiles. "Just like Stanley. O-U-T."

The family sits placidly at home: Grandmother, Mother, two children -- both girls -- aged seven and five. They are watching television. Friday night. *Dallas*.

The house is an urban crackerbox: three small bedrooms --one for mother and grandmother, one for Tyrell, one for the girls; kitchen, living room, one bathroom. There are bars on the windows of the house. It is a pathetic fortress.

The older of the girls glances toward the front window. She sees the car pull into the driveway. She cries delightedly, "Stanley! It's Stanley!"

Grandmother to Mother: "Now what you suppose *he* wants?" Disdain.

Mother to Grandmother: "Mama ..." -Weary resignation.

Car doors slam.

Grandmother to Mother: "He prob'ly in trouble again."

Mother to Grandmother: "He just comin' by to see how we doin' ..."

Grandmother to Mother: "Hmph."

Curtis's voice calls from outside: "Yo! Tyrell! Yo, Homeboy! C'mon out here, man!"

Grandmother to Mother: "That don't sound like Stanley to me..."

The older girl is at the window. "I don't know these boys, Mama," she says. "But they got Stanley's car."

Mother frowns with uncertainty.

"Yo, Tyrell!" Curtis calls. "You in there, or what?"

The girl turns away from the window to face her mother. "Mama, he wants Tyrell."

"I can hear him, baby."

Grandmother to Mother: "Well, tell 'em Tyrell ain't home." Grumpy. "Tell 'em we don't know where he is."

Mother's frown deepens. Making up her mind, she

The blast strikes her belly, hurling her backwards.

rises from the sofa and crosses to the television set to turn down the volume. She moves to the front door. Opens it.

And is greeted by a burst of shotgun fire: **buh-DOOM!**

The blast strikes her in the belly, hurling her backwards. She lands on the floor in front of the television, like a child's doll that has been carelessly thrown aside. Her insides spill out wetly. Her open eyes are dull and glazed over.

The children scream.

A hurled brick shatters the front window. A plastic soda bottle filled with clear, pinkish liquid sails through the jagged hole in the glass. A torn strip of cloth is stuffed into the mouth of the bottle. The strip of cloth is a flaming fuse.

First one bottle. Then another. Then another.

Grandmother screeches to the children: "Run!"

The bottles explode: **WHUMPF! WHUMPF! WHUMPF!**

In an instant the living room is an inferno. Before they can flee, Grandmother and the children become dervishes of fire. Their shrieks of agony are enjoined by the sound of a rushing wind generated by the sudden, intense heat of the fire that sucks air through the hallways of the house. Feeding itself.

Gradually, above the bellow of the wind and the cries of agony, comes another sound. From outside. Approaching rapidly.

The sound of a siren.

Turf

Curtis cocks his head to listen. Then he shouts: "In the car! NOW!"

Escaping footsteps trample the agonized screams coming from the blazing house. Car doors slam once more. The BMW rockets backwards out of the driveway. A squeal of brakes. The car straightens. Shifts into gear. Roars away.

Spanky whines from the back seat, his voice on the edge of panic: "Curtis, man, where the fuck the cops come from, man? We just roll up to the place two minutes ago, man! How the fuck they get here so fast?"

Curtis: "Chill, Spanky. Be cool." In command.

Froggie: "Maybe they just on patrol, man. Maybe they just happen to be in the vi-cin-i-ty." Hopeful.

Curtis: "Maybe." He locks eyes onto Froggie. "Co-bus-dis, m'man. We gots to zig-zag away from the mother-fuckin' cops, y'understand? Else they gonna be on us like stink on shit."

"I hear you."

The BMW stairsteps a dozen blocks, heading north. Knuckles tighten on door handles.

Gradually the siren fades.

Crenshaw Boulevard lies dead ahead. From the back seat comes a sigh of relief. "They gone, Curtis. We lost 'em, man."

Their laughter is the giddy joy of battle-hardened veterans having emerged unscathed from yet another skir-

mish. It is a sound of triumphant savagery.

"Bye-bye, muthafuckas!"

"Man, we be hangin', bargin', and slangin'!"

"Any more hope-to-dies be out there, man, y'all best be watchin' your ass!"

Froggie to Curtis: "We sure done Tyrell, didn't we."

Curtis nods. "He bar-be-cue by now, cuz. Bar-be-cue."

From the back seat: "That's what he gets f'playin' on the wrong turf! We fuck him up! We fuck him up *good!* Ain't that right, Curtis?"

Curtis: "Yeah ..."

Just as Froggie cries out: "Curtis -- *shit!*"

The others see: less than a block ahead of the BMW, a pair of LAPD squad cars converges at the approaching intersection. The squad cars screech to a halt, nose-to-nose, forming a barricade of steel and glass. Red-and-blue lights ricochet from the top of the black-and-whites.

Froggie whips around to face Curtis. His expression begs for instruction. Fearful.

Curtis to Froggie: "Ram the muthafuckas." Dead calm.

Froggie's eyes widen. "Say what?"

Curtis leans over. He stretches his leg to jam his left foot atop Froggie's right foot. Onto the accelerator.

Spanky keens in dismay from the back seat. Froggie's hands grip the steering wheel. Bearing down.



Two patrolmen -- one from each squad car -- flee the false protection of their makeshift roadblock. Diving to the street, they draw weapons and open fire on the BMW. A back seat window starbursts.

From behind him, Curtis hears a wet gurgle. He glances over his shoulder. Spanky is slumped against the seat, his throat ripped open by the stray gunshot. The wound is seeping blood.

Froggie screams.

The BMW torpedoes into the black-and-whites.

At the moment of impact: metallic thunder. A firestorm of glass.

Then: silence descends.

For an eternity there is the hiss of steam, the tinkletink of shattered glass, the drip-drop of gasoline. Weapons in hand, the policemen approach. Wary.

Curtis boots open the passenger's side door. Comes to his feet. Levels the shotgun. Jacks the pump. Once. BOOM. Twice. BOOM.

The policemen: one dead, one dying.

Curtis turns back to the BMW. The front end of the car is an accordion of chrome and metal. He hears a voice whispering his name from the front seat.

Jewels of glass bead Froggie's hair. His chest is pinned between the driver's seat and the steering wheel. His sternum is crushed. Air whistles in and out of his mouth. His breaths are brief and shallow.

Curtis manages to pull Froggie from the car. Lifted to his feet, Froggie is leaned unsteadily against a crumpled fender while Curtis reloads the shotgun. Froggie surveys the carnage through bleary eyes. Turns to Curtis. "You bleedin', man," Froggie wheezes.

"No worse'n you, cuz." Curtis pumps the shotgun, jacking a shell into the chamber. Armed. And dangerous.

More sirens approach.

Hoisting Froggie, Curtis leads the two of them away from the demolished cars. Across Crenshaw and beyond.

Froggie: "My mothafuckin' chest ... really hurts."

"You doin' fine, cuz."

"Don't know ... how much longer ... I can run."

"You doin' fine."

"I'm gonna fall."

"You ain't gonna fall. I got'cha."

Their footsteps clatter arrhythmically. The dark street is a gauntlet of shabby houses. One block. Two blocks. Three.

"Hey, Curtis ... man ... I ain't never ... done no time ... in juvie, man."

"Don't talk, man. You just usin' up your breath."

"You been in juvie, man. You know ... what it's like."

"Froggie, man, I tol' you not to talk."

"They really ... fuck you in the ass there, man?"

Another wheeze. "For real?"

"They do worse shit'n that, man. Lots worse."

Froggie laughs wetly. "Ain't *nothin'* ... I can think of ... worse'n that."

The houses recede. They reach open ground. They

pass through an opening in a fence made of iron spikes. Soon they are dodging between rows of shining stones lit by a pale, quarter moon that plays peek-a-boo with the night clouds.

Curtis pauses to peer in the direction he and Froggie have come. A block away, on the other side of the fence, a squad car screeches to a halt. Then another. And another. A silhouette emerges from each of the cars. The three silhouettes move into pursuit with tactical precision.

Froggie: "Hey, Curtis ... I can't see so good no more. Everything's ... all blurry. Man ... where the fuck are we?"

"Cemetery," Curtis answers. "Inglewood Cemetery." The exertion has made his own breaths come short and fast now as well.

Froggie laughs mirthlessly. "Graveyard," he grunts. "That figgers. Don't it."

Curtis shakes his head, unhappy at the implication in Froggie's voice. "We ain't gonna die, man. Neither one of us gonna die --"

An unexpected shout from behind a mausoleum twenty feet away cuts Curtis off. "Freeze, Homeboys!" There is the sound of a pistol hammer being cocked. "Drop the gun and lay down right there! Right there on the ground! Both of

There is a flash of a
blade. Stymie's hand
plunges into Curtis' gut.

you put your hands on top of your heads, and don't you even fucking *twitch!*"

Curtis lets the shotgun fall from his grip. A survivor realizes that there is a time for everything, even surrender. Juvie is a revolving door. He raises his hands.

As he hears Froggie whisper, "Curtis ... they ain't takin' me ... to get fucked in the ass ..."

Curtis whispers back harshly: "Froggie, *don't* ..."

Too late. Froggie lurches from Curtis, bending to retrieve the shotgun. For the policeman he is a slow-motion target. Two shots: BLAM-BLAM. Froggie staggers and falls.

In an instant Curtis is kneeling beside him. Froggie hooks a forefinger into the blue bandanna that encircles his forehead. "Curtis," he wheezes. "Take ... my colors ..." And dies with his eyes open.

"Face down *now*, motherfucker!" the policeman snaps at Curtis. "I want you to eat that fucking grass now!"

Curtis lies down beside Froggie. Burying his face into the turf, barely drawing breath, he closes his eyes and listens.

He hears the rustle of cloth and leather. Shoes whishing through grass. A metallic clitter of handcuffs.

Then a new voice: "This the last one?"

Turf

Froggie's killer: "That's him."

Another new voice: "You do the other one?"

Froggie's killer: "Yeah."

First new voice: "Nice work."

Froggie's killer: "Yeah."

Curtis feels a knee made of stone pressing into the space between his shoulder blades. His wrists are pulled together and manacled at the small of his back. "You're pretty smart for a loser, Homes," Froggie's killer says to him. "A lot smarter than your cuz here. At least you knew enough to listen to me. That's why you're still alive and he's dead."

Curtis opens his eyes. Turns. At the periphery of his vision he sees the flicker of a shadow.

The first new voice: "Jesus Christ. Where's that goddamn smell comin' from?"

Movement.

Then all three policemen begin to scream.

The sounds that follow are ghastly: wetsnap of bone, dryrip of skin being torn from living meat, sudden gunshots that are frantic and ineffectual. The grass around Curtis is suddenly dewy with moisture that is thick and coppery-smelling.

The aroma of fresh kills.

Silence.

Then: a slow shuffle of footsteps. The handcuffs are unlatched. His muscles aching, Curtis gingerly turns himself over and sits on his haunches.

Clouds have hidden the moon. The shredded flesh of the three policemen litters the ground in dark tatters. Curtis's rescuer is a vague shape standing nearby.

The shape giggles. "What say, Curtis, m'man? What's the haps?"

Curtis frowns. The voice is naggingly familiar, but he cannot place it.

The shape: "Don't you reck-a-nize me, cuz?"

Moonlight bursts through the clouds. And does not lie.

"Stymie?"

"Riiiiiiiiiiiiight."

Curtis's head is swimming as he accepts Stymie's hand. The hand is cold, so cold. Stymie pulls him to his feet.

Curtis: "The fuck is goin' on, man? They tol' me you's dead. We been doin' the muthafuckas what did you in, man."

"I 'preciate that, cuz. Really." Stymie motions for Curtis to follow. "This way. I get you outta here."

They move.

Curtis: "I axed you a question, man. Where you been the past few days?"

"I been takin' care o' business."

"Eight-Trey Crips your business, man. You forget that?"

Stymie turns around. Smiles. "I's runnin' with some new Homeboys, cuz."

Curtis is lagging behind. Sore and stiff, he struggles to keep up. "Yo, Stymie. Ain't nobody run out on the Crips, man. Nobody."

Stymie laughs. Pushes onward. Into the graveyard.

Curtis: "You hear me, man?"

More laughter.

"I'm tellin' you the straight shit, man. You walk out on us you die."

Stymie stops. Curtis comes up behind him. Looks around.

Tombstones and obelisks.

Stymie looks at Curtis. No longer smiling. "You 'n' me, Curtis ... man, we be dead already for a long, long time. Dead inside. You know what I'm sayin'? We too fuckin' mean to belong anyplace else but our own turf, man. Only we also too fuckin' dumb to know it."

Curtis: "What the fuck you talkin' 'bout?"

Stymie: "I gots somebody I wants you to meet."

Curtis's eyes narrow.

Stymie: "My new Homeboys."

Curtis sees them now: shadows within shadows, among the stones, backlit by city lights. Scarecrow shadows. None of them moves. They watch.

Their heads are adorned with colors.

Curtis: "Hey, fuck you, man. I see you later."

The cold hand falls on his shoulder. Restraining.

"I ain't official yet," says Stymie. His voice is as soft as graveyard dirt. "Ain't earned my colors."

Stymie smiles. Curtis frowns.

Stymie: "You made a big mistake tonight, cuz. You the one on the wrong turf this time."

Stymie's eyes are hungry.

Curtis screams.

There is the flash of a blade. Stymie's hand plunges into Curtis's gut. Curtis thrashes. Uncoils. Falls.

Curtis lies still. His eyes are open.

Stymie kneels beside him. Pats him on the head. Gently, like a brother. "You be back in a day or two," Stymie whispers. "Then you understand."

Stymie rises. Fondling the length of intestine wrapped in his fist, he trims the ragged edges. Pink inside and out. The color of true loyalty.

