

SPEC

THE CANADIAN
MAGAZINE OF
SPECULATIVE
WRITING

Volume 1, Number 2

Fall 1989

\$5.00



in this issue:
Spider Robinson
Leslie Gadallah
Eileen Kernaghan

ON SPEC

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EDITORIAL — Why ON SPEC? Marianne O. Nielsen

It's official, our gamble paid off — the premiere issue of *On Spec* was a first-class success!

Due to space restrictions in the first issue we couldn't tell you the why's and wherefore's of *On Spec* (and thank you to those readers who pointed this out. Feedback is great. It means someone out there cares enough about the magazine to write to us.)

So — the why of *On Spec* — in a word: *frustration*. The nonprofit literary society that started the magazine, the Copper Pig Writers' Society, is comprised of writers who have all dabbled in or write exclusively speculative fiction. In discussion with other Canadian writers of speculative fiction it became obvious to us that there were important differences, difficult to define, but nevertheless there, in the stories written by Canadian writers. Some of these differences, unfortunately, made our work too "alien" for the American markets. The other writers also expressed a desire for a Canadian market for their fiction (Are we filled with nationalistic pride? — only a little.) and a forum to see what other Canadian writers were doing. A little publicity for Canadian speculative fiction writers — and illustrators — wouldn't hurt either. Over several beer, the solution became obvious — start our own magazine.

We had heard of a number of previous attempts, but they either didn't get off the ground or didn't last long. The French-Canadian magazines we were familiar with were beautiful, successful, but, hélas, in French. Why not try the same thing for English Canada, operating as a cooperative and making use of the talents of the group, which just happened to include a newsletter publisher, a graphics artist, an editor... A blind competition format was chosen so that we could submit our own work without undue influence.

The title of the magazine not only reflects the kind of fiction we wanted to publish, but also reflects the attitude we took as we went into the venture — *let's try this on spec, let's see if this works...*

And of course the news is, it did work. The first 500 copies of the premiere issue sold out in just over three weeks; the second run arrived from the printer in early July and was promptly shipped out to bookstores across Canada. You hold in your hands the very real second issue, and, as you can see, the quality of writing and artwork continues to be of a high level.

Our editorial policies are still flexible; we are, after all, breaking new ground here. We will buy fiction and poetry that relate to science fiction, fantasy, horror, mythology, magic realism, ghost stories, and anything else that focuses on "What if...?" We will also occasionally run essays, but we would prefer to commission those. One policy we are very sure of, however, is that we want to devote the maximum number of pages to writing and art by Canadian writers and artists. This means that we will, regretfully, not review books and our letter column will be restricted to news items of interest to our readers. This doesn't

mean we won't occasionally print a story by a non-Canadian (as we are doing in this issue) or sneak in something that sits on the edges of our definitions — we also reserve the right to editorial whim.

We are still looking for artists to do illustrations on commission for the stories. If you are interested, please send *copies* (not originals) of your work to the Art Director. Potential contributors wanting copies of our guidelines are requested to send a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE).

Finally and happily, we must thank our advertisers and sponsors, especially those brave souls who, sight unseen and on faith, helped us with the first issue. Without you, we could never have done it. So please, dear readers, support our sponsors. They are all good people worthy of getting something in return for their risk-taking. The same fervent "thank you" must also be given to our Editorial Advisory Board for agreeing to be part of this venture and for the hard work they do for us. The final "thank you" goes to our subscribers and readers who so eagerly relieved us of the first issue. Please — keep on reading us, and we will do our damndest not to disappoint you.

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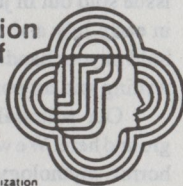
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Carpe Diem

by Eileen Kernaghan

illustration by Marc Holmes

I'd better get going." Angela sweeps up hat, gloves, U-V shield, air monitor from the foot of Martha's bed. "Meditation class in half an hour." She is always in a hurry, even for these daily sessions that are supposed to slow her down, teach her to relax. Already, at thirty, there are faint stress-lines around her mouth. "See you in a week. Is there anything you need?" She hovers in the doorway, waiting for Martha to ask, as usual, for magazines, or shampoo, or dental floss.

Martha says, on a sudden crazy impulse, "Yes — a bottle of Bushmills." She enjoys seeing Angela's eyebrows go up, her mouth stiffen. "A great big one, a forty-ouncer, if you can still buy such a thing. Oh, and a carton of cigarettes."

Angela gives Martha a tight-lipped smile. She is annoyed, but indulgent — an adult dealing with a willful two-year-old child. Martha feels a quick stab of resentment. She is neither young enough nor old enough to be treated like this. *Well, my girl, she thinks, you'll soon enough be in my shoes. When the time comes, all the exercise and clean living in the world won't save you from Assessment.*

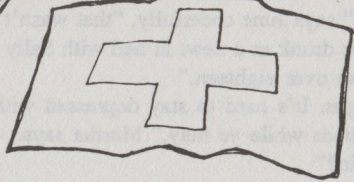
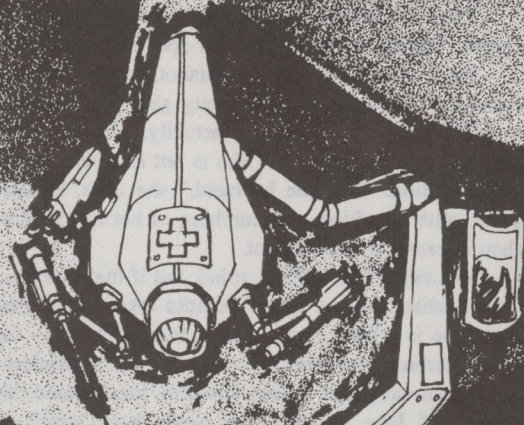
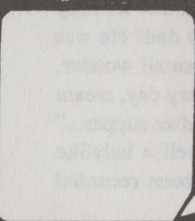
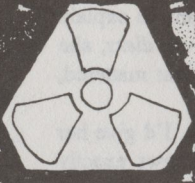
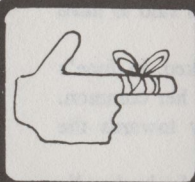
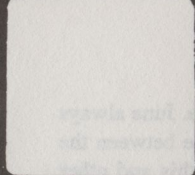
Angela has her hat on, and one glove. "I'll bring you some apple juice," she promises, predictably. "And you other ladies? Can I get you anything?"

Martha's roommates glance up — June from her knitting, Dorothy from her inevitable copy of *Christian Health*.

"Nothing for me, thank you." Dorothy places a faint but perceptible emphasis on "thank." She has a high, nasal, vaguely British voice that sets Martha's nerves on edge.

Encouraged by Martha's small act of rebellion, June winks, and leers. "Well, dear, since you ask... how about something six-foot-two, that looks good in tight jeans?"

There is an awkward silence. Angela, pretending not to have heard, zips up her other glove. Dorothy is sitting bolt upright, holding her magazine like



a U-V shield in front of her face. Even Martha is uncomfortable. June always goes that fraction of an inch too far, stepping over the thin line between the risqué and the merely vulgar. Her notoriety is spreading, on this and other floors. She flirts outrageously with the male examiners, and is said to have called the head counsellor a silly cow.

"June is indiscreet," Dorothy has more than once remarked, in June's absence. Martha's mother, plainer-spoken, would have called her common.

When Angela is out of earshot, boots clicking briskly towards the elevator, June says, "She's a pretty girl, your daughter."

"Well, not my daughter, actually," Martha tells her. "My husband's daughter, by his first wife." She is not sure why she is bothering to explain the distinction. "My late husband," she adds. *Widowed and childless*, she thinks, with a sudden, sick lurching of her heart. Things like that mattered, when it came to Assessment.

June says, "No offense, mind, but if that was my daughter, I'd give her a good whack on the bum." Martha takes no offense. She knows exactly what June is talking about. She is fond of June — fond of her irreverence, her boisterous, good-natured vulgarity, her shameless defiance of the rules. June's own daughters — big, cheerful, loud-voiced, blonde women, younger versions of June — bring her candy bars, which she hides between the mattress and the springs. Martha hears the furtive rustling of the wrappers, late at night.

"What's the use of being alive," June wants to know, "when you have to give up everything that makes life worth living? A short life and a merry one, that's what my daddy used to say. Did I tell you about my dad? He was fifty-three when he died. His heart just plain gave out — and small wonder. Nearly three hundred pounds when he died, bacon and eggs every day, cream in his coffee, two packs of cigarettes, half a quart of whiskey after supper..."

Dorothy, turning a page of *Christian Health*, allows herself a ladylike snort. Martha hopes this unfortunate piece of history has not been recorded in June's file.

"Mind you," says June cheerfully, "that wasn't what killed him. When he died he was as drunk as a newt in bed with Sally Rogers from next door, who wasn't a day over eighteen."

Martha laughs. It's hard to stay depressed with June in the next bed. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," Martha says.

"Come again?"

"A poem. 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.' By Herrick, I think — one of those fellows, anyway. Second-year English. It was a catch-phrase around our dorm." Martha closes her eyes, drawing the lines bit by bit out of the deep well of the past.

*"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying..."*

She falters. "Damn. I wish I could remember the rest of it."

"Well, I never was much of a one for poetry," June says. "Though I didn't mind a Harlequin once in a while. But that, what you just said, makes good sense to me."

"It did to us, too," says Martha, remembering, with affection and astonishment, her eighteen-year-old self.