As Stymie joins his Homeboys -- now one of their own -- he pauses.

To tie the new badge of honor around his head.

Brian Hodge is the author of *Oasis*, *Dark Advent*, and *Nightlife*. Hodge's short fiction has appeared in *The Horror Show*, *New Blood*, *Cemetery Dance*, and several anthologies including *Book of the Dead*. William Relling Jr. is the author of *Brujo*, *New Moon*, and *Silent Moon*. Relling's short fiction has appeared in Karl Edward Wagner's *Years Best Horror*, *The Horror Show*, *Cemetery Dance*, *New Blood*, and most recently *Omni*. His short fiction collection *The Infinite Man* is due out by *Scream Press* this year. They both like girls and dark beer, and have been warned on numerous occasions to stay away from schoolyards.

Resurrections

Edited with Introduction by
George Clayton Johnson

RESURRECTIONS, as we learned in Issue #1 of *Iniquities*, the Magazine of Great Wickedness and Wonders, was to be a department that would showcase the writer by resurrecting overlooked masterpiece stories by big-name writers to establish standards of excellence for contributors to the magazine.

In Issue #1, as an example of good writing, we exhumed Richard Matheson's little creeper "Witch War" which astonished with its bite. For Issue #2 we call to your attention an early story of Charles Beaumont's, "Place Of Meeting", which originally appeared in *Orbit* back in 1953, a digest-sized pulp monthly noted for its low pay.

The story was reprinted in Beaumont's *The Hunger, And Other Stories*, published by G.P. Putnam and Sons in 1957, and recently in *Charles Beaumont -- Selected Stories* edited by Roger Anker and published by *Dark Harvest*.

It is not only a good story, but it is also a good drama.

Early on we discover that Big Jim Kroner wants something. He is continually aware of his goal and the means he is using to achieve it. When he is balked in one direction he takes another, continuing to invent new strategies to gain his ends.

In this act of will and in the frustration of will we have the essential element of drama.

Reading the story we begin to immediately visualize a scene -- a somber setting with people within it ready to speak lines and act out situations. It unfolds on the screen of the mind as a movie might, keeping that desolate place ever before our eyes.

This is Beaumont mixing the art of the screenplay into the art of the short story, raising both arts to a higher level.

Cinematically, Beaumont has begun his drama with a close up. We are aware at first only of the atmosphere and the presence of Big Jim Kroner. The camera begins to pull slowly back -- a special lens -- and we begin to see and hear an ever widening shot that slowly pulls back to include a multitude of people, at last, it becomes a full shot and with that final gesture comes comprehension and the mind takes a great leap and now we understand.

From the very first, as a reader, you can detect a certain seriousness of tone that convinces you that this writer "knows something", -- that he has a goal and knows where he is leading you, using the most vibrant words he can find to make his meaning exact. You become lulled by your growing belief that, if you read to the end of the story you will learn something valuable to know, a greater truth than the one you have always clung to.

This is what Theodore Sturgeon called "Wisdom Fiction".

Seems simple doesn't it? But there is a textbook on craft in the telling of this story.

From the first word of somber tone the story is set.

Writing about Charles Beaumont's "Black Country", Ray Russel, (*The Case Against Satan Mr. Sardonicus; The Colony*),

executive editor of *Playboy* where the story was first published, said: "Beaumont manages to set up a concert pitch -- to use a musical term -- and sustains it from the very beginning to the very end. It almost never relaxes. You're on a beat throughout the entire story until uhhhh, it's over. There are very few stories that have that by Beaumont or anyone else."

"Place Of Meeting" is such a story. From the first word to the last, the story's tone and atmosphere and characters all strike the same dark bell note of tragic eloquence and simplicity, of starkness and despair. It's in the wind and in the gray meadows, the lost sound of peoples voices and the respect and sympathy Beaumont has for his characters.

This is a deeply sincere story.

In choosing this largely overlooked story for *Resurrections*, I am carried back in memory to the time of my first meeting with Beaumont before I had become acquainted with the many skills one must have in order to be a successful working writer.

I had quit my design drafting job several years before and was having real trouble trying to make timely payments on my G.I. Bill house in the valley. I had sunk into defiant beatnikism, becoming an unkempt wild dog having taken off my collar by renouncing 9 to 5, a wild dog in love with words and ideas and writing who hung out with other self-selected artistic outcasts in Laurel Canyon, drinking red mountain wine and shooting the bull.

I got Beaumont's telephone number from Adolph Galperin, a grocer-struggling-to-become-a-writer I'd met at one of the numerous writers groups I belonged to briefly, composed of neophytes like myself. When Adolph told me about one of his regular customers who was published and told me his name, I recognized it. In my combing of the pulp horror, fantasy, and science-fiction magazines searching for a market for my early stories I had noticed the name, new to me until then, in a back issue of *Orbit*. The story was "Place Of Meeting". It struck me with such quiet force that I made note of the author.

I carried the number around with me for several days before I worked up the nerve to dial. Over the phone I tried to explain who I was and asked if he would meet with me, "just to talk". Maybe he could give me some advice about what I might be doing wrong. To my great surprise he agreed. He told me he'd meet me in an hour and a half at Victory cafe on Lankershim in North Hollywood. I knew where the place was, near the grocery store where my friend Adolph worked.

There I was a couple hours later, sitting in a booth at a neat, clean little coffee shop with a hot cup in my hand talking to Charles Beaumont, the first professional published writer I had ever met, the result of my stark appeal for audience.

I'd brought along a beat-up copy of my original screenplay of *Ocean's 11*, sold but unproduced and nowhere to be seen on the media horizon. I hoped to use it as a credential, to establish

Resurrections

myself as a professional also, hoping to meet him eye to eye on a level of equality although I knew that wasn't the case. I was very defensive after spending almost 5 years of writing stories without a sale.

Miraculously, Charles Beaumont took me to be what I claimed to be, and understood my difficulty in selling my stuff. He, too, had his share of rejections and knew that this was no true indicator of a writings merit. Later, Forrest J. Ackerman, his agent through his early years said, "I made approximately 78 submissions for him, but nothing happened for a long time." In listening to Chuck for an hour and a half about the business of writing, I knew that this was the kind of writer I wanted to be. He wrote scripts and stories and articles -- a writing tripod that is hard to tip over; if for some reason they don't want you in one field, you can keep working in another, and perhaps all three at once -- and in showing me his enthusiasm for all three forms, attacking them as an artist. He opened my eyes to the importance of category-hopping to guard against becoming such a specialist that when the market for your specialty dries up you're not left high and dry. When he spoke of writing it was as a life work, not just one story or television series or book or article or a letter but all of it taken together over a lifetime and the values that it reflects. He took himself seriously.

And he took me seriously.

Which was a compelling reason for me to want to spend as much time with him as he would allow.

Sitting in that coffee shop watching this obviously sincere and truthful man permitting me to tell him about the stories I was trying to complete, telling him ideas and my rudimentary plots, noting his reactions for any hint of condescension, I became aware of his generosity of spirit, his characteristic modesty, his high-mindedness, his respect for the past, his comprehensive knowledge, his sense of honor, his zoom-lens mind focusing like a laser beam on the subject at hand with all seriousness, especially when talking about comedy.

As a writer, Chuck had a well developed sense of form.

He could see the form in the works of others, or the lack of it. He was able with one viewing of a single episode of a TV series to quickly see what other episodes of the same series would require and could quickly generate a supply of meaningful story ideas that fit the bill with that added difference that makes a difference.

I was energized by his suggestions and hurried home afterward to incorporate them in my stories.

When he took me to his home one day and showed me the tiny office he had made for himself, I was struck by how clean and orderly it was with ream-sized stacks of clean yellow pages and corrugated bond on an open shelf with several large filing cabinets stuffed with bulging folders, his bulletin board with recent correspondence and notes to himself pinned to it and all the other paperclip paraphernalia of a writers life. The room was dominated by a huge *Torpedo* typewriter which he worked on with incredible three-finger speed and accuracy. I saw the beauty of his clean manuscript pages neatly typed and above reproach, and more, I saw his dedication to the duty of writing for long hours almost every day.

He lived over on Fair Avenue, then in an upstairs apartment with his wife, Helen, and his son, Chris, and newborn daughter, Catherine -- his other children were yet to be born. I met William F. Nolan there while they were putting finishing touches on *Omnibus of Speed*, their soon to be published huge and comprehensive book on motor racing. Through him I met others in the Beaumont circle, an enormously talented group of people brought together by Beaumont's compelling personality.

Meeting and re-meeting them through Charles Beaumont, who let me cling to his elbow for an incredible amount of time, even allowing me to accompany him on trips or to parties and even to business meetings...there were an astonishing number of

doors he opened to let me look behind, sharing his own reaction to the stimulating people who thronged his life.

"Chuck Beaumont was the groups focal point, its electric center," said William F. Nolan (*Burnt Offerings*, *Logan's Run*). "Chuck was like the hub of a wheel and you had all these different spokes going out: Richard Matheson, John Tomerlin, George Clayton Johnson, Chad Oliver, Ray Russell, Rod Serling, Frank Rovinson, Harlan Ellison, myself, spokes. All connected to Beaumont. He energized us. Fired us. Made us stretch our creative and writing muscles. He was always encouraging us to do better. It was a very stimulating period in our lives."

Writing about Charles Beaumont, Ray Bradbury said, "...Those were the years when I promised Chuck if he showed up at my house every Wednesday evening with a new story, I would read it. It was a way of forcing him and several other writer friends to do one story a week, 52 weeks a year. Quality, I told them, and him, comes out of quantity. The more you wrote the better you got. That is, if your intentions were honorable and your dreams high and wondrous.

"Chuck did just that. He not only wrote 52 stories a year but he revised them during the same weeks..." He goes on to add, "Further results can be seen in dozens and then scores of his future talent. He became, in a very short while, not only my honorary son, but first cousin to John Collier, Roald Dahl, Nigel Kneale and a lot of other story tellers that we admired together. Until at last he became and stayed the one and only Charles Beaumont."

Jerry Sohl (*The Haploids*, *Point Ultimate*, *The Lemon Eaters*) wrote of Beaumont: "It's hard to remember him as anything but the finished product, the hypnotic weaver of dreams, fright, awe, hungers and dreads, the man possessed of talents we all wished we had, in the telling, in the plotting, in the air of distinction and completeness that he brought to every piece he wrote. It is difficult to think that Charles Beaumont actually worked hard for many years to achieve his style, his effect, his discipline, yet we all know it wasn't easy and that he struggled to become the master story teller that he is."

John Tomerline, novelist (*The Magnificent Jalopy*, *Challenge the Wind*) and noted automotive writer, a long time friend of Beaumont wrote of him: "A storyteller, a spinner of yarns, balladeer, prophet, a discoverer of wonders among the commonplace..."

Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend*, *Born of Man and Woman*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Richard Matheson -- Collected Stories*) wrote: "I have referred (in print) to Chuck Beaumont's stories with such phrases as alight with the magic of a truly extraordinary imagination, shot through with veins of coruscating wit, feather light and dancing in a wind of jest, and flashes of the wondrous and delightful. All true, this may be the overriding image of his work. But there is more. Other stories which cut deeper, which move the reader and speak things profound."

This is true, I believe, of "Place Of Meeting", and I hope you read it, sensitive to it's deeper implications and with an awareness of the mind or the man behind the story.

Of Beaumont, William F. Nolan said, "I found in Chuck a warmth, a vitality, an honesty and a depth of character which few possess. And, more necessary, a wild, wacky, irreverent sense of humor."

And elsewhere: "...the finest, dearest friend a man could ever have. My racing days are many years behind me. I miss them, but most of all I miss ole Chuck. God bless him.

"I miss him very much."

So do I, Bill. So do I.

Place of Meeting

by
Charles Beaumont

It swept down from the mountains, a loose, crystal smelling wind, an autumn chill of moving wetness. Down from the mountains and into the town, where it set the dead trees hissing and the signboards creaking. And it even went into the church, because the bell was ringing and there was no one to ring the bell.

The people in the yard stopped their talk and listened to the rusty music.

Big Jim Kroner listened too. Then he cleared his throat and clapped his hands--thick hands, calloused and work-dirtied.

"All right," he said loudly. "All right, let's settle down now." He walked out from the group and turned. "Who's got the list?"

"Got it right here, Jim," a woman said, coming forward with a loose-leaf folder.

"All present?"

"Everybody except that there German, Mr. Grunin--Grunger--"

Kroner smiled; he made a megaphone of his hands. "Gruninger-Bartold Gruninger?"

A small man with a mustache called out excitedly, "Ja, ja!...s'war schwer den Friedhof zu finden."

"All right. That's all we wanted to know, whether you was here or not." Kroner studied the pages carefully. Then he reached into the pocket of his overalls and withdrew a stub of pencil and put the tip in his mouth.

"Now, before we start off," he said to the group, "I want you to know is there anybody here that's got a question or anything to ask?" He looked over the crowd of silent faces. "Anybody don't know who I am? No?"

Then came another wind, mountain-scattered and fast: it billowed dresses, set damp hair moving; it pushed over pewter vases, and smashed dead roses and hydrangeas to swirling dust against the gritty tombstones. Its clean rain smell was gone now, though, for it had passed over the fields with the odors of rotting life.

Kroner made a check mark in the notebook.

"Anderson," he shouted. "Edward L."

A man in overalls like Kroner's stepped forward.

"Andy, you covered Skagit valley, Snohomish and King counties, as well as Seattle and the rest?"

"Yes, sir."

"What you got to report?"

"They're all dead," Anderson said.

"You looked everywhere? You was real careful?"

"Yes, sir. Ain't nobody alive in the whole state."

Kroner nodded and made another check mark.

"That's all, Andy. Next: Avakian, Katina."

A woman in a wool skirt and gray blouse walked up from the back, waving her arms. She started to speak.

Kroner tapped his stick. "Listen here for a second, folks," he said. "For those that don't know how to talk English, you know what this is all about--so when I ask my question, you nod up-and-down for yes (like this) and sideways (like this) for no. Makes it a lot easier for those of us as don't remember too good. All right?"

There were murmurings and whispered consultations and for a little while the yard was full of noise. The woman called Avakian kept nodding.

"Fine," Kroner said. "Now, Miss Avakian. You covered what?...Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria. Did you--find--an-ybody alive?"

The woman stopped nodding. "No," she said. "No, no."

Kroner checked the name. "Let's see here. Bole-slavsky, Peter. You can go on back now, Miss Avakian."

A man in bright city clothes walked briskly to the tree clearing. "Yes, sir," he said.

"What have you got for us?"

The man shrugged. "Well, I tell you; I went over New York with a fine-tooth comb. Then I hit Brooklyn and Jersey. Nothin', man. Nothin' nowhere."

Place of Meeting

"He is right," a dark-faced woman said in a tremulous voice. "I was there too. Only the dead in the streets, all over, all over the city; in the cars I looked even, in the offices. Everywhere is people dead."

"Chavez, Pietro. Baja California."

"All dead, señor chief."

"Ciodo, Ruggiero. Capri."

The man from Capri shook his head violently.

"Denman, Charlotte. Southern United States."

"Dead as doornails..."

"Elgar, Davis S...."

"Ferrazio, Ignatz... "Goldfarb, Bernard..."

"Halpern..."

"Ives...Kranek...O'Brian..."

The names exploded in the pale evening gunshots; there was much head-shaking, many people saying, "No. No."

At last Kroner stopped marking. He closed the notebook and spread his big workman's hands. He saw the round eyes, the trembling mouths, the young faces; he saw all the frightened people.

A girl began to cry. She sank to the damp ground, and covered her face and made these crying sounds. An elderly man put his hand on her head. The elderly man looked sad. But not afraid. Only the young ones seemed afraid.

"Settle down now," Kroner said firmly. "Settle down. Now, listen to me. I'm going to ask you all the same question one more time, because we got to be sure." He waited for them to grow quiet. "All right. This here is all of us, everyone. We've covered all the spots. Did anybody here find one single solitary sign of life?"

The people were silent. The wind had died again, so there was no sound at all. Across the corroded wire fence the gray meadows lay strewn with the carcasses of cows and horses and, in one of the fields, sheep. No flies buzzed near the dead animals; there were no maggots burrowing. No vultures; the sky was clean of birds. And in all the untended rolling hills of grass and weeds which had once sung and pulsed with a million voices, in all the land there was only this immense stillness now, still as years, still as the unheard motion of the stars.

Kroner watched the people. The young woman in the gay print dress; the tall African with his bright paint and cultivated scars; the fierce-looking Swede looking not so fierce now in this graying twilight. He watched all the tall and short and old and young people from all over the world, pressed together now, a vast silent polyglot in this country meeting place, this always lonely and long-deserted spot--deserted even before the gas bombs and the disease and the flying pestilences that had covered the earth in three days and three nights. Deserted. Forgotten.

"Talk to us, Jim," the woman who had handed him the notebooks said. She was new.

Kroner put the list inside his big overalls pocket.

"Tell us," someone else said. "How shall we be nourished? What will we do?"

"The world's all dead," a child moaned. "Dead as dead, the whole world..."

"Todo el mund--"

"Monsieur Kroner, Monsieur Kroner, what will we do?"

Kroner smiled. "Do?" He looked up through the still-hanging poison cloud, the dun blanket, up to where the moon was now risen in full coldness. His voice was steady, but it lacked life. "What some of us have done before," he said. "We'll go back and wait. It ain't the first time. It ain't the last."

A little fat bald man with old eyes sighed and began to waver in the October dusk. The outline of his form wavered and disappeared in the shadows under the trees where the moonlight did not reach. Others followed him as Kroner talked.

"Same thing we'll do again and likely keep on doing. We'll go back and--sleep. And we'll wait. Then it'll start all over again and folks'll build their cities--new folks with new blood--and then we'll wake up. Maybe a long time yet. But it ain't so bad; it's quiet, and time passes." He lifted a small girl of fifteen or sixteen with pale cheeks and red lips. "Come on, now! Why, just think of the appetite you'll have all built up!"

The girl smiled. Kroner faced the crowd and waved his hands, large hands, rough from the stone of midnight pyramids and the feel of muskets, boil-specked from night hours in packing plants and trucking lines; broken by the impact of a tomahawk and machine-gun bullet; but white where the dirt was not caked, and bloodless. Old hands, old beyond years.

As he waved, the wind came limping back from the mountains. It blew the heavy iron bell high in the steepled white barn, and set the signboards creaking, and lifted ancient dusts and hissed again through the dead trees.

Kroner watched the air turn black. He listened to it fill with the flappings and the flutterings and the squeakings. He waited; then he stopped waving and sighed and began to walk.

He walked to a place of vines and heavy brush. Here he paused for a moment and looked out at the silent place of high dark grass, of hidden huddled tombs, of scrolls and stone-frozen children stained silver in the night's wet darkness; at the crosses he did not look. The people were gone, the place was empty.

Kroner kicked away the foliage. Then he got into the coffin and closed the lid.

Soon he was asleep.

"Rockin' The Midnight Hour"

Exploring the Rock 'n' Roll/Horror Connection with David Schow, Richard Christian Matheson and John Skipp and Craig Spector

by Anya Martin

"Horror is the rock 'n' roll of fiction. They share the same sort of aesthetic qualities with each other, at least the kind of horror that we're writing. It tends to have that rock 'n' roll feel to it because it's very fast-paced. Even the slow numbers are fast-paced. It's got a lot of energy to it, it's got a definite beat, and it tends to go over the edge."

-- Spector

The term rock 'n' roll/horror connection is apt to conjure up three decades of monstrous melodies. Consider the number of rockers who've concocted songs with an often tongue-in-cheek macabre tilt. Graveyard bop in the recording world goes back to rock classics like Bobby "Boris" Pickett's "Monster Mash," Sheb Wooley's "Purple People Eater," and Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I Put A Spell On You."

Of course, some rockers got more into their ghoulish lyrics than others. By the '70s, you had an entire rock subculture

devoted to the macabre, centered around performers such as Alice Cooper and KISS, who actually decked themselves out in the wardrobe and whiteface of the undead. Not to mention the king of the creepy crooners, Ozzy Osbourne, who, allegedly, bit off the heads of doves and bats with his teeth in concert.

Indeed, the whole heavy metal world seems Satan-obsessed with parents and child psychologists even now linking lyrics about demonic spells and human sacrifice to the real-life growth of Devil-worship among teens. This violent subculture--if you listen to Geraldo Rivera and the cops--is spreading like the plague through high schools across the country, along with the conviction that Tipper Gore's P.M.R.C. might've been right after all: Dangerous rock lyrics actually *do* cause unsavory behavior.

But metal did not create the only horror subculture in rock music. Out of punk rock in the U.S. and Great Britain came the "Goths" (short for "Gothic") or death-rockers. Rejecting the self-effusive

glam look of the metalheads--something sure to scare parents, but sharing more in common with drag-queens than Draculas -- the Goths had a much more romantic view of horror. Taking Bela Lugosi and Lord Byron as models, they desired to emulate more directly the demeanor of the dead, or more precisely the undead--for every Goth's ideal nightmare was to be reborn a vampire. They dressed all in black, lots of drapy fabrics and spiderweb netting; they dyed their hair jet-black, masked their faces in ghostly white and lined their eyes with thick black liner.

As for their sound, though punk queen Siouxsie of the Banshees is credited as being the first Goth, the key band here was Bauhaus, a British band who composed hard-edged, somber songs. Their most famous hit "Bela Lugosi's Dead," was featured in the film *The Hunger*, based on Whitley Strieber's vampire novel. Bauhaus broke up in the early '80s with lead-singer Peter Murphy going solo and the rest of the band reforming first as Tones on Tail and then as Love and Rockets.

Carrying on the Bauhaus legacy are such groups as Alien Sex Fiend, the Sisters of Mercy, Christian Death, Skinny Puppy and the Cramps.

And of course, none of this takes into account what seems to be a general fascination of rockers for death and darkness, from the teenage death songs of the fifties ("Teen Angel" "Deadman's Curve") to the black undertones lurking through works by the Doors, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd...

With all this supernatural rockin', it would seem thus like such a natural twist for the supernatural story. Yet, how many examples can you name in which writers have set their horrors in the underworld of rock 'n' roll? Make that same list but include only stories or novels penned before 1985. Suddenly, despite three decades of horror-rocking, it's hard to come up with more than a handful. Why has it taken so long for the rock 'n' roll/horror connection to creep over into the written word, and why now? Add into the equation, the fact that you now have at least two generations of horror writers who have grown up with rock music.

Well, what seems to have happened is a slow build. Rock music certainly has been playing a marginal role in the field for some time, for example, in the pop-culture-embued works of Stephen King. No list of rock 'n' roll/horror novels could be considered complete without reference to *Christine*, the tale of the demonically-possessed '58 Plymouth Fury. King even included snippets of rock lyrics at the start of each chapter.

As did George R.R. Martin in *The Armageddon Rag* (1983), a book which resurrected '60s rock long before last year's much-touted 20-year anniversary of Woodstock. In fact, *Rag*, an early example of what seems to be gelling into a sub-sub-genre in the field, may be the best example of how it can be done, the blend of subject matter and a distinct rock 'n' roll tone.

And then there's Anne Rice, who probably brought the notion of a rock/horror connection more into the mainstream than even King has. When she resurrected *The Vampire Lestat* in 1985, after a 10-year hiatus, her suave, blood-sucking anti-hero rose out of subterranean slumber to expose the secrets of all vampirekind as *what else* but a rock star through the medium of MTV videos. If Ms. Rice's hand was on the pop-culture pulse, her actions were greeted with idol-like approval by rock idols, such as Sting and Queensrÿche lead singer Geoff

Tate. Both have voiced aspirations to act in films based on her novels. In lieu of any definitive contracts, Queensrÿche's *Rage For Order* album (1986) consisted almost solely of songs focusing on the trials and tribulations of being a vampire, while Sting composed "Moon Over Bourbon Street" (*The Dream of the Blue Turtles*, 1985) directly in homage to the works of the vampire mistress.

Still, rock 'n' roll wasn't at the core of any of these books--not the kind of rock 'n' roll that ripped through your soul, the kind of rock 'n' roll that parents accused of stealing their kids' souls. That supernatural extension has slithered onto the bookshelves and magazine stands only in the last few years thanks to a new breed of writers, whom largely nobody had ever heard of before. And it has influenced them not only in terms of the characters and plots they incorporate into their writing but also, as was hinted at by writers such as King and Martin but never brought full swing, in the tone of their writing--indeed, in the very process of creating their works.

At the head of the list of this type of writer must come, a quartet of writers who are both friends and sort of literary compatriots, David Schow, Richard Christian Matheson and the duo of John Skipp and Craig Spector. Other writers have danced with rock as topic and tone--Ray* Garton (*Crucifax Autumn*), the trio of Canadian lawyers who call themselves Michael Slade (*Ghoul*), Philip Nutman (*Full Throttle*) Mick Garris, Poppy Z. Brite, Gregory Nicoll, and most prominently John Shirley. And more will surely be added to the list, after the publication of *Shock Rock*, a horror/rock anthology edited by Jeff Gelb and due out this year. Nevertheless, if one was searching for experts on the topic, though Shirley gives them a fair run for their money, the fearsome foursome of Schow, Matheson, Skipp and Spector are perhaps the closest

Sometimes, rock is the subject matter of these writers. But more than that, what makes their works rock 'n' roll is a certain bravado they exude in their writing, a certain devil-may-care attitude that has sometimes pissed off their parents, the older, respected fathers of the genre. It's in the rhythm of their words, different beats but sharing a quality that rips through your soul like a hard-edged guitar riff.

It is this sensibility that is missing, for example, in Rice's work, or Michael Slade's *Ghoul*. While there are many other reasons why these novels could be

"I think, with rock 'n' roll and horror, more than with their counterparts, they're designed to go all the way. They ask you to do the stuff your mom and dad wish you wouldn't."

-- Skipp

praised, the rock in *The Vampire Lestat* and *Queen of the Damned* --no matter how many rock musicians it has inspired--is merely the replay of "just one note," offers Schow. *Lestat* may be a rock musician, but the novels just don't read rock 'n' roll; indeed, they have the tone more of a classical piece, perhaps an opera. According to Schow, his reaction was, "here's somebody writing about a rock singer who doesn't listen to the music."

The same criticism goes for *Ghoul*, where rock 'n' roll is treated as the means to an end, not as an end in itself. Slade has produced a psychological thriller and chosen to cast a rocker as the serial killer.

But the rock 'n' roll/horror connection still doesn't end with the writing style of these four, and a gradually building community of compatriots. Indeed, rock 'n' roll as a musical style that challenges cultural taboos shares a number of characteristics with horror as a literary style which at its best tests the limits of our sensibilities. A case can be made for a multi-level dialectic. As Spector says in the quote at the top, rock and horror both share a quality of danger, referring not to the mainstream of either field but to its more experimental periphery, those artists who aren't afraid to take a few risks, to tread into areas that the mainstream of our culture considers dangerous.

In the words of Skipp, "I think, with rock 'n' roll and horror, more than with their counterparts, they're designed to go all the way. They ask you to do the stuff your mom and dad wish you wouldn't."