*

At three a.m. Martha wakes from an uneasy doze. She has not slept well since she came here; and tomorrow she faces a battery of tests. She tells herself there is no need to worry. She hasn't touched sweets for fifteen years, or butter, or cream, or cigarettes. Nor, in spite of her joke about the Bushmills, alcohol. Seven years ago she gave up meat. She is only slightly overweight — better than being underweight, according to her doctor, who keeps up on the latest studies. She walks everywhere, take megavitamins, exercises, practises biofeedback and meditation, checks her blood pressure daily; is as scrupulous as Angela in the use of U-V shield and air monitor. There is, perhaps, a little breathlessness on the stairs; a trace of stiffness in her finger-joints. An occasional absent-mindedness. Normal enough, surely, for a woman of sixty. Nothing to worry about. Certainly nothing to warrant Reassignment.

Her throat is dry, and her heart is beating faster than it should. She repeats a mantra in her head. *Health. Joy. Peace. Sleep.* Other words, unsummoned, creep into her mind.

*That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.*

She wants a drink. She wants a cigarette. She wants to get out of this place. Lying wide-awake and fearful in the aseptic dark, she listens to the small, mouselike rustle of candy wrappers.

*

Martha lies back on her pillows, staring at the posters on the opposite wall. They remind her of the samplers in her grandmother's drawing room. "Healthiness is Next to Godliness." "A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body." "A Megavitamin a Day Keeps the Doctor Away." She is exhausted by the daylong pokings and proddings and prying, the sometimes painful and frequently embarrassing invasions of her person. She admires, without daring to imitate, June's cheerful rudeness to counsellors and examiners; her steadfast refusal to co-operate. Only Dorothy seems unaffected by the tests. She wears the smug and slightly relieved look of a schoolgirl who knows she has done well on her math final.

June turns on the TV. Martha realizes, with some surprise, that it is New Year's Eve. A pair of talking heads is discussing the Year 2000. With the end of the millennium only twelve months away, the media are obsessed with predictions, retrospectives. It is hard for Martha to imagine what may lie around that thousand-year corner. She finds it odd — and in a curious

way exciting — that by a mere accident of birth she may live to see the next millennium.

“The biggest New Year’s Eve Party in a thousand years,” says June, when the commercial comes on. Her voice is wistful. “I always did like a good party.”

Martha smiles at her, remembering that she was fond of parties too, when she was younger. There seems so little point in them now.

“Perhaps,” she says, “we will be allowed a glass of champagne.”

June chuckles. “Maybe one small glass. The last for a thousand years.”

That’s enough to set them off. They take turns describing what they will eat and drink on the Eve of the Millennium — a stream-of-consciousness recitation of forbidden delights.

“Chocolate mints,” says June. “Pecan pie. Truffles.”

“Amaretto cheesecake,” Martha adds. “Christmas pudding with rum sauce. Tawny port.”

Pointedly, Dorothy puts on earphones. Martha and June, caught up in their game, ignore her.

“Fish and chips. Bangers and mash.”

“Guinness stout. Roast suckling pig.”

“Crab croquettes and oyster stew.”

It’s so long since Martha has eaten anything unwholesome, she has to stop and think. “Sour cream and hot mango chutney.” Then — an inspiration — “Sex-in-the-Pan.”

“Sex in anything,” says June, and howls with laughter.

Dorothy seems to take their foolishness as a personal affront. Lips pressed into a thin line, she thumbs rapidly through a fresh copy of *Christian Health*.

*

They sit up to see the New Year in, and afterwards Martha sleeps soundly, even though there are tests scheduled for the morning. These ones don’t sound too awful. Blood-sugar again, cholesterol check, an eye and ear exam; and — absurdly, it seems to Martha — tests for the various sorts of social diseases.

Still, she is awake hours before the first robots rumble down the hall with breakfast. She knows, instantly, that something is wrong. She sits up, switches on her overhead light. In the far bed, Dorothy is heavily asleep. The other bed, June’s bed, is empty.

The bathroom, Martha thinks; but no, the door is ajar and the light is out. Could June have been taken ill in the night? A sudden heart attack, like her father? Has Martha somehow slept through lights, buzzers, running feet, the clatter of emergency equipment? But when that happens, don’t they always draw the bed curtains?

Dorothy is awake. “Where’s June?” she asks immediately, smelling trouble.

Martha shakes her head. She feels on the edge of panic. Should she push her bell? Call for a counsellor? Go out and search the corridors?

And then suddenly June is back, waltzing into the room in boots, hat, coat, humming gently to herself. The cloud of cheap perfume that surrounds her is not strong enough to drown the smell of liquor.

"June, where have you been?" Martha realizes, to her dismay, that she sounds like a mother interrogating a wayward teen-aged daughter.

June grins and pulls off her toque. "Should old acquaintance be forgot," she sings, "and never brought to mind... I went to a New Year's party."

Dorothy gives a snort of disbelief. "How could you have gotten out of the building?"

"Who was to stop me? Only robots on night shift, and one duty counsellor. Only reason nobody walks out of here, is nobody thinks to try."

She flops across her bed, arms outflung, short skirt riding up over pale plump knees. After a moment she sits up and tries, unsuccessfully, to pull off her boots. "Oh, shit, Martha, can you give me a hand?"

She slides down on the mattress so that both feet are dangling over the edge. Kneeling on the cold tiles at June's feet, Martha takes hold of the left boot and tugs hard. It's a frivolous boot — spike-heeled, fur-cuffed, too tight in the calf. Dorothy watches in outraged silence.

Martha rocks back on her heels as the boot comes off with a sudden jerk. She hears June give a small, contented sigh.

"Oh, Christ, Martha, what a ball I had! There's this little club on Davie... I wish you'd been there too, there were these two guys..." June sighs again, as the other boot comes off. "But I knew you wouldn't come, there was no use asking, you're too afraid of old creepin' Jesus, there..."

Dorothy, white-faced with fury, stalks into the bathroom and slams the door.

"June, what did you *do*?" Martha hears her voice rising, querulously, and thinks, *I sound like my mother did; I sound like an old woman.*

"Christ, honey, what didn't I do? I drank. I ate. I danced. I smoked." Her s's are starting to slur. She rolls over, luxuriously, and adds something else which is muffled by her pillow.

"I beg your pardon?" Martha asks.

June sits up. Loudly enough to be heard at the end of the hall, she announces, "I even got laid."

"Shhh," Martha says, instinctively. Then, "June, how could you? All the tests we have to take today — blood sugar, cholesterol..."

"AIDS," says Dorothy grimly, through the bathroom door.

"Oh, June. Oh, my dear." Martha is just now beginning to realize the enormity of what June has done.

There are footsteps in the corridor as the dayshift arrives. Martha feels like crying. Instead, she searches through June's bedside drawer for comb, make-up, mouthwash; and silently unbuttons June's coat.

*

On Wednesday the test results are announced. One at a time they are called to the Chief Examiner's office for their reports. Dorothy returns, smug-

faced and unsurprised, and puts on her street clothes. Martha's name is called. Sick and faint with anxiety, she makes her way through the maze of corridors. She has passed, but with a warning.

June is gone for a long time. "I thought from the first," Dorothy remarks, as she waits for the Chief Examiner to sign her out, "that June lacked any sense of self-respect."

Martha doesn't often bother to contradict Dorothy's pronouncements, but this time it seems important to set the record straight. "You don't mean self-respect," she says. "You mean self-preservation."

Then the door opens, and June comes in. She has applied her blusher and lipstick with a heavy hand; the bright patches of red look garish as poster paint against the chalk white of her skin. She stares blankly at Martha as though she has forgotten where she is. Gently, Martha touches her arm. "June? What did they say?"

"Nothing I didn't already know." June's voice shakes a little, but her tone is matter-of-fact. "Sugar in the blood — incipient diabetes. Gross overweight. High cholesterol count. Hypertension. Just what you'd expect."

"They can treat all those things. They don't have to Reassign you."

June shrugs. "Not worth it, they say. Bad personal history. And there's my pa."

"Quite right," says Dorothy. How Martha has learned to loathe that prim, self-congratulatory voice. "If people won't take responsibility for their own health..."

"Better to get it over with," June says. "It'd be no fun at all, hanging around for Reassessment."

And then — awkwardly, and oddly, as though it is Martha who is in need of comfort — she pats Martha's shoulder. "Never mind, Martha, love, that was a hell of a good party, the other night. And there's something I want you to remember, when your time comes. Once you know for sure, once you make up your mind to it, then you can spit in their eye, because there's bugger-all more they can do to you."

Dorothy pins her hat on her grey curls, and leaves. Martha's papers are signed; she could go too, if she wished, but she has decided to stay with June. She knows she won't have to wait long.

Soon they hear the hum of trolley-wheels at the end of the hall. Martha holds June's hand.

"Listen, the news isn't all bad," June says, with gallows humour. "The kidneys are still okay, and the lungs, and a few other odd bits. There's quite a lot they can Reassign. Maybe to some pretty young girl. I like that idea a lot."

Then the trolley is wheeled in.

"A short life and a merry one," says June. She winces slightly as the counsellor slips the needle into her arm. "Remember to drink a glass of bubbly for me, at the big party."

Martha nods, and squeezes June's hand as June slides away. ◊



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Teechurs aftur ours

by Richard Davies

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The Fairy Ring

by Leslie Gadallah

illustration by Nancy Niles

By way of vengeance, the fairy granted him three wishes.

Answer this time-limited, skill-testing question: what do you want most in all the world?

Asked in fun, such a question will most often raise glib, unimaginative answers — a whopping big fortune, a good lay, the sudden vanishing of a mother-in-law — because people are superficially unimaginative, grasping, vindictive.

But under the surface, the human race does have its fine and serious side. Given one moment's serious consideration, as it must be when one truly believes the granting of wishes has somehow become possible, the whole texture of the time-limited, skill-testing question changes, and answers become impossible.