"They're both not completely but fundamentally rooted in the gut," adds Spector. "It's the way you react to them. You feel good rock 'n' roll in your gut. You feel good horror in your gut. It's a real animal kind of art form."

Given such observations then, it should come as no surprise that the rock 'n' roll roots of these guys does not lie in all that creepy crooning--what might have seemed the obvious connection. Though they are often spotted in black leather jackets and tend to wear their hair long, these guys are most definitely not diehard metalheads or Goths.

The influences that cut into these writers' works are found rather in the cutting edges of the rock 'n' roll they grew up with, what John Skipp calls "our tribal music. It's so much a part of the way we think that it couldn't help but flop over into the books." Skipp, Spector and Matheson all are musicians; for Schow, the music

is an inescapable part of his lifestyle.

Of the four, rock as subject matter has come up the most in the work of Skipp and Spector. They made their literary debut with the story of a punk vampire in the New York club scene (*The Light at the End*), and followed with a novel about a less-than-successful rock musician, offered the power by an "angel" to become the ultimate vigilante (*The Clean-Up*). As for 1988's *The Scream*, it was sort of the ultimate rock/horror novel, in which the ultimate evil was provided by a Satanic heavy metal band called the Scream and their perverted manager Joshua Walker.

By coincidence or destiny, Schow's first published novel *The Kill Riff*--another rock/horror story--arrived on the market just a few months after *The Scream*, raising questions as to whether there might be a certain timeliness to the subject. It was about a man whose daughter was trampled in a riot at a rock concert. He becomes obsessed with tracking down and murdering all the members of Whiphand, the now defunct metal band that played that gig.

Schow has also used rock music in short stories. "Red Light," his 1987 World Fantasy award-winning story, took its title from a song by Siouxsie and the Banshees. In his "Lonesome Coyote Blues," two guys on a long, lonely desert drive tune in a radio station that plays songs by greats such as Buddy Holly and Jimi Hendrix--only these are hits they never recorded.

As to why rock figures so greatly in his works, Spector suggests, first of all, simple logic, the age-group of their protagonists--"it would be culturally a part of their experience." While their upcoming novel, *The Bridge*, contains no main characters who are rock musicians, he and Skipp say that rock still figures in as the background music--what the characters listen to.

Schow ascribes the emergence of *The Scream* and of *The Kill Riff* as having a more direct relation to its topicality. Writers often find their subjects in the news. "You have people trying to bring lawsuits against Judas Priest or putting lyrics in songs that have offensively inspired people to hurt themselves or commit suicide or do drugs or whatever. You have people trying to sue Ozzy. You have the PMRC thing that went down a couple of years ago. The PMRC is still out there."

Still, as for the more general emergence of a trend towards rock 'n' roll

horror fiction, Matheson is a bit skeptical. While he agrees that the high visibility of recent events such as the Tipper Gore/Frank Zappa debate could have been contributing factors, he points out the long-running rock 'n' roll connection that slides the other way, that "Alice Cooper was doing this shit--albeit rather laughingly" two decades ago. Preferring to credit the odd coincidence rather than any strict causality, he acknowledges, "I could just as easily argue for it to have come out 10 years ago."

And indeed, as said before, when one looks at the proliferation of horror rock and remembers how even the Beatles were supposed to carry messages from beyond the grave in the grooves of their records (played backwards of course), he has reason. Perhaps, though it may cause chagrin for those seeking pat causal explanations, any sudden rise in rock as subject matter for horror tales is mostly an accident of time, albeit one that was probably inevitable given the tremendous influence of rock in the mainstream of American culture.

As for an interplay between rock music and the creative process of writing, Matheson, who was a professional drummer before turning full-time to writing in his early '20s--he's now 36--says that being a musician factors into his writing "everywhere." For him, writing itself is an aural experience. The basic relationship is "two-sided." First, there is rhythm; he is quick to compare the manipulation of language with the mixing of percussion instruments. The second component is melody and applies to the choice of words. "They actually have a musical tonality," he says. "Certain words sound beautiful together and other words sound cacophonous together. Being aware of that I think means writing that much better--it literally sounds good to the ear."

Matheson is known for his sharp-edged stories, tightly composed pieces, that make up for their brevity in sheer emotional impact. His stories are not explicitly rock 'n' roll in their subject matter, though rock songs do come up, for example, on the radio dial, in "Hell" (*Silver Scream*, ed. David Schow). As Jim Morrison's voice delivers a heavy assault of "Music is your only friend. Until the end," Lauren discovers that her VW rabbit is locked in on three sides by cars parked way too close for comfort; the nose of the car is facing a cliff.

And, on another musical bent, he has done a country-western/horror tale of

sorts called "I'm Always Here," for the Joe Lansdale-edited *Razored Saddles*, about a "Siamese-twin country western duo." According to Matheson, he has always been fascinated by the way that country western husband-and-wife duos, like Porter Wagoner and Tammy Wynette, spend their entire life together "singing about their domestic crises. You get this entire marriage like a Swedish movie--like an Ingmar Bergman movie--in a country-western cooperation."

Nevertheless, even when they don't emerge in the text as the Doors' piece did in "Hell," specific rock songs are an integral part of his creation process. Indeed, he reveals that each story he does often is composed with a song in mind. None of these songs become the title, they rather contribute an ambience that sets his creative juices in motion. "It's like if you're interested in someone, you feel an attraction to somebody, you lower the lights and you light a candle, put on some beautiful music. It fills in so that you have a perfect mood.

"So, if you have an idea for a story, by putting on a certain kind of music, it fills in the rest of it. It absolutely transports your mind to the perfect place. The music is like substance enhancement. If you listen to it the right way, it's very powerful, very transcendent."

As for a specific example, he confesses that the bone-chilling enhancement for "Sirens" (also in *Silver Scream*) was Neil Young's "The Needle and Damage Done." When asked more generally about his musical roots, he cites the Beatles as his first big inspiration, what drove him into wanting to be a rock musician in the first place. Much of his musical taste was established during the years he was performing--Led Zeppelin, the Doors, the Rolling Stones, old Allman Brothers, Cat Stevens.

Skipp and Spector not only listen to other peoples' music while devising new books; they have created their own --full-scale soundtracks for *The Light at the End*, *The Clean-Up*, some miscellaneous pieces for *The Scream*, and most recently *The Bridge*. They stopped writing such extensive music, however, when they found they couldn't interest anyone in releasing the music commercially. *

"People don't release soundtrack albums for books," says Skipp regretfully. "It happens so rarely as to constitute never."

Which is one of the reasons, they add, that they would like to break into film,

to have the opportunity to be able to integrate their musical and literary proclivities into one creative whole.

While Matheson has a song for each of his stories, Skipp and Spector associate certain pieces of music with parts of novels. For example, Spector recalls listening to a lot of Pink Floyd's *Momentary Lapse of Reason* album while working on *Dead Lines* and a four-day marathon of both the vocal and instrumental version Tina Turner's "We Don't Need Another Hero" during *The Clean-Up*. As to who or what he listens to on a regular basis, he says that "it goes through phases. Certain artists or a given album will strike a resonant chord in the work."

As for what's on Skipp's self-assault agenda, when writing the current S&S novel *The Bridge*, he said he had been listening to lots of Oingo Boingo--"Oingo Boingo outnumbered everything else by about 60 percent." Other artists they are currently listening to include for Skipp--Peter Murphy, Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush, Tin Machine, Treat Her Right, soundtracks to *The Thing*, *Cat People*, *The Dawn of the Dead*--for Spector--Pat Metheny, the Sisters of Mercy, Shriekback, Edie Brickell and New Bohemians, soundtracks to *Batman*, *Near Dark*, general Tangerine Dream.

Indeed, according to Schow, what a writer listens to while he writes, or indeed whether he listens to music at all, says a lot about the finished product. He had even contemplated placing a playlist at the head of his latest novel *The Shaft*, so that readers can get a tone for what he was listening to while composing the text. He, most definitely, like Matheson, Skipp, and Spector, writes with the music on. The first thing he does most mornings is turn on the stereo.

"One of the things I do a lot of day to day is listen to music," he says. "The stereo is on usually from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to bed. [It's] like clouds in the sky--sometimes all the music that you're listening to swims together and makes pictures for you and inspires you to do stuff. It helps the creative process along to hear other people indulging in their creative process."

While writing *The Shaft*, for example, Schow says that he listened to a "huge casserole" of musicians, from classical to jazz to rock. When he feels like writing to instrumental pieces--music with lyrics, he says, can be distracting--often it's Tangerine Dream, or various sound-

"The whole idea [behind rock] is pissing off your parents which we as horror writers seem to be doing to the wave of horror writers who came before us."

-- Schow

track music from Jan Hammer's *Miami Vice* track to his favorite, Wang Chung's *To Live and Die in L.A.* In terms of rock, he leans typically towards the alternative/progressive end, "almost everything by the Cocteau Twins," Sisters of Mercy, Shriekback, hard core/thrash bands like the Butthole Surfers, the Circle Jerks, T.S.O.L., Suicidal Tendencies. Or to the obscure, the 1974 incarnation of King Crimson, Japanese garage bands like the Mops (you know them--they sing "I'm Just a Mop"), Henrietta Collins and the Wife-beating Childhaters. He even occasionally throws on some Screamin' Jay Hawkins.

Schow does add though that he finds Devil-oriented heavy metal "a crashing bore." "I think it's incredibly limiting in that Biblical horror can be dispelled by waving a cross or a Bible at it. That's a pretty pallid horror, isn't it? I mean it's got a pretty established methodology for getting rid of it. It's not a problem in the way that bugs aren't a problem if you have Raid...And if you listen to the music, some of the better speed-metal and thrash-metal has nothing to do with it. I think bands are beginning to realize it, too."

Indeed, he modelled the sound of Whiphand--the band in *The Kill Riff*--after his own musical preferences. "If there was a real band like that, it would be one of the more subterranean metal bands, and it wouldn't be as famous as Whiphand was in the book. They wouldn't be playing sports arenas."

But if Whiphand was on the periphery of bands who might become famous in our consumer-oriented culture, and Schow's musical tastes often run to the extreme fringes of the status quo of rock music, perhaps it is not so surprising that the work this music inspires has also been labeled as being on the edges of what is acceptable in horror literature. While it has for the moment died down, the Splatterpunk controversy itself that revolved around the loose group of writers including Schow, Skipp, Spector, and Matheson was phrased as an aural argument--quiet versus loud horror. The classicists versus the hard rockers?

The parallel is not lost on the writers themselves. "It was funny because I think that we all in our separate ways *did* do what the Sex Pistols and the Dead Kennedys were doing at the time," observes John Skipp in retrospect, commenting on the spontaneity with which their writing emerged on the professional

scene, just as the Pistols rose to challenge the musical status quo. "And these were not a bunch of guys who were writing letters to each other, saying, hey, let's start a movement. They were just a bunch of bands who had the same kind of sensibility, and the next thing you know people had decided that it was a movement--nothing killed it faster than deciding it was a movement."

"Basically they had decided that things had just gotten a little too tired around here, a little too corporate, a little too regular and predictable, and they weren't addressing the things that they thought rock 'n' roll should be about. So they started going on stage and screaming and doing wild shit."

"And I guess that's sort of what Craig and I and Schow and Clive Barker and various other people have done. We were reading the stuff that was there and going 'yeah, this is great, but what if you went *this far*..."

Schow agrees. "The whole idea [behind rock] is pissing off your parents which we as horror writers seem to be doing to the wave of horror writers who came before us."

"It's as though we've done something and we don't know what it is, but we sure pissed them off," he adds. "They're having the same reaction that your average '60s parent has had when you put on the average Dirty Rotten Imbeciles album."

What these guys are defending, however, is not loudness per se. In Spector's view, the key factor is not noise level, but rather a certain level of feeling: "Quiet horror can mask its inability to convey a message by simply being chilly and remote. [It can] hide behind that every bit as much as loud horror can hide behind the viscera. I think that what makes any kind of horror or music--whether its quiet, loud, or whatever--good for us is this real feeling of emotional involvement, that the writer was going after something and got it."

Hence, he feels that in much the same way that punk rock today hardly pulls the same emotional triggers it did when it burst onto the music scene in the mid-'70s, too much loud horror can fizzle the fright. "There's also such a thing as a cyclical nature to this, cycles of desensitization and resensitization," he suggests. "If you do too much for too long, it becomes devalued."

Skipp returns to the aural analogy: "Then it stops being an alarm, and it

just turns into a background noise."

As for Matheson, he agrees loudness is not a virtue in itself, but that part of the problem--and indeed where the analogy wears thin--lies in the different qualities and expectations of fiction and rock music.

"If we're talking about the fringe like splatter-horror, yeah, it's really like intellectually breaking the law. Or with music, it's aurally breaking the law. And at its worst, like every juvenile delinquent, it can just be an insolent punk which does nothing. And at its best, it can be genuine revolution, genuine iconoclasm. It can be very exciting, but it can just be loud."

Actually, he feels that most of the loud horror out on the market is "pretty dumb. It just seems out-of-control in the worst possible way." Part of the problem, though, is that the sort of visceral anger that triggered bands like the Sex Pistols doesn't translate onto paper. "True angry teenage rock 'n' roll is very inarticulate stuff that relies on the most obvious phraseology, kind of a primitive way to get from A to B with an idea. Whereas any horror story has to be by its own construction so much more sophisticated than that. It cannot afford to be pure out-and-out angry. You couldn't have the Johnny Rotten of prose because it would be unreadable, not unreadable because it would be offensive, but because it wouldn't be very interesting. There has to be more delicacy, and there has to be more maturity and refinement with prose writing, even with bad prose writing."