All of these things the fairy knew very well. Which was why she made the offer to Bruce Worthington right in the middle of his own front lawn in the bright orange light of the street lamp while he stood there with his mouth hanging open, half a can of Foster's in one hand, and his front door key in the other.

She fluttered up out of the grass right in front of him, startled him, hung in front of him for a moment on vibrating wings while she studied him, then settled on the beer can, folded her wings, put her tiny fists on her hips and glowered.

He couldn't believe his eyes. It was the extra weight in his hand that convinced him, the weight of a small bird, and the high, chirping voice like a bird's voice.

"You blockhead. You've absolutely ruined everything, you know," she scolded like a sparrow scolding.

"What?" Bruce said brilliantly. She had a spangle of dew on her tiny dark head. She was so little, so delicately formed, Bruce felt gross and coarse and awkward.

She pointed a dainty finger down at the grass. "Look at that," she said. "That's obscene. Why did you have to do that?"

There was a brown circle in the grass, perhaps a meter in diameter. A couple of days ago he had finally accepted Pete Norton's bucket of formaldehyde and God knows what assorted poisons and poured it around the circle.

When you came right down to it, the whole thing was Pete's fault.

Bruce had seen the circle of mushrooms appear in the lawn last week some time. It hadn't bothered him. Mushrooms didn't do any harm, except to get Pete all lathered.

"You can't just leave them there," Pete had said.

"Why not?" Bruce asked. Lawn lore was not his best subject.

"They'll ruin your grass," Pete explained.

Bruce's lawn was not a thing he paid much attention to. He trimmed the grass now and then, mostly to keep the neighbours happy, and otherwise left it alone. Dandelions had taken over one spot, and clover had infiltrated, two things Pete pointed out from time to time. Bruce always said, "Yeah, I better do something about that," and then forgot it until Pete got on his case again.

But Pete wasn't going to be put off about the fairy ring. "You got to get rid of that right away," he said firmly. "It'll spread all over the neighbourhood in nothing flat. I sure as hell don't want it in my grass."

Pete's grass was important to him. He spent a lot of time working at it. It looked like AstroTurf. Nobody walked on it; Pete had sufficiently terrorized the neighbourhood cats and kids to make sure of that. Even the bouncing robins, in search of the rare urban worm, shunned Pete's lawn. Possibly, a worm couldn't live in that dense, chemical-soaked turf.

Bruce had considered the ring of mushrooms. They were kind of cute, actually, little brown umbrellas packed together in a circle. He didn't have anything against them. But he didn't want to fight with his neighbour over them, either. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I'll bring you some stuff," Pete said. "You just pour it around the circle. Right now, before it spreads."

Pete had left and returned almost immediately with a plastic pail with a spout on it. The pail was almost covered with labels displaying the skull and crossbones, and labels shouting "POISON," and labels with instructions about what to tell the doctor before you died. It didn't seem like the sort of thing one should be pouring onto the earth.

But Pete was adamant, so, reluctantly, Bruce had complied with his neighbour's wishes. That evening, he had poured the horrible stuff around the circle. Two mornings later, all the little umbrellas were mushy and rotting, and no new ones had sprung up to take their place. After supper, Bruce took the remains of the poison back to Pete because he didn't want the stuff hanging around the house.

Pete had been unusually affable, they'd had a few beers while the tail end of a baseball game played itself out on the TV. Bruce had been carrying



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AUSTRALIA

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the remains of the last beer back to his house after the game when the fairy accosted him.

"You great bumbling idiot, don't you know it's almost Midsummer?" the fairy asked.

Bruce scratched his head. Somehow the date didn't seem that important. "Yeah, I guess," he said.

"Where do you think we're going to dance now, seeing that you've ruined the Ring?"

"Uh, I don't know." He was not usually quite so slow and stupid. It must be that he was unaccustomed to addressing fairies.

"Of course you don't. Nincompoop. Ignoramus. You just go ahead and destroy a thing without a thought in your head about how one is supposed to manage."

"I wish I had a suggestion."

The fairy gave a miniscule snort. "Dumb humans are always wishing something when it doesn't mean anything."

"It does mean something. It means I would like to help, but I don't know how."

"Help?" the fairy chirped in high indignation. She spread her wings and lifted off the beer can and vanished into the night.

Before he could collect his wits, she was back hovering in front of him. "Do some serious wishing, feather-brain. I grant you three wishes. How about that?"

Bruce was completely baffled. When he could pull his sagging jaw back into action, he said, "I thought you were mad at me."

"I am," the fairy answered shortly. "Three wishes, before Midsummer." There was a little tinkling in the air somewhere near his head — *ting, ting, ting*. The fairy vanished. This time she stayed vanished.

*

Alicia rolled over to the other side of the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," Bruce said.

"I dare say," she answered. She pulled the sheet up and took a deep breath which came out as a long sigh. Then, in a more kindly tone of voice, she turned to him and asked, "You want to tell me what's bothering you?"

"If I do, you'll probably think I'm out of my mind."

"Would you rather be thought out of your mind or out of steam?"

There was no malice in that. She was teasing him now. Her annoyance, always short lived, had evaporated. He tried hard to see the humour in the situation. It eluded him.

"I'll tell you," he said with some trepidation. God, he had to tell somebody, or he would go mad. "But you have to promise to listen until I'm finished, okay? Don't interrupt."

"You do sound ominous, lover. All right, I promise."

So he told her, starting with the mushrooms and Pete's poison, sneaking up on the real craziness. She was biting her lip by the time he was through and her eyes were fixed on a point in outer space.

After a long time she said, "That's really weird, you know."

"Yeah."

"A fairy standing on a beer can. That's really weird." She giggled. "How many did you say you had over there at Pete's?"

"Not that many," he answered crossly.

"But three wishes, you know, that's not bad." There was a little waver in her voice which threatened to turn into more giggles.

"The thing is," Bruce answered most seriously, "How do you decide? What should a guy wish for, eh? Tell me that."

"Take it easy, will you? It's not that tough. Fame, fortune and more wishes ought to about cover it."

"Well, I don't think it's quite that simple."

"Why not?"

"I can see me wishing for fame and promptly becoming famous as the only guy in the last three centuries dropped into the rubber room because he believes in fairies."

"I see your point."

"Let's remember, she was pretty angry at the time."

"Yeah, let's." Alicia's giggles were breaking through again. "Did she stamp her little foot?"

"Damn it all, Alicia, I wish you'd take this a little more seriously."

ting

An invisible crystal chime sounded next to Bruce's ear. A moment passed before the significance of it dawned on him. Then he could have kicked himself, for all the good that would do.

"Damn, you see what you made me do?"

"What?"

"I blew one of the wishes. Just like that. Without thinking."

"Oh my goodness," she said, sounding reproachful. All the banter had gone out of her voice. "We've got to be more careful, Bruce. Really. Think about what you're saying. There's only two left."

Bruce grunted unhappily.

"When is Midsummer, anyway?"

"The 24th of June."

"The 24th? Why the 24th?"

"Because that's what the dictionary says. That's all I know about it."

"Well, then we've got almost two whole weeks. You know what we really need here?" Alicia said, sliding to the edge of the bed and feeling around for her clothes. "What we really need here is some expert advice." She had a talent for answering her own questions.

"Yeah, right. We go down to Canada Manpower and put in an order for one expert in fairy wishes."

"Of course not, silly." She pulled her blouse over her head and fumbled

her feet into her shoes. "But I think I might know someone who could point us in the right direction. You know Ellen Matthews from the office? She's a member of a coven. Bet you didn't know that. I'll talk to you later."

"Wait, Alicia, I don't think —" but she was off and running and didn't stop to listen.

" — we should advertise this," he finished to himself. A chill rattled over his skin. He pulled the blankets up and cocooned himself in them. It would be awfully nice if he never had to get up and face the world again.

But of course he did have to get up and face the world. He had to go to work in the morning like any other morning. And he had to come home at night. In the day between the going and the coming, he grew acutely conscious of how often the average person says "I wish..." followed by some improbability he really doesn't wish for at all.

*

When he got off the bus, he felt the sense of foreboding return. When he walked around the corner, he saw a group of people milling around his house. Pete was standing on his front walk, supervising, making sure no one wandered over onto his grass.

Bruce stopped at the end of Pete's walk to take a reading on the situation. "What's going on?" he asked his neighbour.

"I thought maybe you'd tell me," Pete said.

A panel truck parked at the curb had the CBC's exploding golf ball painted on the side. One of the people was packing a big camera on his shoulder. *I do not want to deal with this, whatever it is*, Bruce thought.

"I don't suppose you'd put me up for the night?" he asked Pete, only half joking.

Pete shook his head. "I think you'd better go over there and get them on their way before any more rubberneckerers gather and turn into a genuine mob. But I wish you'd tell me what makes you interesting to the CBC."

"Damned if I know, Pete," Bruce said. Which was true, though he had his suspicions.

He was prepared, therefore, when a microphone was thrust under his nose, and a pretty young man in make-up asked him snidely, "Is it true you see fairies on your front lawn?" The man carrying the camera loomed over the slight young fellow and captured Bruce in the machine's glassy eye.

Bruce looked the young man square in the baby blues, blinked twice and said, "I beg your pardon?"

"You are Bruce Worthington?"

"Yes."

"We have a report that you have actually seen and conversed with a fairy right here in your own front yard."

"Do you? And do you believe it?"

"That's not the question, Mr. Worthington. The question is do you believe it?"

"That's a very silly question and I wish — no, cancel that — I would like very much for you to get out of my way. I'm tired and I'm hungry, and

I want my supper." He tried to push his way by. The microphone followed him like it was attached to him.

"You didn't answer the question," the young man persisted.

"The only fairy I've seen around here lately is the one sticking a microphone into my bloody face. Would you please go away?"