Indeed, one can find a literary parallel to this debate in the debates about rock music contained in *The Scream* and *The Kill Riff*, parts of the text derived straight from the news. While the fears of housewives and preachers may fuel the plotlines behind both books, the implication here is just as no type of writing is inherently bad neither is any type of music. The real horror is censorship.

As for the thought of rock actually causing someone to wreak violence, Spector is skeptical. "Any dough-wad with a record player can sit there and say, I listened to your lyrics and they said I should go and kill my parents. Well, aren't we just a special child?"

As for what he'd say to Geraldo after that special on Satanism: "It's a theory. It's a piece of fiction. Have you ever heard of fiction before?"

Horror and rock 'n' roll are both something that many parents and educa-

tors seem to have a real fear of--they are genuinely scared that kids who are into the stuff will grow up to be mass murderers, drug dealers, rapists, or at the very least, sexually promiscuous profaners of the English language, damned to Hell. An article in *Omni*, a little over a year ago, outlined numerous attempts used by those speaking for the child's best interest to remove Stephen King novels from school library shelves. The excuses ranged from foul language to the encouragement of Devil worship. Only pornography and evolution cause as much fury among God-loving Christians as horror and rock 'n' roll.

“The writer of horror who accomplishes what rock 'n' roll accomplishes is a very strong writer because he is providing invisible music...”

-- Matheson

Which, of course, has everything to do with why the kids like both horror and rock so much--the shock value that plays so well into the dynamics of adolescent rebellion. It is this teenage rock/horror connection that filmmakers, with their eye ever peeled onto the lucrative youth market, have cashed in on for much longer than the writers. Early examples date back to the early '70s, cult movie musicals, *Phantom of the Paradise*, director Brian de Palma's update of *The Phantom of the Opera* to a rock-palace setting, and the more famous *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. As the '80s dragged on, more and more horror films incorporated rock stars (David Bowie, *The Hunger*; Sting, *The Bride*) into their casts and rock songs into their soundtracks (the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* series, *Return of the Living Dead*). The culmination of this trend can be seen in the runaway box-office success of 1987's *Lost Boys*.

Still, the rock 'n' roll horror connection can be taken to the extreme. Obviously, there are a lot of similarities between rock and horror, but as Matheson points out, one is music and one is writing. While one can compare elements of the two, look for rhythm and melody in text, the fact remains that while novels and short stories may be composed to a diverse and eclectic assembly of music, Skipp and Spector aside, they don't come to the reader with a soundtrack. Given this limitation, Matheson feels that writing is the “bigger accomplishment.”

“The writer of horror who accomplishes what rock 'n' roll accomplishes is a very strong writer because he is providing invisible music,” he puts forth. “He is making you hear as strongly and as loudly as a powerful piece of music.”

But even beyond that, the fact is that rock music is typically produced by a

team of different individuals, a band, while horror fiction--with the possible exception of Michael Slade--is the product of one person. This has inherently different implications for the process of creation. “In rock 'n' roll, it is very unusual to have an artist that is one person who plays all the instruments, who writes all the songs. In rock 'n' roll, if you can do that you're considered a genius. In prose, it is expected. It is expected that an individual have all the ideas. It is expected that you will write all the dialogue. It is expected that you will write all the descriptions. It is expected that you will handle everything, that you will orchestrate the entire thing. And it doesn't make you a genius or a savant, it just makes you a writer.”

Indeed, he adds that “a lot of what is attractive about being a rock 'n' roll musician is that it harnesses a very limited and primal part of your personality. It's like sex. On a certain wavelength, it's just the simplest thing you can do. It's so simple. To write beautiful scenes about lovemaking is difficult, to just fuck is simple.”

Perhaps this is why Matheson left music to prospect the world of words. And this is why it would be terribly misleading to characterize all his work or that of Schow, Skipp and Spector as simply the embodiment of a rock/horror connection. Such extreme reductionism would have the effect of distorting their work to fit categories that might not lend themselves to a perfect fit. Still, reading their works, talking to them, they wouldn't be writing the way they do if they hadn't grown up in an age of rock music and inundated themselves in its aural frequencies. It's become a cliché to say that writers write from their own experience, but these writers have experienced rock 'n' roll.

Massachusetts-based writer, Anya Martin, is a seasoned rock critic and columnist who has penned more words on the subject of music and horror than she cares to remember. After too many years of recording other peoples words as a journalist, she now devotes most of her time to writing fiction and is currently working on a novel and a non-fiction film book.

* Editor's note: For update, see *Shadowlands*, Pg. 5

SCREAMS FROM THE MASSES

Letters

Editors,

It was a great pleasure that I received the premiere issue of *Iniquities*. Despite its lengthy incubation period, the magazine is an unqualified success and I want to be one of the first to congratulate you on a job well done.

The typesetting, the layout, the look--everything is just plain terrific. Obviously a lot of care (and no small amount of effort) has gone into a finished product that belies its tender age. And need I mention the quality of the work contained within? With luminaries like Schow and Barker featured alongside interesting and provocative non-fiction articles, the magazine fairly screams quality.

Like, wow!

Like, amazing!

Like when does the second issue come out? Can I expect to see the magazine in Waldenbooks or some other major chain--and if no, why the hell not? You deserve it, kids.

Take care and best of luck,

Cliff Burns

Canada

Cliff,

Thanks for your cool comments.

By the way, *Iniquities* is now available in chainstores, hell, it's available everywhere now!

Dear Editors:

Sending honest comments to a valuable horror market is always a risky endeavor, but you did seem eager for some reactions, so here we go . . .

If I were editor of this magazine (and I really don't know if I'd want such troubles), I think I would aim for a little more variety. There are a few too many stories in Issue #1 about guys gleefully torturing or violating innocent girls. Now, aside from the fact that this grates against my feminist attitudes (something I'm not afraid to admit, even though I am very opposed to censorship), I also find it slightly tedious. This is not to say, by any means, that the stories are bad: John Shirley's excerpt draws some fascinating parallels, and Tim Sullivan's story is a tasty treat (I loved the ending, I've got to admit). But I do hope that you're not going to spend all your editorial days focusing on sexual violence just so that you can break the taboos. Besides, contrary to what a couple of your writers claim, sex and violence are not the most forbidden ingredients. It's much more taboo, especially in the "popular" genres, to challenge and expose the existing

social order. One of my favorite recent horror books is K.W. Jeter's *In The Land Of The Dead*, not only because it's skillfully written and incredibly frightening, but also because it is a courageous comment on our society. Just thinking about the premise of the novel makes me shiver: There are these fat greedy pigs, you see, who hoard tons of money while thousands of perfectly decent people wander the streets homeless and hungry, looking like walking corpses . . .

I wonder if such day-to-day horrors are part of the "realism" that Lisa Feerick claims to seek. Unfortunately, I'm not quite sure what Ms. Feerick wants. She keeps telling us that she's going to define the "New Horror," but she never seems to get around to it. How many writers does she actually name--two, maybe three? She keeps talking about the "hot babes," but she names only Nancy Collins, so how do we know that there are any others? and what is this crap about the "post-Punk generation of young cynical professionals" -- what a ridiculous stereotype! As someone who was actually once a punk rocker (but who might never become a professional), I personally am not impressed by loudness anymore, probably because I've had my fill of it. Besides, despite what Ms. Feerick (and many others) might think, the original punk movement was deliberately opposed as assumed by punks (correctly so) that the quest for "free love" had proven to be a sham. Punk was an attempt to revitalize pop culture by cutting away the rot 50 that things could begin anew. The form by its nature begged for experimentation and a multiplicity of ways to challenge the status quo. Frankly, I don't know if most Splatterpunk resembles this movement; instead, it's more like American hardcore. Hardcore was different in that it put limits on the music; it did not ask for change, because change meant selling out. Hardcore demanded heavy metal volumes, a higher level of violence and athletic stamina. Also, unlike punk (perhaps because of its nature), its participants were almost exclusively male. I wouldn't like to think that the splatter fans are hardcore, but I see a lot of evidence . . .

Admittedly, I have nothing against traditional horror, but I think I am at least as appreciative of innovation as anyone who follows the "New Horror" movement. My favorite current horror writers include K.W. Jeter, Michael Blumlein, Steve Rasnic Tem, Patrick McGrath, Angela Carter and Jessica Amanda Salmonson. Although a couple of them once worked with the "Cyberpunks," none really are "Splatterpunks" and yet they all write horror that is highly original.

Moreover, much in line with Ms. Feerick's alleged criteria, they are beautifully in touch with the post-whatever world. But if you ask me, one of the reasons that they're so good is that they have no desire to join *any* club . . .

Despite what you might gather from all my grumbling, I am very pleased with *Iniquities* #1. Moreover, I do hope that you continue in your attempts to mix all types of horror in a "new and exciting magazine." I don't know who could have claimed that this idea "sucked" -- the concept is wonderful . . .

Sincerely,
Richard Singer
N Y

Dear Sirs:

I found a copy of your magazine buried on the bottom rack at a Little Professors and the art leapt out and grabbed my eyeballs, pulling them out and leaving them dangling by their optic nerves. After pushing them back in, the title also caught my attention and I thought, what the Hell. So I bought it. A month later, after tracking down and killing friends that keep stealing my copy, I have finished reading it. It's great.

The editorials are intelligent, literate, yet far removed from the precocious highbrow bullshit that other magazines have to appeal to, I don't know, maybe *New Yorker* readers. The fiction was diverse, exploring the different facets of horror, while staying away from the wretched prose of hacks. It's my hope that you will print some new, undiscovered authors, maybe one an issue as a parallel to your "Resurrections" department. A "Spawned" department, perhaps. There has been a dearth of magazines that print decent horror since the *Twilight Zone* went down in flames, or maybe that's just here in the Midwest, very close to Cincinnati, where thoughts and ideas are crushed with a terrifying regularity; I didn't see the Autumn edition of your magazine until January, so it wouldn't surprise me if their were hundreds of other magazines that Sheriff Simon Leis simply wasn't permitting into the area.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
H. Robert Perry IV
OH

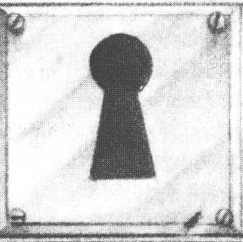
H. Robert,

You'll notice two brand new authors in this issue. And while your suggestion for a "Spawned" department is cool, publishing new authors has always been our intention, but as for giving birth...?



HOT
Copy
OF
THE
CAGED
VIRGINS

STARRING
Elizabeth Massie
Buddy Martinez
Lotta Gue
and Buffy Jo



Rated XXX

Hot Orgy of the Caged Virgins

by Elizabeth Massie

Just because we live in Slayman Cove don't mean we don't know nothing about sex. We might not live in New York City or some of them big places, but we know what end's what. We don't need nobody telling us 'bout that. Since I quit school a couple years ago, the state of Virginia said every kid from kindergarten up to high school got to have that Family Life class. Sex education, you know? 'Course back here in the Cove nobody hardly takes the class. They all get opted out of it by their parents. This way the kids can learn sex the right way, either on top of some preacher's daughter or underneath the hairy belly of their grandpa.

I'm eighteen now, and was almost engaged, so I know sex. My friend Penny is eighteen, too, and she got three kids so she knows about sex. And the boys we hang around with, well, they start fucking goats when they're thirteen.

But what I'm getting at is that we sometimes think there is more to sex than just humping out in the weeds. Sometimes we think maybe the people up there in New York might be having more fun with it than we are. And that's what give Pete Maupin the idea. He scraped up what money he still had left over from his old job and decided to take us into Rickettville to the drive-in movie. The picture showing was an x-rated one called "Hot Orgy of the Caged Virgins."

Two days before Friday, it started raining.

And it rained, and wouldn't stop raining.

I was babysitting as usual on Friday morning at my Mama's house while Mama was working at Jones'. I sit for seven kids during the weekdays, three of them is Penny's and the others is just others. It was raining to beat the band, and most of the kids was playing out in the mud. I had little Bobby round my knee, whipping him with the electric cord for spitting his breakfast, when Pete come knocking on the door. First I thought it was the social service lady and was scared, but then I seen Pete behind the door and let him in.

Pete had lost his job just four weeks earlier from McNeal's Body Shop out on Route 112. He didn't have nothing to do during the day anymore, and it wasn't nothing to have him come hang out at my mama's house for a couple hours. Sometimes Pete wanted to screw me when he visited but I always kept him off, telling him that Meade and me was almost engaged. Pete would fume around but then he'd be okay and we'd watch a little t.v. and have an early morning beer or two. Then he'd be off on whatever other business he had.

Hot Orgy

This morning his hair was plastered with the rain and he looked bothered.

"It's off," he said.

"What's that?" I said, and Pete glared at me like I should know but I didn't so I just shrugged. I gave Bobby one last pinch with my nails and let him run off.

Pete shook his legs, spraying the wall of the living room, then came in and sat down on the sofa next to me. Pete is big, and when he sits on Mama's sofa, the springs give out all the way down to the floor.

I wiped cookie crumbs off my mouth and crossed my legs. I was wearing my cutoffs, although it was damn cold for the first day of September. I like the way my legs look. I know that Pete does, too.

"Too much rain for the movies," said Pete. He balled his fingers up together on his knees and scowled at the television set.

"You mean for tonight?" I said. "It don't matter. Just save your money for something else." I thought I was helping.

"It was a good movie," said Pete. "Not like some of those cheap things Jimmy rents for his VCR. This one was a real sex movie, like they show in the big cities."

Pete and I sat in silence then for a minute, both of us thinking about the big cities. Then I said, "Maybe it'll be good weather next Friday. Why don't we all get together and go next week?"

"Ain't showing next week," said Pete.

"How do you know?"

He didn't say nothing, and I knew he didn't know but I pretended like he did. I said, "Sorry it's raining." Pete grimaced.

I said, "Maybe it'll stop. Then we could go."

"It ain't gonna stop. Listened to the radio at seven this morning. Guy was calling for a flood warning. That means it'll be high water down by the river, and high water down in Rickettville. Drive-in movie people ain't gonna open for that."

Pete stood up suddenly and looked at me. A rain drip that had been hanging on his earlobe fell to his shoe.

"I got business," he said, and he stomped out of the front door. I watched him move down the path until I couldn't see him no more for the rain, then I called the children in from the backyard so they wouldn't get pneumonia.

Meade got off work early from his daddy's auto body shop 'cause hardly no one was coming in during the rain. He drove his jeep up the path and parked in the yard, then came pounding on the door. Mama wasn't home yet since it wasn't quite four, and the kids was all over the house. Meade came in and took his shoes off by the door so not to get mud on the floor. He's a year younger'n me but he got a year more school than me. His hair is blonde and his eyes are gray. Penny was jealous when we started going together 'cause she said Meade was tops. I told her being cute was all right, but sometimes Meade was boring as shit. Penny just hushed me up.

I give Meade a wave hello, 'cause my mouth was full of chocolate-covered peanuts.

"Can't you get them kids up to the attic for about half hour?" Meade said, and I knew by his smile that he was feeling good 'bout the long weekend coming up. I said the kids'd never stay in the attic if they knew we was up to something, but I could tell that Meade was happy and horny and it wasn't going away unless I did something 'bout it. So I took him out to the shed and left the kids in the house by theirselves. It was the same old same old, so while Meade had a real good time for hisself, I thought about what I was going to fix for lunch.

When we got back the kids had broke an ashtray. I stuck my lit cigarette on 'em all 'til they said who did it. Then I swept it up quick so Mama wouldn't notice. As I was dumping the pieces in the trash and Meade was getting a beer, the door opened. I thought it was gonna be Mama but it wasn't. It was Pete. He had rainwater in his jacket collar and a weird grin on his face.

"Hey, Pete," said Meade.

"Hey, boy, what you and old Caroline doing here on a Friday afternoon?" Pete don't like Meade much, but Meade never seemed to notice.

"Beer's in the fridge," Meade said, still grinning from our time in the shed.

"No time," said Pete. Then he looked at me. "Can you get hold of them others that was going to the movies with us?"

"Still raining," I said.

"Yeah, and the drive-in still ain't open," he said. "But I made a run into Rickettville, anyway. Got a great plan."

"What's that?" asked Meade.

"Out in the truck. You two come outside and see what I picked up."

We went out to the porch. Kids came out too, but they couldn't have cared less when they seen what Pete had in the back of his pickup. It was two of them wire grocery carts they have at the bigger stores. Pete had stole them down in Rickettville.

"So," I said, knowing Pete was anxious for somebody to ask. "What they for?"

"If we can't go see caged virgins we can make our own movie."

"We don't know no virgins," I said. I laughed. Pete laughed, too.

"And we ain't got no camera," said Meade.

"Well, we got girls," said Pete. He rubbed his hands together and let out a long breath. "We got some men, and a couple boys." He looked at Meade and winked, but I don't think Meade caught that joke. I thought it was pretty funny, and bit my lip so not to laugh. "And we got us some cages now, from Kroger in downtown Rickettville. We got that old barn at the top of Pusgah Knoll. And we got a rainy night with nothing else to do."

There was something in Pete's voice, something about the excitement he was trying to hold, that got me all fired up. A chill ran my spine and my breasts felt puckered. I thought at that moment that if it was morning again and he wanted to jump my bones on the sofa, I'd go for it.

"I'll get everybody," I volunteered. "I'll tell Mama to watch Penny's kids tonight so Penny can come, too."

"So what you thinking about?" asked Meade. He was lighting a cigarette, and the tip glowed bright with his first suck.

Pete just shook his head. "Gotta come to find out."

Meade looked at me, then he nodded, his lips smiling around the roll of his cigarette. "Sure," he said. "It's too rainy for nothing else."

Then Pete was off the porch in the rain, climbing into his Ford and revving the engine just a little more than usual. Meade went into the house long before I did.

The barn on Pusgah Knoll used to hold tobacco, then hay, and now nothing. The sides is pretty strong, and the roof's still there, but its got holes in the wood floor that are wide and when I was a kid I once broke my ankle in one. It's at the top of Gardner property and old Mrs. Gardner don't come out of her yard no more so she never knows when people is messing around in her barn.

Meade and me drove his jeep up the road that leads along the edge of Gardner property then pulled off in the trees. We put on our ponchos and got out in the rain. The rain was loud, but down on the other side of the road, hidden by brush, was the river, and we could hear it, too. It was moving fast. Wouldn't be long before some of the lower bridges was all covered over.

We turned on our flashlights and took the steep slope along the old hayfield up to the barn. It wasn't no time before I had rain down the front of my poncho and up my arms, but I wasn't going to complain. I was excited. Meade was quiet and walked bent forward, but I knew he was excited, too. Meade likes sex. Maybe he was thinking he would get to mess around with one of the other girls who came tonight. Which was fine by me, 'cause I was thinking how nice it might be to have Pete in my pants in one of them dark old stalls.

By the time we got to the barn we was panting. I squinted up at the barn on the knoll and I could see little streaks of light coming out through the gaps in the walls.

There was some truck tracks where Pete had driven up to the door and then away, and the ruts was filled with water like dark little rivers.

Meade slid the heavy wooden door open and let me go in first. I stepped carefully, ducking out of my poncho and shaking the water off. Then I gave Meade my poncho, and looked around the barn.

Everyone was there, like I thought. Penny sat on one of the old blackened bales of hay, wearing a denim mini-skirt and more eyeshadow than could've come out of one whole shadow container. Jimmy sat next to Penny on another black bale, and on the floor near him was Chasity, Jimmy's slutty cousin, who was twenty five but tried to act like a teen, and Lemuel, Chasity's recent boyfriend who was my age. All four had beers and cigarettes. Flashlights and kerosene lanterns shown onto the center of the floor like the old, sputtering lights of the Slayman High School stage.

In the middle of the floor was the two grocery carts, with Pete sitting in one.

"Well, so glad you two drowned rats decided to join us!" he bellowed. Obviously he had been into his cooler for some time already. His smile was giddy. His voice was gruff and he looked great. "We just been chatting and waiting for you. Want a beer?"

Meade stepped forward. "Sure, Pete. You got any left or you drunk it all?"

Pete licked his lips and nodded toward the cooler in one darkened stall. "Boy, I might be feeling good but I know what I'm doing. Go on, get a couple. How you like my chair? It's a little tight, but I fit. Kinda nice, too. Cool and smooth and sexy." He rubbed the sides of the cart, then he rubbed his knees, then his crotch. I blinked. I seen plenty of guys do that, even my brothers and my daddy, but it seemed weird to see somebody do it in front of a bunch of other people when they knew they was doing it. I felt a flush in my chest. If this was New York sex, I was going to like it.

Meade went to the cooler and took out two Coors. He tossed one to me. I bent over to pick it up, aware that the move brought the low neck of my fuzzy white sweater down in range for the boys to have a good peek. I hoped Pete was watching.

Penny rolled her eyes,
but I could tell it
wouldn't take much
coaxing to get her
in the grocery cart.

Meade rolled an upended bale over and motioned for me to come sit beside him. I stepped over a puddle on the floor and sat on the bale next to Meade. I crossed my legs. I wished I had a mini-skirt like Penny.

Pete took a long sip from his can, then tossed the can against a far wall. It echoed as it hit. Then he said, "You missed the introduction. I was just showing everybody what I had in mind. I thought ya'll wasn't coming."

"Should've waited for us," said Meade. He took my hand and gave it a squeeze. It was real hard not to pull away.

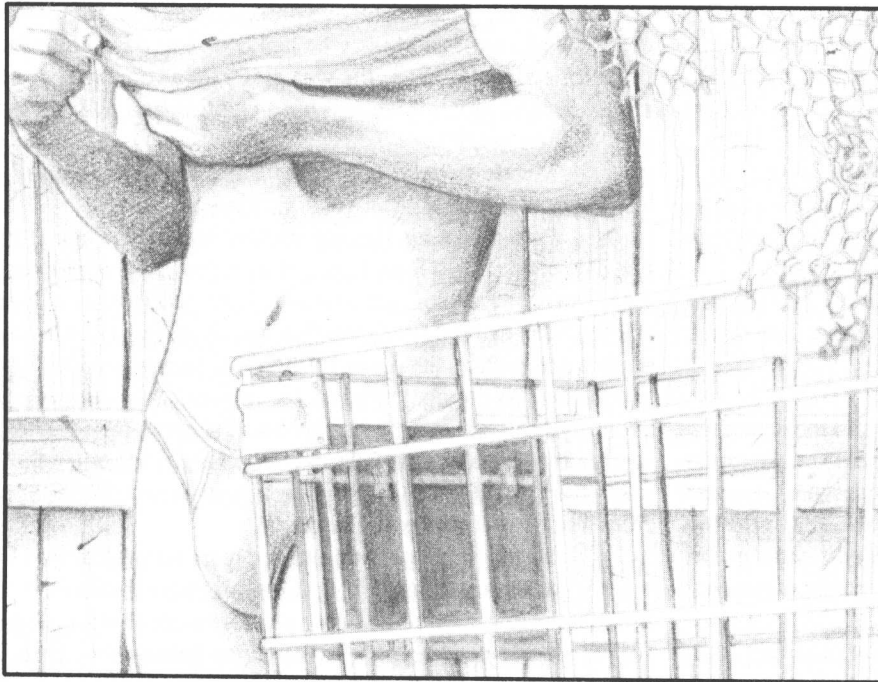
Pete climbed out of the grocery cart, balancing himself so as not to tip it on its side. He said, "I was just talking about the movie we missed tonight. I said we could keep on being back-woods morons or we could try some of that big city hot stuff."

Meade took a drink of his beer. He looked at Jimmy and Chasity and Penny and Lemuel. They was sheets in the wind already, faces sloppy and eyes watery and anxious. Meade said, "Tell us what you was talking about."

"Big city humpin'," offered Penny. She giggled. "Group sex."

"Caged virgins," said Jimmy, and he laughed out

Hot Orgy



loud, sniffing then coughing beer out his nose.

"We don't get to see the movie," said Pete. "Big deal. We got us our cages. So we can make up a script. We just need two people to be the virgins and get in them carts."

"Now you ain't serious," said Meade. He shook his head, humored. "Nobody gonna get off being in no grocery cart. I thought you was just kidding 'bout that part."

"Pete says some people handcuff each other and then they fuck," said Chasity. "They like all that cold metal. Some of them whip each other with chains. Wild stuff I'm talking about, see?"

I popped the tab of my beer and took a swig. All this talk had my pussy starting to thump.

"Pete says some of them lock each other up and play fantasy games," Penny said. "That's what we's gonna do."

"So," said Pete. "We need us two virgins. Who wants to play the part? Pretty Penny, would you like to try our cage?"

Penny rolled her eyes, but I could tell it wouldn't take much coaxing to get her in the grocery cart. After Pete beckoned twice more, wiggling his index finger in her direction, she stood up and trotted to the middle of the floor.

"Got to take off your clothes, honey," said Pete. "Won't work, otherwise."

Penny nodded.

We all watched as Pete stripped Penny and then put her in the wire cart. I never watched a boy strip a girl before and it made my blood hot. Penny had to scrunch down and then Pete took some chicken wire from one of the stalls and tightened it over the top of the cart with some pliers. Penny laughed, then burped.

Then Pete said, "Need another virgin."

Nobody said nothing. We just looked at each other.

"A man," said Pete.

Jimmy and Lemuel worked their shoulders but wouldn't look at each other. Meade said, "Uh."

"Why you need a man?" Jimmy said then. "Caged virgins is girls."

"I never said that. You thought that."

"Men don't do that kind of thing," complained Jimmy.

"Boys don't," said Pete.

I didn't really want to see Jimmy nude in the cart, 'cause he's fat as a ball of lard, and Lemuel is dumb as sheep shit and he probably still thought we was just out for the usual drink and get smashed routine. I knew Pete wasn't going to get in, 'cause he was man-in-charge. So I looked at Meade. He had a hayseed hillbilly scowl on his face. I hated it. "Go on, Meade. If you love me you'll get in the cart."

Meade scratched his face. "I don't know..."

"Forget Meade," said Pete.

"Come on, Jimmy, get in the cart.

You'll thank me for it later."

"You think it'll be good?"

"Like Heaven, Jimmy."

"Meade..." I said.

"Come on, Jimmy," said Pete.

"Meade!" I said.

Pete strolled forward and took Jimmy by the arm. Jimmy whined, like he thought Pete was gonna hit him. "Come on, boy. Gotta have us an actor."

Meade stood up. He gave me his beer can. "I'll take first go. We'll see who's the man in this place."

"Hoo-wee!" shouted Chasity, and I knew she had been silently rooting for Meade all this time. "Gonna see me some cute buns."

Meade walked to the cart, but he took his own clothes off. He moved slowly like maybe he was embarrassed but didn't want to look like it. I took some quick drinks. My head was beginning to spin. Meade never looked so worthless. His body was hairless and damp. Only his penis was surrounded by red hair. I could hear Chasity's low whistle as Meade climbed into the cart. It was harder for Meade to get situated, 'cause he took up more room than Penny did, but when he seemed fairly snug, Pete covered the top with the chicken wire and tightened it down with his pliers.

"Opening scene," he said. "We have trapped ourselves two mountain virgins. What you think we should do with them?"

I looked at Lemuel. He was totally confused with the role-playing. Chasity was into it immediately.