A snort of laughter escaped the cameraman before it could be suppressed. Bruce got to the door before the young man regained his composure.

"There's really no need to get abusive, Mr. Worthington," the young man called after him.

Bruce shut the door between them and leaned on it.

The young fellow was right, he didn't have to say that. The kid was only doing his job. Sometimes Bruce didn't like himself too much.

"Bruce, is that you? Can you believe that out there? Honestly, you just can't trust some people. Ellen swore she wouldn't tell a soul." Alicia came bustling in. She took his jacket and hung it up, solicitous as hell now that the damage was done.

"They were trying to make me look like some kind of a nut," he said, in partial vindication of his behaviour.

"Never mind. Come and sit down. I'll fix you something and show you what I've got."

He followed her meekly into the living room and didn't even feel shock at the mess of books and papers and charts and diagrams spread out over every available surface. It just proved again what a dangerous business wishing was, even something as trivial as wanting Alicia to take him seriously. Right now, he mostly wanted her to leave him alone.

He pushed some of the stuff aside and sat heavily on the couch. Alicia put a glass in his hand and burred away happily, "I've traced all the three wishes stories I could find, right back to the Middle Ages. You wouldn't believe some of the dumb things people have wished for."

"Yes, I would," he answered. "That's one of the reasons I was telling you we have to be careful."

Alicia charged on, hardly waiting for his answer. "You see, the trick is to work out the exact phrasing of your wish and then chart all the possible interpretations, then go back and rephrase it to eliminate the bad ones, and keep doing that until you've got it exactly right."

"I suppose you've worked out what I should be wishing for, too," he said.

"Well, not quite. After all, they are your wishes, even if you did make rather a mess of the first one, dear. But I do think that fame and fortune stuff is awfully selfish, don't you? I meant we have the potential here to do great things for the world. I mean, end war, or feed the hungry, things like that. You know what I mean?"

"How about giving it a rest and feeding me?"

"Bruce, you can't mean it, when we have all this work to do."

"Look at it this way, if I pass away due to starvation, the wishes are gone."

She looked at him blankly for a moment, put a hand to her mouth and said, "Oh, my," then bustled away into the kitchen. That wasn't like Alicia.

Hell, she didn't even sound like Alicia. Bruce wondered what kind of change-ling the fairy had stuffed into Alicia's body.

What a mess, and after only one, very minor, wish. Maybe the best thing would be to just wait it out, to sit quietly until the 24th and let the other two expire unused. That would be safest. Sure, it was a lost opportunity. He'd lost opportunities before. That's why he was working in an insurance company's claims office instead of going off on all those great adventures he'd imagined having when he was a kid and couldn't wait to grow up and get started.

Losing an opportunity would be better than creating any more disasters.

"I'm not going to use the other two," Bruce said as Alicia reappeared bearing a tray of cold meat and crackers. "I'm not going to wish for anything."

"Bruce, you can't be serious." She set the tray down carefully. "There's so much... people... the world... pain and suffering... "

"Without me adding to it," he said morosely. "Too many things can go wrong."

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do."

"That's just plain cowardice, Bruce Worthington. You're a coward."

"I guess so." He couldn't summon up the energy to resent the label. He'd always thought he had as much courage as the next man, but come to think of it, he'd never done anything particularly heroic, childhood dreams notwithstanding. Maybe he was a coward.

Alicia's disappointment had rendered her inarticulate. She stared at him for a moment, then turned and stomped out of the room. He heard the front door slam.

All this from one wish, and she wanted him to try again? He'd have to be out of his mind.

Fairy, you sure are a mean little shit, he thought into the gathering dusk. Probably he only imagined the twitter of lilliputian laughter drifting out of the window toward the lawn.

He couldn't let Alicia go off like that, no matter how unreasonable she was being, or how strange she was acting. He heaved himself off the couch and started after her. He half expected to find her standing on the front porch with her back to the door and her arms folded, waiting for him to make some gesture of appeasement.

The scene that greeted him took time to absorb. There was the van, angled against the curb. There was Pete on the sidewalk, staring at the street, looking white. The CBC folk were milling around. A distant whooping announced the approach of a siren.

Much later, he remembered hearing a screech of tires. It was a common sound on urban streets.

Something small and broken and bloody lay in the street. Bruce charged down the walk with a pain growing in him as his certainty increased. Pete said, "Jeez, Bruce, I'm sorry," as Bruce pushed his way into the crowd, but Bruce wasn't listening.

"Alicia." She lay in a crumpled heap with a trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth. "Oh. God." He wanted to take her in his arms and will life into her.

The pretty young man touched his shoulder sympathetically. "You shouldn't move her," he said. "An ambulance is on the way."

Time stopped for him. The ambulance came. Competent, detached people in white clothes eased him out of the way. When he clambered after Alicia into the back of the ambulance, the attendant shrugged and let him. The drive through the city seemed both endless and brief. At the hospital, a flurry of hurrying people herding equipment left him standing disoriented at the back of the ambulance not knowing what to do.

The attendant, standing beside him on the tarmac, offered him a cigarette. Bruce shook his head. "You know, I'm not supposed to say anything," the attendant said as he bent his head to light his cigarette, "But I wouldn't hold out a lot of hope. She's pretty bad."

Bruce looked away from the man, stricken.

"I thought you should know," the attendant said.

Bruce nodded.

"You better go in. There's forms and stuff."

Bruce tottered on wooden legs toward the glass doors.

"Where is she?" he asked the first person he saw inside.

"Surgery," was the abrupt answer. "You related?"

"We're..." He hesitated. What? Lovers? Yes, most of the time. Companions? That too. Partners? Occasionally, when they could agree on a course of action. Confidants, certainly. "...friends," he finished, inadequately.

The person appeared to be a nurse, crisply impersonal, as sympathetic as the glaring cold fluorescent lights. "Do you know who the next of kin would be?"

"I don't know. There's a mother, somewhere, Vancouver I think." The nurse wrote it down. She had more questions. Bruce was scarcely aware of them.

"What's happening?" he pleaded. "How is she doing? I have to know."

"You can have a seat over there, Mr. Worthington. As soon as the doctor knows anything, we'll let you know."

Bruce sat on a hard, slippery plastic chair with his elbows on his knees, staring down at an ugly brown floor beside half a dozen other people sitting with their elbows on their knees staring at the floor.

"Fairy," Bruce said quietly, "Are you listening? I don't want Alicia to die." No one paid any attention to his muttering. "Fairy, listen, I wish for Alicia to live. You hear me?"

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"Mr. Worthington?"

Startled, Bruce looked up. Some time had passed. Hours, maybe days, he didn't know. A harried-looking man in green looked down at him. Bruce started to stand, but the other motioned to him to remain seated and sat down on the chair next to him as if grateful for a moment off his feet.

"I'm Dr. Quaid."

"Alicia?"

Dr. Quaid took a deep breath and bit his lip for a moment. "I'm afraid I don't have very good news for you. Alicia's alive — God knows what kept her going — she has a number of very serious internal injuries. We've patched up the worse of those, and she's gaining a little strength. But — this is the worst part — she took a bad knock on the head. There's a bone fragment buried deep in her brain. In a little while, when she's stronger, we're going to try to take it out. But you must be prepared for the fact that the fragment itself has done a lot of damage. We're going to do some more damage removing it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Her mind is going to be affected?"

"Quite a bit, I'm afraid. We won't know the full extent of the damage until she recovers from the surgery, but I can't honestly hold out much hope."

A while ago, Bruce thought his capacity for anguish had been saturated. He discovered there were depths yet to be plumbed.

"You might as well go on home now, Mr. Worthington," Dr. Quaid said. "You've been here a long time. Nothing significant is going to happen for the next few hours. You should get some rest."

The taxi deposited him in front of his front walk. Night had sneaked in when he wasn't looking. The house was dark in the wash of the orange street light. He stood there, looking at it, wondering what he was going to do in there all alone. He thought about her clothes hanging in the closet. He thought about her books, scattered all over the living room. He thought about her not being able to read them.

"Hey, Bruce, hang on a minute."

Peter Norton came shambling down his own front walk in carpet slippers and a baggy sweater. He made a square turn onto the sidewalk. He did not step on his grass.

"How is she?"

"Not good." Bruce was going to stop there, but then he added, because he needed to tell someone, "There's brain damage."

"Oh, man," Pete groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. "That stinks. It really stinks."

"Yeah."

"You know, I feel partly responsible. If I hadn't been talking to the CBC guys, they'd have been gone."

"Yeah. I know. It's all your fault, Pete. The whole rotten mess is your fault."

Pete was shocked. "Hey, now, come on man, I didn't make her have an

accident.”

“If it wasn’t for those bleeding mushrooms, none of this would have happened.”

Pete opened his mouth to protest and closed it again. He gave Bruce a long, appraising look. He patted Bruce gingerly on the shoulder. “Maybe you better get some rest, eh?” He backed up a couple of steps, keeping his eye on Bruce as if anticipating an attack, then turned and hurried back toward his own place.

Bruce hardly noticed he was gone. He walked across the lawn to the dead circle in the grass.

“So help me, fairy, I’m going to get you. This has gone too goddamn far.”

The fairy fluttered up out of the grass. She hovered near his face. He made a grab for her that would have crushed her, but she eluded him easily.

“I apologize, human. I thought it would be amusing.”

“Amusing?” Bruce roared. Distantly, a dog answered.

“Forgive me, I did not foresee such terrible consequences.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Bruce demanded.

“I’m sorry. I can do nothing,” she answered. “What is done, is done. It’s up to you.”