"Yeah," she said. "I think I'd like to show that mountain man what a real classy woman is all about." She hopped from her seat and sauntered over to Meade's grocery cart. I hated her for being so quick about it, but I wanted to watch real bad. I followed to the cart.

Chasity wriggled her red fingernails in through the

slats of the cart and tickled Meade on the arm. He flinched and chuckled, but of course, couldn't move away. Penny said, "Hey, this ain't too comfortable," but Chasity and me ignored her. We was watching Meade, naked and squished up, sitting in the grocery cart.

But what was funny was that Pete ignored Penny, too. I was kind of hoping that he would go over and do whatever a man did to a caged virgin, but he was, instead, staring at Meade.

Without looking away from Meade, he called over to Jimmy and Lemuel who was still on the bales. "She's all yours," he said. Jimmy nodded happily, then caught Lemuel by the arm like a kid excited but too scared to go on a carnival ride by himself. The two went over to Penny.

"How's the movie gonna go for this boy?" Pete asked me.

Chasity poked her fingernail at Meade again. "I don't know if this'll work too good. He's cute in there and all but I can't get to him. Different for a girl, you know. We can't get no blow job through the cracks."

"What about you, Caroline? What you want to do to your little mountain boyfriend now that he's caged?"

The way he said it made me embarrassed. I was almost engaged to Meade. I'd never get out of the mountains and up to New York when we got married. I just hadn't seen that 'til now. Meade was all jobbed up and set to live in Slayman Cove the rest of his life. There wouldn't be nothing to humping but Meade groaning and sweating and me thinking about making lunch.

Meade said, "Maybe you should trade me places, Pete. You seem to know what we's supposed to do."

Pete then grinned at Meade, and in that grin I seen something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Maybe, I thought for a second, Pete was queer and wanted Meade in there to suck on his dick. Or maybe Pete was more drunk than he looked. Maybe Pete just liked seeing Meade trapped for some reason.

"Give him some titty," said Pete, and all of a sudden he reached out and ripped Chasity shirt open. She didn't have no bra.

"Christ, what you...?" she sputtered, but then Pete took her by the shoulders and forced her boobs down to the slats. Chasity banged her knees down on the old barn floor, ripping her hose.

I stepped closer.

"Suck the titty, mountain boy," said Pete. Chasity whined and struggled against Pete's grip but he held her down to the grocery cart.

Meade frowned through the wire. He looked kind of like a zebra, what with the shadows and all. "Pete, I don't need your help. Let her go. She'll do it if she wants to."

"Don't like titties?" sneered Pete.

"I like titties. Let her be."

I licked my lips. They tasted like the dead rats and rain I was smelling. But my breath was coming on, fast.

"Screw you, bastard," said Pete, and he gave Chasity a push and she went sprawling on the barn floor. I flinched; Meade did, too. We both seen it at the same time; Pete was

starting to go crazy. I knew Pete never really liked Meade, but now he acted like he hated him. I didn't understand why until Pete shoved his face to the cart and said, "Little Mr. Mechanic McNeal."

Oh, yeah, I thought.

"Little Mr. McBigFuck Daddy's boy."

Meade's face went white in the light of the flashlights. Like he knew why Pete was acting crazy, too.

"Pete..." said Meade.

"Shut up little caged virgin boy," said Pete.

I put my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. Chasity on the floor, nursing her butt and torn hose, stopped her whimpering and looked up at Pete with an expression of fear. Only Lemuel and Jimmy, taking turns sticking their cocks through to Penny, took no notice of what was going on. They laughed and burped and hit Penny's cart so's it rattled.

Pete reached in his pocket and pulled out a little screwdriver. He shoved it in the cage, scraping Meade's back. Meade grunted and tried to turn over, but he couldn't.

"I stole this from McNeal's Body Shop," Pete said. "Ever hear of the place, Meade?"

I licked my lips. They
tasted like the rain and
dead rats I was smelling.

"What are you...?" began Meade, but Pete stuck the screwdriver in again, this time catching Meade in the arm and drawing blood. I gasped. But my pussy, it kept on thumping.

"I stole it from McNeal's Shop. Stole lots of other stuff, too. But you know when I did it? After your cocksucking daddy fired me for stealing. I never stole nothing 'til I was fired. Then what the hell, I might as well steal since I got credit for it."

"Fuck this," said Meade. He started grabbing the cart sides with his fingers and trying to shake it. "Let me out of here."

"You had good tools there," said Pete. "Them pliers did a good job." Pete glanced over at me and winked. Sweat started to run under my arms like rain water. I winked back.

Meade hunched up his spine and pushed against the chicken wire. All it did was bend a little. Meade's arm was really bleeding now. "Let me out!"

Jimmy and Lemuel looked over at us. Jimmy's dick was limp now, but Lemuel's was still stiff as a dead bird.

Pete said, "Big city sex. Sometimes they do that sado stuff. They like it." He dropped the screwdriver into his pocket and went to a hay bale at the side of the barn. From behind it he pulled out a small battery powered hand drill. Meade seen it, and he screamed.

Hot Orgy

But Pete came back to the cart and turned on the drill. He said, "McNeal equipment is specially good for making picture shows. Movies with caged virgins got to have different kinds of action. Don't want nobody bored watching the show. You want to be bored, Caroline?"

My stomach tried to come up into my lungs. But it wasn't from being scared, it was from being excited. This was better than anything I'd ever seen. It was a movie and it was real life. It was what I felt: about Meade and Slayman Cove and being stuck with stinking crying puking babies every day of my life all rolled into one.

Pete punched the drill bit through the side of the cart. Meade shrieked, and the drill went all up and down his body, making deep, bloody holes.

"Pete!" I shouted, but instead of reaching out to stop him, I wrapped my arms round his waist and held on to him. There was so much blood. Pete's heart thundered through the back of his shirt.

Meade bucked and thrashed in the cart. The chicken wire bent up and down. The cart almost turned over. Pete said, "I didn't steal a fucking thing."

Meade shouted, "Caroline!"

Jimmy said, "Goddam."

Lemuel just stroked his dick and gawked.

Pete stuck the drill in again and again. We couldn't hear no sound now but Meade. I let one hand go down to my crotch and rub.

Then Pete stopped. Meade wasn't dead but was quiet now, panting and sputtering through the blood like he had

through the rain on our way up to the barn.

"Don't want murder on my hands," said Pete.

"No," I said.

"Can't quite let him go, though," Pete said. "Meade might tell his daddy on me again."

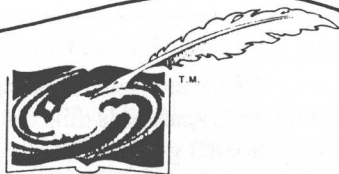
I nodded. I thought I seen the others nod, too.

So me and Pete pushed the wheeled cart into a dark stall and threw an old tarp over it. Meade croaked, "Caroline, please," but then I went to where Pete was letting Penny out of the cart. Pete patted my butt. Movie time was over, he said.

It wasn't raining when we went outside, so Penny and Jimmy and Lemuel agreed to sit in back. I got in the front with Pete. He stroked my thigh and I shivered. "Weathermen don't know the right weather from a hole in the ground," he said.

I laughed, then we drove 'round the knoll down toward the swollen river and home.

Elizabeth Massie was born in 1953 and now lives in Virginia. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies including *The Horror Show*, *New Blood*, *Grue*, *Borderlands*, *Women of Darkness* and *Obsessions*. She will also have fiction in *Still Dead*, *A Whisper of Blood*, and *Dead End: City Limits*. Her first novel *Sineater* will soon be published by Pan Books Ltd. of London.



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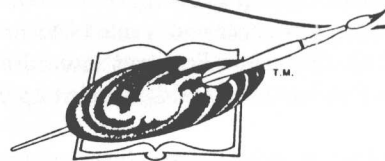
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A Certain Slant of “I”

by S. P. Somtow

Well, here we are in the second issue of *Iniquities*. All you guys out there who bet we'd die with the first issue can ante up now. I just got off the phone with the Big Bad Budskies and it looks like they're going to print even more copies this go-around, so it's time for me to dash off another exciting installment of *A Certain Slant of "I"*. Quite an achievement this, considering that, since last time, I've started commuting between Los Angeles and Bangkok in an ever more intense quest for adventure, decadence, and funding for films.

In my last column I talked about how I had managed to obtain, from our family shaman, a magical fetish with which I've been secretly controlling the powers-that-be in the publishing industry. I can report that the fetish is working pretty well -- results are mixed, but then again, sorcery's not an exact science. Some of my publishers are now starting to toe the line, but I'm still about as far from that seven-figure advance as when I first starting tapping into the old supernatural node.

Hey, it's one thing to sit around with the Redoubtable Tim Sullivan in the comfort of suburban Southern California, watching a sweet old lady be-

coming possessed by various gods. You know that, however close you are to the archetypal darkness, that you can always go down to the 7-11 for a slurpie in between bouts of shamanism. I got to thinking that I should perhaps go back to my roots, get a taste of the real thing. I hadn't returned to Thailand in twelve years; perhaps it was time to go back and confront the sources of magic.

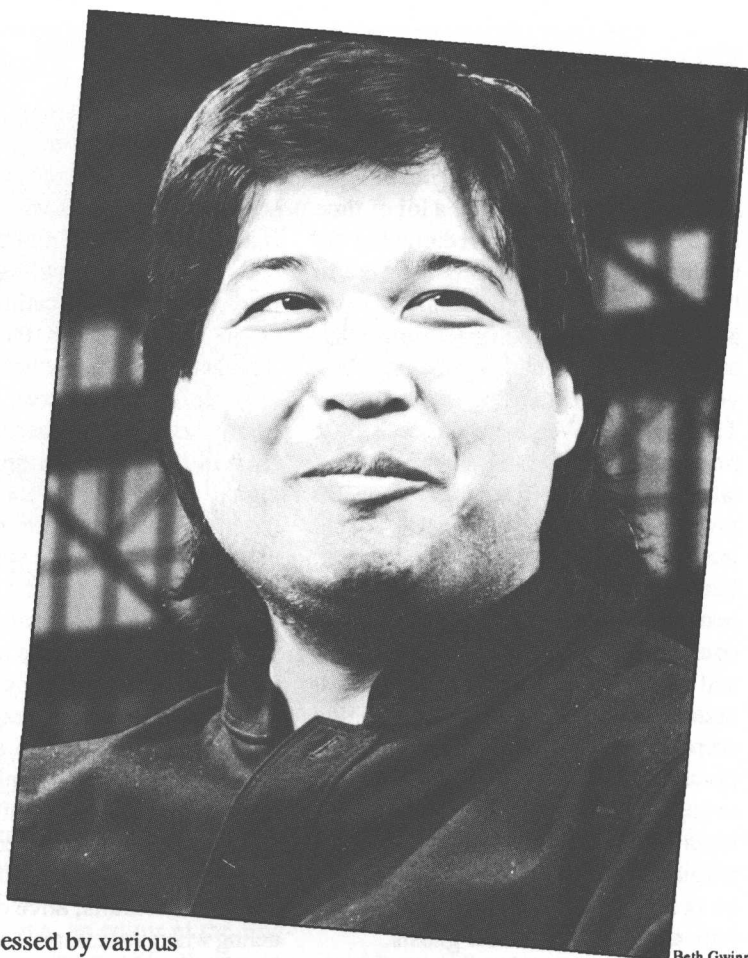
The opportunity to do this arose when I was attempting to raise money for one of my film projects, *The Glass Pagoda* (I usually tell people this one is a cross between *Rambo* and *Cocoon*), and had to take a trip to Bangkok to discuss things with a couple of potential investors. Amazingly enough, the Redoubtable was able to come with me, having conveniently managed to make a small amount of money by the simple expedient of allowing his car to be totaled by a little old lady with plenty of insurance. Tim's function in this endeavor would be to maintain the role of an inscrutable occidental, mystifying the financiers with cryptic American comments and causing rich princesses to swoon at the raw animal passion, which, it is popularly believed in Thailand, is exuded by members of his race. I'm sorry the above sentence was so convo-

luted and ungainly.

What I meant to say was, Americans are said to have big dicks.

When I first started writing I was very wary of using any material from my childhood. I didn't want to become branded as an ethnic writer, and I didn't *feel* particularly ethnic anyway -- how could I, after growing up in six or seven different countries and not even learning my native language until I was seven years old? It was a pity, because Southeast Asia is a goldmine for lovers of horror. There are more traditional monsters than you can shake a stick at, and as a kid I'd heard about all of them from my *philiang* (sort of a nanny) who would regale me with tales of these horrid creatures and the things they'd do to me if I didn't brush my teeth.

Indeed, the Southeast Asian worldview is absolutely permeated with spirits of every kind. When the Siamese were converted to Buddhism in the twelfth century (or thereabouts) the tenets of the Buddha's highly abstract philosophy were superimposed over an animistic shamanism that had remained unchanged since tribal, undoubtedly neolithic times. The new beliefs were absorbed seamlessly into the old in a process that continues to



Beth Gwinn

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this day.

Take, for example, the government lottery. The lottery is something of a fixation in Thailand, and a lot of time is devoted to trying to predict what the winning number will be. We have this in the U.S., too -- you can go out and actually buy books that will give you mathematical formulae that will help narrow your chances of winning big bucks. In Thailand, however, there's a much more personal way of getting the number--by talking to spirits. Every astrologer in town seems to have a personal hotline to the random number-generating computer, but the most effective way is to get dead people in on the act. For example, you could go spend the night in a cemetery, and in the course of your dreams you'll undoubtedly come across some rotting corpse who will be only too happy to divulge the number -- if it likes you enough. The cemetery lottery number myth is so prevalent that some nights it seems like there's a convention going on in some graveyards, especially those reputed to have powerful ghosts.