“What am I supposed to do?” He put his face in his hands. Mashing the fairy wouldn’t save Alicia. “Lord, I wish I hadn’t given in to Pete. Then none of this would have ever happened.”

ting

He stood in the bright orange light of the street lamp, half a can of Foster’s in one hand, and his front door key in the other, regarding the fairy ring. He felt disoriented, not quite sure how he got there. How much of Peter’s beer had he put away? He tried to count back over the evening. Two, he decided, and hefted the can in his hand, and a half. Not enough to make him confused, surely.

Getting old, man? he thought. Can’t hack it anymore?

Not that old, for crying out loud.

A little flutter of motion caught his eye, down in the grass there beside the mushrooms. He couldn’t immediately identify it. He shrugged. A mouse, probably, or some night bird.

Peter really had his drawers in a knot about the mushrooms. In the name of neighbourly relations, Bruce thought he probably ought to get rid of them. They were kind of cute, though, sticking up through the grass.

The hell with it. If Pete wants them gone, let Pete get rid of them.

The porch light came on, and the door opened, and Alicia came out onto the porch and yelled at him.

“Are you going to spend the night out there admiring your lousy lawn which a dog wouldn’t shit on, or are you going to come in and have supper while it’s still almost warm?”

She sounds like a wife, Bruce thought. He smiled and went inside.◊

If You Go Out in the Woods

by Paula Johanson

illustration by Richard Bartrop

When winter settled in around this country, it was strictly snowshoe weather for walking anywhere but on the trodden path to the stable or the kids' play area. For the walk into town, especially, whether I walked along the highway or cross-country, it took hours on snowshoes. The Valhalla range was completely inaccessible. Maybe next year I'd get skis and learn how the Norwegians did it. Meanwhile, it was wool socks and boots and maybe I could still keep all my toes.

My son Kevin, who likes to do whatever I'm doing, was bundling up as well. We'd already debated whether or not he would accompany me to town and (thank God) had put that off till another time. Christmas presents and all. Maybe he could wait till the snow had gone — I wish. It's enough worrying about Kathleen here alone with little Alice without having to keep an eye on Kevin among strangers and roughnecks in town. But Kevin is sensible enough, for a ten-year old, to know when it's better to stay home and safe. He even stopped insisting on Christmas lights when I promised him a red light bulb for the living room. All that, "Aw, please, Mom," when we have no front windows to hang the lights in.

"I'll follow you as far as the meadow," Kevin chattered. "Then me and Alice'll make a snow fort, and tomorrow sneak out there and attack when you come home." He helped Alice find the sleeves of her parka.

"Okay, sport." I found my mitts and wriggled my hands into them. "Scarf and toque, Kevin, it's cold out."

He gave me an exasperated look. "Aw, if me or Alice gets cold, we can just come h-home."

"Smile when you say that, pardner." I pulled the toque over his ears. "And it's 'Alice and I' as the subject of a sentence."

"Smial," he repeated. "Subject, object, predicate, clause; comma, colon, period, pause. Got it, Mom." Alice looked like a furry bear, all bundled up.

"We're ready to go." I looked for Kathleen, who came forward and hugged



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me, her body not yet awkward with the baby due this spring. "I'll be back tomorrow. You be careful, Kath — ask Kevin to get the schoolbooks from the top shelf this time, eh? No risking accidents." We left the kitchen, clumped through the mud room in our boots, and heard the door close firmly as Kathleen locked it behind us. "All right, kids," I commanded, "single file, forward *march*. 'I love to go a-wandering, along the mountain track...'" Kevin sang descant to my soprano, and Alice tried to fa-la-la and val-de-ree where she could. The play meadow was a hundred yards from the house, snow dimpled with old footprints partially covered.

Both of the kids were picked up and thoroughly hugged. "Be good, Honeybear. And you, sport, look after her. If you two go walking anywhere, play Good King Wenceslas, eh?"

"Sure, Mom," Kevin nodded. "But why should we walk in one set of tracks when no one's come by for years?"

"Because, Kevin," I put a hand on his toque, "the people who pass us by and go into town are hungry and don't have anywhere to live. If they know there are people here they'll come and hurt us and live here. Or maybe the Mackaness', or one of the other secret houses."

"Smiles," Alice corrected me. "Hobbit hole, round in the ground."

"Yes, Honeybear. So we leave very little for strangers to find. We don't want them to know we're here."

"What about Mr. Harris at the store?" Kevin wanted to know.

"He knew about us before. And his sister is Mrs. Mackaness. So we trust him, and he trusts us not to make an avalanche fall on his store." I patted both kids again. "Now I'm going. Goodbye till tomorrow." They called goodbye after me, Kevin's clear voice and Alice's slurring cry. She had learned to talk a lot better in the past year, but she was still only six. Maybe with time, and if she had enough protein to make her brain grow...

Ah well, there were soybean seeds on my shopping list, and the fish biocosm was at last working efficiently. We could eat a fish every week this winter and still not deplete our breeding stock. And old Bossie would be giving milk again when she had her calf. So it would be powdered milk till spring. At least we didn't have to keep the kids indoors all the time anymore, and they could get some vitamin D from the sun.

I soon left behind the smooth mound of our house, with its snow-covered saplings growing in the soil insulating the concrete shell of our roof. Settling into the stride, I set a good pace on the snowshoes. Sometimes the strain of the awkward motions had sent me, in the past, into writhing belly cramps, but my period wasn't due for at least a week, so this time I had no trouble. I passed the Mackaness' *smial* about noon. We all called our half-dozen underground homes in the hills *smials*, after Tolkien's hobbit books. It was a safety measure: if someone heard the kids chatter in town about "Going home" (or if, God forbid, they were caught by someone in the woods) all the words "Going to smile" would do was confuse the uninformed. The town was only five miles away, after all; but that short distance took me several hours to cover in the deep powder. It was late afternoon before I cached my snowshoes behind Harris' store and

went in to do the Christmas shopping.

Harris recognized me at once, even under the ski mask that Kathleen had knitted me this fall. He stacked the wood stove for the customers who were warming up, then came and helped me with the list my family had made. It had been condensed, but even so it was still a long list. We spent some time gathering cloth, needles, precious salt. Business was slow today; Harris ignored the browsers and chatted with me.

"Honey candy for the little ones?" he asked. "And what about some pickled cukes for Kathleen?" Harris had been quite solicitous of Kath since she had come to town and conceived his son's child. Now that young Peter Harris was gone on the road to Vancouver, all Harris would let himself hope was that there would be a grandson he could call Pete.

"Those home-pickled cukes would be good. And a very little of the honey candy," I told him. "I want Kevin and Alice to keep their teeth. Maybe you have some apricots left from Vernon? We wrap them in paper with pictures drawn on it, and tuck them in the stockings."

Harris chuckled. "Like the old mandarins we used to get."

"And besides, it's a change from our apples. Speaking of which, here's the dried apple rings and the fruit leather you wanted this time. And the wolf wool sweater that Kath knit. I hope your wife likes it." My pack was now empty, and I began to load it with the cloth, food and other items. Harris stroked the sweater admiringly.

"Fine job she did. It was lucky to get the fur — that the beast didn't kill you both instead, Janice." I looked up at the mention of my name. "I told you to carry a gun when you're up there, and how a knife ever did the job, I'll never know."

I grinned, and six inches of steel slid out of my sleeve into an easy grip. "Oh, hell, it's not as if it was a true wolf. It looked as though a Samoyed ran wild and had half-breed pups. When it had its jaws clamped on my arm, I knew it couldn't kill me right away, so I held its head till Kathleen came and cut its throat. Knowing it couldn't get loose to kill me made it easier." I put the knife away without the other customers noticing it. "Kevin made a drum out of the skin. All by himself he shaped the wood and tightened the skin. And, he made little fur cuffs for Alice out of the scraps. He's doing well."

"And is Alice any better?" Harris was studiously wrapping the honey candy that he knew she loved. I looked around; there were only one or two strangers in the store, and they were out of earshot.

"She's talking pretty well now, but Kath is sure she'll never get much better than a four-year-old. I told you we figure it's an enzyme she's missing, some PKU thing. A real hospital could have fixed it at birth. The food she ate as a baby never built her brain up properly; wouldn't have even if we'd let her drink Bossie's milk when she was weaned, in spite of fallout." I accepted the candy and tucked it in the pack. "But there'll be milk with the new calf. I should tell Jack Miller that his bull did the trick, and next year we'll breed a calf for him. I wish Kathleen had settled on a better stud fee."

"How about the stud fee you owe my son Pete?" Harris poked me. "Don't that beat all, Kathleen coming in with Kevin and Bossie, and heading home with

both them girls knocked up. I bet Kevin had some questions after that, eh?" He burst into laughter. "And when'll be your turn, Janice?" He poked me again with an arthritic finger.

The old devil. It was funny enough, but I laughed less than he. "Not till Kath's baby is three or four years old. Maybe I'll have a new husband by then," I said somewhat soberly. "I still miss Steve, and I know Kath misses Mike, although Peter went a long way to help her get over that. Now he's off to Vancouver and the ships, God bless him. I hope he gets past the highway raiders."

One of the strangers had come nearer, and Harris put his gnarled finger to his lips. "Talk softer, Janice," he warned. "These are travellers if not raiders. You never know for sure." The fellow disappeared around an aisle, and Harris went on. "They come in asking for gasoline around noon, insisting even after we told them we save it for emergencies. Well, rather than have ourselves an emergency on the spot, we sold them a few liters at the highest price we dared ask. And they paid it so easily I don't know whether I should have asked more or turned it down as loot. You ask my wife tonight when you stay with us, and she'll show you a ring for every liter."

I shivered. "Wolves are one thing, but men turned thieves and raiders give me nightmares." When Kath had dressed my arm from the wolf's bite and rocked me to sleep that night, my dreams were not of wolves, but of men with teeth tearing at my arm and claws at my belly. "Um, oh I nearly forgot. Have you got a red light bulb? I promised Kevin we'd put one in the living room."