A year ago I wrote a short story ("Lottery Night," *Asimov's*, April 1990) about two kids who spend the night in one of these cemeteries and who encounter a *phii krasue*, which is a unique kind of monster I'm hoping to popularize in Hollywood. This thing is an ordinary corpse by day, but by night the head detaches itself from the body and crawls around using its tongue as a kind of pseudopod. The guts do not remain with the torso, but dangle behind the severed neck-stump, leaving a sluglike trail of intestinal glop wherever it goes. *Phii Krasues* are also noted for their diet. They live on shit. Woe betide you if you're caught late at night in the middle of nowhere with a bad case of diarrhea!

More about *Lottery Night* later, as it has a certain relevance to the visit of the Redoubtable and myself to the Temple of Horror in Bangkok.

Lest you think that the *phii krasue* is about as hair-raising as it gets, there are dozens more. The chimaera-like *phii krabang* is sort of a pot-luck demon--lacking a body, it steals fishing nets to use as wings, and its tail is a chili-pounding pestle pilfered from some hapless housewife's kitchen. The *pred* is sort of a banshee, and the *phii um*

squats on your chest mornings, crushing you like a two-ton safe and preventing you from getting out of bed. The hideous *phii thalé*, overhung with seaweed, comes charging out at you from the ocean, and the *phii dip* or "raw" ghost is your garden variety flesh-eating zombie, not to be confused with the *phii suk* or "cooked" variety, which is your see-through, wispyly ethereal kind of spirit that hangs around gibbering and tossing the furniture around in the middle of the night.

One is never far from the supernatural in Bangkok. In spite of the fact that it's one of the world's most contemporary cities, with a bizarre postmodern skyline, buildings in the shape of giant robots, an astonishingly decadent night life, and the highest per capita fax usage in the world, this is also a place where one routinely visits a family exorcist to get rid of a malevolent influence haunting the bathroom, and where you'd never take an important step without consulting your ancestors, alive or dead, channeling where necessary. And even though the Buddhist philosophy is fundamentally atheist--or at the very least only tolerates the existence of the gods as imperfect higher beings, themselves subject to the laws of karma --this doesn't prevent there from being a patron spirit for *everything* -- mostly celestial and infernal beings borrowed from the pantheon of Hinduism, with a dose of Catholicism thrown in for good measure (those who read my last column will remember how our family shaman brought Jesus, Zeus, and Isis down for a visit as well as the usual Eastern divinities.)

It stands to reason, then, that there'd be a special deity in charge of the field of horror. This demigod -- or demigoddess, actually, is known as Mae Nak Phrakhanong, and she has her very own shrine in a not-very-nice part of town, backing onto a canal that was once a major thoroughfare of the city but has long since, because of the coming of the expressways, become transformed into a brackish, stagnant backwater with an odoriferous ambience uniquely its own.

The Serpent Woman of Phrakhanong (that's a very approximate rendition of the phrase *mae nak*) was once a real woman who lived on this spot about a hundred years ago. One hundred

years, in this part of the world, is about all it takes for a person to get herself worshipped as a god. An attractive young housewife who died in childbirth while her warrior husband was away at the front, she couldn't quite bring herself to be reincarnated like normal people. When her husband returned from the war, he found her waiting for him, cooking, cleaning the house, and doing the usual domestic things that women were expected to do in those unequal times.

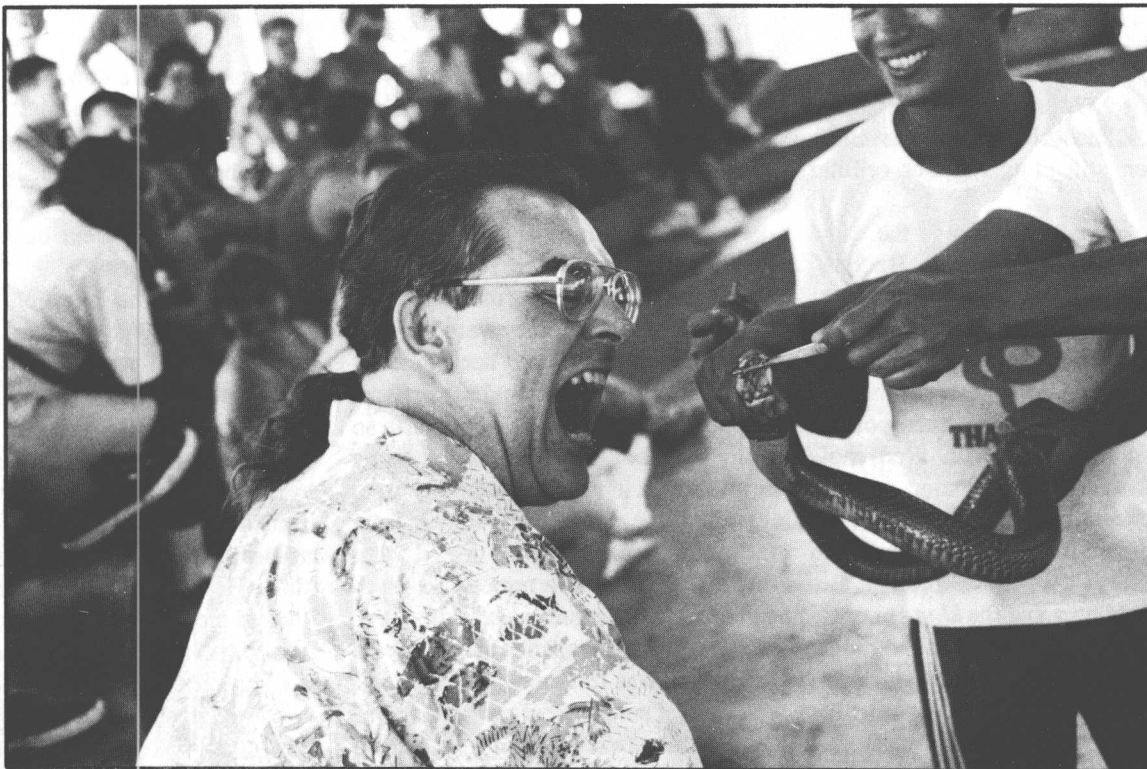
A hundred years ago, life centered on the waterways. Phrakhanong (now subsumed into Greater Urban Bangkok) was, in those days, one of dozens of little villages by the side of the canal, and one must imagine the Serpent Woman sitting on the portico of the stilted house, going down the steps to bathe in the canal, and pounding her pungent curry pastes beside the constant traffic of sampans and barges.

Life with the woman of his dreams proved a little weird for the young war hero. For one thing, if he so much as looked at another woman, that woman would soon be found hideously slain. The village was soon full of dead nubile women, and people were wracking their brains trying to find out who the killer could be.

One day, the warrior was watching his wife pounding chilies by the water. She happened to drop the pestle through the slats in the floor. The house was, of course, on stilts, so Mae Nak's husband was astounded to see his lover reach through the floorboards, stretch her arm down a good fifteen feet, retrieve the pestle, and return without a thought to preparing her curry paste. It was at this point that he began to suspect that his wife might actually be some kind of terrifying demon.

Our hero did what any red-blooded Siamese would do -- he went to see the family shaman -- the local equivalent of the Ghostbusters -- who -- after an epic battle with lots of gore and special optical effects -- trapped the creature in a jar and threw it into the river.

The story didn't end there. It turned out that Mae Nak's spirit was fond of helping pregnant mothers get through difficult childbirths. The ghost could be pretty handy with lottery numbers, too, as a matter of fact. It wasn't



long before a shrine was erected on the spot. A statue of the Serpent Woman became an object of veneration. Her clothes, cooking utensils, and shoes were placed on permanent display as sacred relics, and it became *de rigueur* for expectant mothers to come and paste the image with a few pieces of gold leaf.

The story of Mae Nak Phra-khanong became so popular that, as soon as the movies industry arrived in Thailand, it became one of the first horror movies made there. When talkies arrived, Mae Nak continued strong, and by the early 1970s, when Thailand's movie industry was among the five most prolific in the world, producing well over a hundred films a year, she had been the subject of at least twenty-five films, and the faithful-beyond-the-grave housewife had been played by every major female star (and a couple of transvestites) in the Thai-speaking cinema.

The movie business has since fallen on hard times in Thailand, and now only a handful of films are made every year. Rampant video piracy is often blamed, as is an exorbitant movie tax designed to encourage the local film industry but which ended up doing the exact opposite. Nevertheless, the shrine remains. I wanted to achieve success in horror films, so I decided to take a trip to the shrine. I figured that I could pray to Mae Nak herself, ask her for a nice fat

movie contract or two, and leave an offering or two to help sweeten the deal.

Our party consisted of my sort-of-a-cousin Pana, an editor at the English-language newspaper *The Nation*, my second cousin, environmental activist Lady Nunie, great-granddaughter of King Mongkut (the much-parodied Yul Brynner in *The King and I*, though I think Rex Harrison's portrayal of this character in *Anna and the King of Siam* is even more ludicrous) and my second cousin once removed, her daughter Ing, whose radical writings had recently caused her work to be banned from the pages of the very newspaper for which my cousin Pana worked; and, in addition, the only person in this whole saga who is not my cousin, the Redoubtable Tim Sullivan.

We actually started the day at a massage parlor where all the practitioners are blind. Well -- think about it -- what profession could blind people really excel at? For \$8 each, we were tied into knots, pummeled, wrung out and battered for two hours in an airconditioned room. On the wall was one of those photo-murals of the California forest that you can purchase from your local office supply mail order catalogue. It was a little disconcerting when the masseuses entered the room, each one with her hands stretched out in front like a Frankenstein's monster, clawing at the air as they inched toward our prostrate

bodies -- but once contact was made one could not have asked for a more relaxing experience.

By then it was coming up to evening and the time was ripe for a visit to the Temple of Horror. Sunset was the most atmospheric time for a confrontation with the spirits. We piled into the chauffeur-driven van my sister had lent us for the occasion, and soon we were wildly zig-zagging through Bangkok's tempestuous traffic, occasionally jamming up so much that we'd spend an hour waiting for a single light to change. Bangkok's a very high-tech city in some ways, and in order to cope with the horror of the traffic it has become customary for people to carry cellular phones around at all times. The Redoubtable and I sat around in the van dickering with our New York agents via satellite while my cousins regaled us with tales of other cousins. By the way, I have over a hundred first cousins on my father's side alone, thanks to the venerable ancient practice of polygamy, of which my grandfather was an ardent advocate.

At length we left the main street and charged into the labyrinth of alleys or *sois* which are a cartographer's nightmare, since they change almost daily. We were now far from the affluent neighborhood of palatial manses where we had been boarding. Well -- not that far -- a couple of miles, perhaps, but with

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the traffic it might as well have been the next county. We had left the skyscrapers behind and had arrived at another milieu altogether, still clutching our cellular phones.

Along the banks of the canal stood a rather dilapidated Buddhist monastery that was clearly not one of Bangkok's tourist spots. It was a wood and concrete compound that seemed to have been slapped together almost at random. There were the usual pointed eaves and pavilions with tiled roofs bordered with gilt serpentine designs, but there was a certain humdrum quality to the temple; it was a parish church in Harlem, not St. Paul's Cathedral. Between the temple and the *klong* or canal was a field strewn with trash and rubble on which dozens of aluminum plates had been set out with food for the *ma wat* or temple dogs, semiferal creatures that prowled the grounds, relentlessly begging from passersby.

There was a lot of dogshit. It was not a pretty sight until you looked past the field, past the mangy denizens of the temple, down toward the canal. Behind the row of mango and banana trees that lined the canal, the sun was setting, the night-blooming jasmine was already beginning to scent the air. Beauty and decay stood cheek by jowl. "It's remarkable how you Asians are able to

single out the epiphany from the surrounding dross," said the Redoubtable.

"The Japanese have a word for that ability," I said, but I couldn't remember what it was.

The shrine itself stood at the very edge of the water. It was a tiny room, no larger than a medium-sized privy. Mae Nak's clothes were hanging in an antique closet, and her statue sat behind a railing, overlooking her worshippers. The statue was caked with so many layers of gold leaf, pasted on by devotees, that it had become rather shapeless; only the crystal eyes, staring from the golden matrix, caused one to think that this image was a representation of someone who had once been human.

Next to the shrine stood a sacred tree which was festooned with fetishes. A couple of people were crawling around the base, assiduously rubbing the bark to see if any lottery numbers might magically appear in its patterns. A cemetery stood close by. Many of the markers sported laminated photographs of the deceased. One of the gravestones actually had a street light sort of growing out of it. That really symbolized the whole situation for me -- the pragmatic and the mystical were all one thing there, there was none of this dissociation of sensibility that plagues the Western mind. Well, here I was. It was time to go through with

the ritual, so I lit a bunch of joss sticks and candles, applied gold leaf to the face of the statue, and knelt down to ask for a big fat horror movie deal. My cousins and the Redoubtable too prayed.

Then we went back home to party.

Well, the question I'm sure you're all asking is -- *did it work?*

I'm still waiting to find out. But I have to tell you that on my return to Los Angeles there was a phone message waiting on my answering machine. It was from a big Hollywood producer. It seemed that he had called the very day of my petition to the patron deity of horror films. He wanted me to come in and "take a meeting" right away -- with a view to optioning one of my short stories as a big-budget Hollywood picture.

The story was *Lottery Night*.

Did it work? We'll soon find out--like everything in Hollywood, it may all come to naught at any moment. It is all in the hands of dharma, karma, and of course Brahma, creator of the universe.

I grew up in science fiction, friends, and a lot of this New Age shit is pretty hard to swallow. Nevertheless, I offer you this tale as either a staggering example of synchronicity or evidence of the existence of -- ahem -- *things man was not meant to know!*