Harris nodded and started to answer when a voice came from behind me. "Yeah, a red light for the whore's window." It was one of the young travellers. "Ask me for a kid, babe, I don't charge stud fees." He showed yellow teeth in a sparse beard. Harris should have known better — a raider can be known on sight. Young men travelling, sometimes on foot but usually in a decrepit hand-repaired Land Rover or van; skin and bone from irregular diet, eyes glazed or dilated from whatever drugs can still be found. And the clothes — you'd never see Peter Harris in blue jeans and a silk shirt (both filthy). Not all young wanderers were raiders, but ones this dirty, skinny and strung-out were the likeliest.

Shock at his attitude stopped me cold for a moment. No man had talked to me that way for six years. When I started to move, Harris put a hand on my arm (right over the knife-sheath, the cunning devil). "That's family you're talking about," he snapped. "Dry up and leave. I don't need your business."

I turned my back on the parting fellow and said clearly, "Well, I'll be off on my other errands now. I'll see you later this evening?"

Harris nodded. "Go right to my house when you're ready," he said softly. "I'll bring your pack and snowshoes when I close up." I walked out past the young raider.

The errands took as long as I could linger over them, trying to cool down. Imagine calling the mother of a house a whore. Imagine threatening her with sex she didn't want. He was lucky to be breathing after that. Last year, even the gentle potter had joined the fight when some stoned stranger had raped Jack

Miller's daughter. The anger passed... I walked to the Harris'.

Once inside the house I found the old couple both scared blind, for me. "He must have heard us talking," Harris explained. "My wife overheard him and the other talking in the repair shop."

His wife, small and withering, nodded. "I heard them say they're going to wait on the highway till they see you leave tomorrow, and follow you home. They know you got family and things up in the hills."

"They're not going to steal from the town?" I asked. Harris shook his head, knotted hands shaking as his wife brought in mint tea.

"Too many people, organized. They don't want to face the lot of us. They heard about electric generators, and they want one for their Land Rover. They figure a place out of town like yours or my sister's will have one."

"That's stupid. They have to power the generator somehow. Most of us use small streams. First they have to find a *smial*," I used the hobbit-word we all knew." And then they have to adapt it, and I bet they don't know how." After a moment's thought, "They probably won't even be able to find a *smial* in all that snow."

"Whether they can or can't, they'll try. They could destroy your home and family." Mrs. Harris poured steaming cups of mint tea. "Janice, I wish you all had come to spend this winter with us. If Kathleen is going to stay here from February till the baby comes in May, I don't see —"

"We couldn't leave the orchard that long." I tried to soften the dry tones of my voice. Why could I never remember her first name? "It's not just a house, you know that, it's a cycle that has to be maintained at all stages. If a wrong algae gets into the fish ponds, the fish die. If we turn off the generator, the hydroponic garden dies. Our stream may run dry or freeze over. If we even let the house grow cold, it'll take weeks to bring it up to a comfortable temperature — and we don't even have a skylight like the Mackanness'."

Shifting in his seat, Harris had little to say. "You may live in a hole in the ground," he muttered finally, "but you're part of our lives here. If you need help, we'll get some men and do what we did for the Millers when they were threatened —"

"Not yet," I snapped. "They don't know where any of the *smials* are, so they're no real threat. Do you want to kill them for standing on the highway?" The mint tea wasn't any help. I wanted coffee. There wasn't any coffee. "If we kill them out of hand, we aren't even defending ourselves." I kept seeing the wolf/Samoyed, watching us, stalking for minutes before it leaped. "We'd be just like them. I don't work that way. And what would that tell the kids about the way people react to threats? Great object lesson. I'd rather avoid the issue entirely." The Harrisese waited for my magic solution. I thought about it. "If I leave now, they might not be on the road yet. At any rate, I'll stay off the highway. Full moon'll light the path, and the breeze I noticed coming in might even fill my tracks before daybreak. They won't know where I've gone, and if your sister's skylight has stopped leaking heat, there won't even be a ripple of warm air to give away the *smials*."

They didn't like it, but I left.

The breeze had come up a bit, and was filling in my tracks from the afternoon. By the time anyone thought to check the woods, there'd be no sign. Over the first hill I saw a glow, not silver like the cold moon rising, but red and green and gold — Goddamn Christmas lights, for Pete's sake. The Mackaness' kids must have pestered their parents into putting up the goddamn lights, just like Kevin pestered me. They were older, and remembered more. Well, it was pretty. And the glow from the town would mask it if the light shone above the hill.

Which goes to show how a mind relaxing will slip into old habits. The town below had no lights after dusk, and the coloured glow would light up as far as the road. I trudged along, watching the pretty glow, and well after midnight, came upon my own *smial*. The vaguely circular hill pleased me aesthetically; like a fool I tromped boldly around it, admiring how well our home suited the forest life. This was the way people were made to live, within the environment, not in spite of it. This and other profound statements occupied my cold-befuddled mind until I finally got around to knocking on the door, being in no state to try the alternate entrance by the stream.

It was Kathleen who pulled me in, unbundled me and checked my feet and face for frostbite. She warmed me slowly, in a week's ration of warm water, and cursed me black and blue for coming home this way, raving at her about the pretty lights. I slept through most of it, but she had more in the morning, variations on the theme of "travelling on an empty stomach," "changing plans," and "what the hell were you thinking of?" She'd already fed Bossie and the kids when I got up to explain.

The idea of the raiders shut her up right away, and terrified the kids. When Alice started to howl, Kevin grabbed and hugged her, wide eyes meeting mine over her head. "What were the pretty lights, Mom?" he asked. "I heard you telling Momma Kath about the pretty lights on the way home, while you were in the tub warming up." I could see the change in my face by the way he held Alice tighter. Dear God, the Mackaness' lights...

This time Kevin came along and I didn't argue. He could hide as well as any deer by now, and tell Kathleen if anything happened to me. It was noon again when we reached the Mackaness' *smial*, and from first sight I could tell there was something wrong. Heat waves rose steadily from the skylight, where the lights still glowed dimly. Kevin hid while I crept up and peered through the broken plexiglass. The room below held clutter, a broken punch glass, a scrap of silk; no doors had been forced, and no one was in sight. Asleep in the other rooms, no doubt. The Land Rover was parked next to the air intake and the stream that powered their generator. I went back and got Kevin to help me.

"Watch carefully and say nothing," I warned him. We took a tarp from the Land Rover and covered the skylight, packing the edges with snow. Another tarp was rolled into a tube from the exhaust pipe to the *smial's* air intake vent, and sealed with silicon gel from the raiders' own repair kit. Then we gouged out a rough new path from the stream, pulled the pins on the Rover's hood and used it to dam the flow, redirecting it away from the generator. Inside the *smial*, as the generator died, the power-controlled doors slammed shut, probably waking the raiders and whoever they'd left alive this long.

I turned to my son. "Now, Kevin," going back to the Land Rover, "this is how an engine is started." The keys were gone, but I explained how to hotwire a car, just as Steve had shown me before Kevin was born. We were in no hurry; the Mackanness' security system locked all internal and external doors in a power failure. Each room vented to the air intake, and had a hidden exit, and I strongly suspected that any surviving member of the family would either escape alone, or smile to watch their captors die. I started the engine and let it run. We waited.

Ten minutes later, a small head poked through the snow, and the Mackanness' little girl came out of a secret exit. Wrapped in a sheet, with a black eye and one ponytail missing, she looked around, and saw us and came over, barefoot in the snow. "They're in Momma's room," she whispered as we wrapped her in some of our clothes. "Nobody else is left. Will Momma die asleep?"

We told her yes. She nodded, curled between us. I thought about my apple trees. Last January I burned smudges at night to make fog so the frost wouldn't kill the orchard. Sheila Mackanness came over in the dark of night to tell me the smoke was visible against the sky. I thought about my apple trees.

"Now you can come home with us," Kevin told the girl, rubbing her feet like Kathleen had rubbed mine.

"Smile when you say that, pardner," I chided him, watching the lights that no longer shone green and gold... and red. ♦

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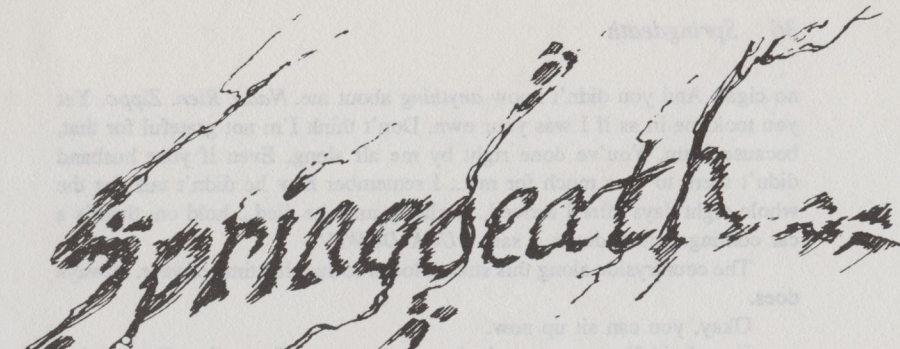
In the Green Time

by Coralie Adams

I know I'm a sinner so
I bury
the signs of my sins in the garden

I read where smoking is bad for me so
I carefully conceal
my cigarette butts those holes are
easy to dig about the size of a thimble
I bury my whiskey bottles right side up
like the people who get buried in
the perma-frost I hope my bottles
don't pop up like I hear the people do
when the perma-frost
shifts
in the midnight sun

the arms and legs are a little more
difficult I can't remember just where
or who I got them from but they
are good
ones better than mine people always laugh
at my bandy legs and my cigarette pocked
arms and I want to grow better ones but
so far no luck they seem to go funny
in the dirt and smell
a lot and I don't like them
then so I go and
get more and plant them always hoping
they will grow
strong and straight and then
I will cut mine off and
put on the new ones that I grew
in my garden in
the green time



by Drake Dresen

illustration by Tim Hammell

Listen up:

So you've never seen your house. Those miserable arrows of fate that pierced your eyes at birth have deprived you of a view which ices the blood of sighted people, haven't they? You've never seen the cause of my nightmares which plague me night after night, have you? Your skin has never purpled with pathetic dread as mine has when confronted with the image of that cruel and disturbing place. It is to you, after all, only a house, isn't it? You only live there.

I wrote that down and memorized it. It took me a long time to get the words just so. What do you think? *Let me be your eyes. I want to help you. I want you to see it, too.* I wrote all this just for you.

Do you know where we're going? Guess. Give up? Well, we're not going into town like you thought. You must've guessed that from our little offroad detour just now. No, ma'am, not to town. We're going *back there*. I've turned the car around. We're going back to that evil little house in the valley. I want you to... *experience* it as though you had never been there before, as though it were new to you. That's why today you got to go for a car ride, your first in years. You're going to see that place for the very first time. Please, don't protest. It's my pleasure.

You know, I've given this a lot of thought. It's been five years now I've been at your service. Five years! Can you believe that? Just nod your head, I know you can't answer me right now. Is it on too tight for you? I'll loosen it later on. It's just that right now I'm the one who's got to be doing all the talking. I'm sure you'll have plenty of questions.

Anyway, after five years a fella starts to thinking about where he's going, what he's going to do with the rest of his life. All you've ever shown me have been kind words, just like the ones you had for your husband. I know you're not someone who cares to... physically... demonstrate your liking for someone. But words are nice, too.

Even to a thirteen year old. That's how old I was when you and your late hubby took me in. Remember? No parents, no family, no pools, no pets,

no cigar. And you didn't know *anything* about me. *Nada. Rien. Zippo.* Yet you took me in as if I was your own. Don't think I'm not grateful for that, because I am. You've done right by me all along. Even if your husband didn't seem to care much for me... I remember how he didn't talk for the whole eight days after I arrived... right up until he died... hold on, there's a car coming... duck down. I said *DUCK DOWN!*

The countryside along this stretch looks so sad this time of year. Always does.

Okay, you can sit up now.

I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. After today, I'm leaving you. I've thought it over pretty carefully, and my mind is clear. Time for a change. And there'll be someone else to help you along, I'm sure of it. Don't try to talk me out of this, please. It's tough you being a widow, and blind, and old and everything. But you know what? It's even worse for me. I can see where we live. It's horrible. I've tried to put things right, honest I have. But I know now it's impossible.

Do you care if I smoke? No, of course you don't.

I wrote down this speech. I've been working on it for over two years now. I was going to read it to you just before I went away, so you would think it was coming right out of me, out of my head or my heart, since you can't see the piece of paper it's on, and when I was gone you'd think highly of me, how well I could put my thoughts together on the spur of the moment. But that doesn't really matter so much anymore. What matters is that you know what I've been going through for these past few years. I'm going to make you understand. I'm going to make you see that house.

I'm starting to feel sick in my stomach. You know why? Because that source of my misery, my *maison d'être*, just came into view.

This is where I get into the guts of my speech. I've memorized the description of what it's like to drive up to that place. Here goes. Listen up.

Spooky. It makes you feel exhausted. It makes you shiver. It makes you want to lie down or kill somebody.

I wrote that part first. It gets better. The speech, not the house. Hold on, I'll get out here and open the gate. Don't get out.

I'm back.

This is a long driveway. It's lined with trees. You remember three summers ago when there was a blight on them? I handled that one pretty well. You told me to buy something to kill off the blighters, didn't you? Well, I went one better. I bought something to kill the trees. Mixed it with a systemic. Paint a ring around the bottom. The trees suck it up. They're not sucking up anything anymore. They're black and skinny. They look patient, like they're waiting for something else to happen. Well, it won't. They're dead.

Ring around the bottom

Now the poison's got 'em

Hush-ah, hush-ah

The trees fall down.

They were terrible trees. Every fall they were spouting dead leaves all over the place. Have you ever seen dead leaves? No, of course you haven't. You've never had to sweep them up either. *What a horrible smell. Death's smell. Death's knell. Meph's dell. Hell mell.*

I've been writing poetry. I'm going to publish a book of my poems. Just one book. One copy. And then, you know what I'll do? Guess. Give up? I'll burn it. Set fire to it, and gasp in the smoke. That's the only way I'll get the smell of those dead leaves out of my brain.

By the way, if you hear someone throwing up, it's me. I gag when I look at this place. Get out, please. We're here. Oh, excuse me. I'll unlock your door.

Watch your step. I'm going to be your eyes for a while.

Don't try talking. You know I can't hear what you're saying. I'll take it off when I've had my say. No, I can't untie your hands either. Please understand.

This is a place of death, misery and eternal hopelessness. I'm starting again. *It is a museum of doom. It has two stories, a bad outlook facing south, and windows painted black to keep out the sun.* I painted them five years ago. You didn't notice? To continue: *House paint: white.* One doesn't want the place getting warm. *White reflects light, keeps in the night.* You won't mind if I break into a poem now and again, will you? It's in my blood.

If it could see, this woebegone hall of the damned would look over a narrow yard bounded by... how did I describe those things again? Just let me look at my notes... oh, yes... *necrotic creepy creeping vines entwined in a bone-white fence* (fashioned from my own skilled hands from... guess. Give up? Clue: what's the only stuff that really looks bone-white?). Don't concern yourself with what kind of bones. Concentrate instead on my meter. Suffice to say you haven't had any visitors over the past few years.

We're going inside now. Keep your eyes open.

Here is the entrance way, the antechamber where your cloaks are kept and your sensible shoes arrayed. And along the walls here, and along all the walls in this grotesque residence, are the shabby traces of your hands, the waist-high tracks of your feeble efforts to navigate these ruins. Sorry, I'd meant to cross out "feeble." *Look now upon that which I have accomplished. Above and below your hand tracks is the writing on the wall. From floor to ceiling, interrupted only by the oily margin secreted by your palms, I have worked the ugly tragic secrets lurking beneath.* Some of my best literary work is up here. Pages and pages of walls. *Encyclopedia Graffitiica.*

Now look up. Waay up. Remind you of the Sistine Chapel? I'm a bit of a realist. Every square inch of the ceiling is covered. Get a load of the vivid colours... I believe shades of black to be colours, don't you? *There is the face of Beelzebub, and there are the Guardians of the Gates of Hell...* and over here, come along, follow your handish highway... in the sitting room, all around the chandelier, are the fallen cherubs. *These are nocturnal secretions, evil ooze, which only I could see, until now. I have uncovered them for you. I have turned over the stinking black rocks which no one else dared to*

turn over, and witnessed the horrible secrets thereunder. I am an interpreter, a translator, a medium, a channeler, a liaison. Don't thank me yet. There's more.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, when did he have the time to do all this? Without your knowing? The answer is, while you slept. Rather deeply, I might add. Your husband the doctor kept a good supply of sedatives on hand... goes well with your nightly cup of tea. Me, I've been going without sleep. It's a waste of time being dead to the world. I need the full twenty-four hours. There is so much to do. There is so much I have done. Like painting the ceiling. You wouldn't believe how sore my neck was for the eight and a half months I was up there doing the Michaelangelo bit. Scaffolding and everything. Paint everywhere. Eleven p.m. till seven a.m. Wound things up in time to bring you your morning coffee, every day. By the way, I used watercolours, so you couldn't smell the paint.

Behold! Are you with me? Cast your gaze upon the finely wrought intricacies of the wooden banisters. Do you know how many faces of demons I have carved in there? Guess. Give up? *Three thousand nine hundred and eleven.* Count them. Don't. *Three thousand nine hundred and eleven teeny tiny mugs seething with malevolence, all uncovered by me.* They've lived inside the wood, the whole time. Of course, I didn't bring out the ones swarming in the handrail! I didn't want you to feel them. Not yet.

Is it any wonder I've been feeling nauseous? No. Let's go upstairs.

Upstairs there are three rooms.

The first is your room. It is dark and musty with the smells of your age and your suspicions. If I'm going too fast, just let me know. *Around you are gathered the doubts of the cause of your late husband's death five years ago. These uncertainties I have crystallized upon your bedroom walls in my sure, cursive hand.* I used a lot of ink and paint, so the words are embossed. *The stitching in your bed-quilt contains truths, too.* Nothing your fingers could read, though. Done while u sleep. Two hands, no waiting. You look surprised about the quilt. Want to sleep on it? Or shall we go on? I'm somewhat eager to continue, so if you don't mind...

The second room is dimly lit. The only light in this room comes through the one window left unblackened. This is my little bedroom. This is where you thought I carried out my adolescent hobbies, as you called them. The truth is, this is where I stored the tools of my artistic trade.

Come over here to the window. This is a great view of the back yard. You never wanted to go there. It's too shady, too chill, you said. There's never any sunlight back there. It's true. It's a good place to work during the day. *Come to the window, and look out upon further evidence of the magnificence of my endeavors.* Down there.

Outside there are three statues, standing side by side.

The first statue, nearest to the back door of this loathsome place, is short and grey, it's a statuette, really, the features of which are contrived to look worn and smoothed by wind and rain and lack of care. It is a caricature of itself, a silly winged gnome, with a tangle of wilted stone weeds dangling



HAMMILL
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from its smirking thick lips. It is grinning insanely and has, clutched in its beclawed hands underneath its chin, a hideous goggle-eyed frog.

Number two is a faceless monster with ten arms, four pairs of breasts — each of which looks like a bunch of grapes — and an enormous jutting penis which points due south. This twelve foot tall beast is covered in verdigris and birdshit and lists slightly to one side. I did that on purpose. Not really.

The last sculpture is a black marble cube, ten feet by ten feet by ten feet. It is balanced on one corner, precariously so, and seems in constant danger of tipping over. Engraved deeply into its sides are six scenes, each depicting one of the six different seasons in Hell: Spring, Springdeath, Summerdeath, Falling, Crashing, and Winterkill. The side depicting Spring is, except for six one inch diameter concave depressions clustered in the center, blank: Spring in Hell lasts for only six seconds, enough time to make you long for it. By the way, the period of longing, which equals exactly the length of time it takes the other five seasons to run their course, is six years. Too bad if you sleep through Spring.

What's wrong? You don't look well at all. Are you getting it all for the first time? Those things live here! I've merely exposed them! Now do you understand what I've gone through all this time? Five years! It's a tribute to my artistry and strength of will that I've been able to withstand it. All I'm doing now... *Now is the time of redemption. Now is the time of revelation. The waiting is over. I bring you now to the culmination of my toils, where the blind will see and the stupid will understand.* What he's saying... what I'm saying... is that when you know what this is about, when you know what's being done here, you'll see why I can't be alone with this anymore. I've been hurting for so long now, the only way I can be free of the hurt is for you to hurt, too. Do you understand?

Draw near, woman! The time is at hand! Follow me to the third and final room where all will be revealed. I'm gesturing imperiously, here. Mind your step.

The third room is locked and dark. It was here your late husband had his study. In here you were not permitted. In here you have never set foot... until now. The hulking shadows that lurk here breathe in quiet. This room is without hope. It is a narrow room, sad and tired and lacking energy. It has wound down, expended any life it once had, and it languishes in the murky frontierland of meaninglessness and oblivion. Not a good room.

You'd better sit down now. Here's a chair.

Have you ever heard of self-mutilation? Ever tried it? No, you're not a touchy-feely sort, are you? Well, your husband was. He was gifted with scalpel and suture. Good doctors are. The good doctor was a bit of a hobbyist, too. Had all kinds of diversions apart from hacking and sewing. You never would have known that, though, would you? As far as you could ever tell, when he was in his study he was reading about the newest procedures in his medical journals or making entries into his diary... *It is time.* In a minute.

Poor you. Blind since birth. Didn't ever want to be a bother. Amazed to find love, the kind, patient love of a doctor... no pun intended, my dear. But there he was, and there you were, and here you are now, in the house that love built. *In the house that Hell built.* You had a garden out front to sit in, and a sitting room to sit in, and a tea room to sit in. *Apropos* of all this sitting, here you sit, patiently, begagged, fit to be untied. Which you will be, in time. Long before spring.

Spring is just around the corner.

Tell me something. Did it never occur to you that it was just a little bit strange that a boy shows up at your door and next thing you know, in a matter of days, your good husband the doctor falls ill and dies? You are a very trusting woman. *A very stupid woman.* No, I wouldn't say stupid. Still, your husband wasn't a spring chicken anymore, was he? *Spring is just around the corner.* And after all, he had endured a number of... "emotional" illnesses throughout his life. It was sweet providence that brought your little helper to you, to take care of all the arrangements, to comfort you. And in your grief, you believed in this... boy. You believed that a child could take care of all these delicate matters. *How could you be so stupid?* I'm feeling nauseous. This place has always made me want to puke.

Did you know that the good doctor always had plenty of knives on hand? *You'd have to be blind not to see them.* Sorry. *Scalpels for cutting, scalpels for paring, scalpels for ripping and shredding and tearing.* Scalpel: a small, sharp straight cutting knife used in surgery, etcetera. Especially etcetera. Know something? Guess. Give up?

The good doctor, ma'am, was etcetera'd by one of his own scalpels. Right here in this room. Under this roof. In this Hell.

Etcetera.

Spring is just around the corner. It lasts just six seconds. Don't blink or you'll miss it. So here's this boy in the spring of his youth, balanced on the crest of puberty, poised on the threshold of this wretched dwelling-place, his voice ready to crack, hat in hand, so to speak, needing a place to stay... it doesn't matter where he came from, does it?

Are you getting the picture? Do you see what it means? It's all so formulaic. It all came together so nicely. Sick husband. Blind trusting frail dependent wife. Little man-boy lost. All languishing in The House of Satan's Hidden Artifices. Too many people, not enough time. *It is time.* Yes, yes. Don't get your knickers in a twist. Not you, Milady.

So someone's got to go. Someone's got to make way for the interpreter, the translator, the medium, the channeler, the liaison. *Capeesh?*

Thus, in pursuance of a well thought-out pretext the squeaking pubescent and the good doctor march upstairs and into the doctor's study. A box of scalpels is lying, open, on the doctor's desk. It's the first day of spring. The window is open. Bright new hormones waft through the young man's body. Tired dusty ones scabble through the doc's. Junior is controlled by his. He is powerless to prevent them from working their changes on him.

And so out of the box comes a scalpel it is time yes and it's held

precisely in a strong sure grip *It Is Time* yes! and from behind him deep and deep and deep it goes and again from the front deep and deep and deep it goes. Six stabs in six seconds and it's over. The boy falls lifeless to the ground. Hippocrates rolls over in his grave. *Springdeath.*

I loved you once, the way a man is supposed to love a woman. But then one day I saw that you were impervious to all the horrors here... I knew you would never understand what I would have to endure... I realized then that I'd have to work alone. I was exhausted. My strength was gone.

And at the lowest point of my misery, the boy came. He was sent to me. He had to have been. When he presented himself at our door, it was a message to me to carry on. I had somehow been... *advised...* to continue. I had been... *encouraged...* to borrow the energy of his life for my travails. I had no choice in the matter. *The official word was in.*

I buried the boy in the back, where the cube now stands. His teetering tombstone. Then I contrived my descent into "death." And on that very day my work began.

I'm good with a scalpel. And needle. Local anaesthetic. Mirror. A few incisions in my throat. Overhaul the old voice box. Cut here, fold there, remove this, sew that. *Etcetera.* It didn't take long to heal. And when it did, the voice you heard was no longer the good doctor's... it was the shrilling orphaned man-boy at your beck and call. And wasn't it terrible about the doctor, ma'am. Leave all the worries to me. Squeak, squine, squawk. *Swine!*

I needed solitude, and found it, in your very presence, under your pathetic nose. I needed time, and found it, living at night outside your non-embrace. How could you ever miss the physical comfort of a man you never cared to touch?

Enough! It is time!

I have been your eyes, but I will be no more. The charade is over. *Spring is just around the corner, and it lasts just six seconds. Don't blink or you'll miss it.* I want you to see the Spring, and the Springdeath, and all the seasons of my Hell.

I want you to join me in the land of the sighted. Know something? Guess. Give up? You will.

I know the technique. It's a new one. I read about it in one of my journals. I've mastered it. Good prognosis. It'll take just a wee bit of surgical wizardry on your sunken eyes, right here in the good doctor's study, and within days you'll be able to see everything I've done over the past five years. You won't believe your eyes. *Jeepers Creepers!* But we've got to get started right away. *Spring is just around the corner.* I wouldn't want you to miss it.

It Is Time.

Okay, now you just lie down here and I'll give you a little something in the arm to put you to sleep for a while. When you wake up it'll all be done. Shh, shh, now be a good girl and stop squirming... just relax... don't fight it... this'll pinch just a little bit... there we go... nice and easy... that's it... that's it... ◊

headed out to the ice-milk coloured stars

by Janet Elliot Waters

D shadow blown like some vast dark silk
across the thin-milk moon
you leaving

On Spec would like to thank



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Rocket to Oz

by Spider Robinson

illustration by Rob Alexander

Ayers Rock, wombats, Dreamtime... an alien civilization from a lost universe? Welcome to On Spec's first feature essay as Spider Robinson reports on his recent travels in Australia.

When Dorothy made her trip to the land of Oz in L. Frank Baum's familiar books, it was fantasy. When Robert A. Heinlein's character Zebadiah Carter made his trips to both Oz and Mars in *The Number of the Beast*, it was science fiction.

My own trip to Oz incorporated elements of both.

Even if you're not an sf writer like me, traveling from Vancouver to Queensland is a science fictional experience on at least three levels. It involves a long period of cramped and tedious space travel; it produces First Contact with an alien culture; and it involves a social/cultural jump of approximately ten to fifteen years in the past.

I expected at least some of this, and approached the experience as a science fiction writer: as I would a trip to Mars. I studied the terrain and conditions, packed survival gear, tried to anticipate contingencies. What I did not anticipate was that I would be leaving behind not only Vancouver... but reality itself. That my journey would take me to the realm of the genuinely fantastic.

The flight to Cairns was, except for some surprisingly good food, an eternity of torture closely resembling my mental picture of a flight to Mars. Very cramped, very noisy, undeniably physically dangerous and yet crashingly boring, the trip differed from real space flight in three notable ways: there was no computer to play with, there was nothing but featureless grey visible through the portholes instead of starry space, and they let you get drunk.

But when my family and I were sprayed with poison gas, staggered through the final indignities of Immigration and got our first sight of

Cairns, Queensland, our complaints faded away into an awed silence. A new world...

Furthermore, a tropical paradise, closely resembling the planet Earth before those damned humans got hold of it. Air so sweet and clean it puzzled and brought distant objects into focus! Endless beach and sky and sunshine! Our quarters were impressive even to the people in the zombie trance of pronounced jet lag: a luxury hotel amidst a riotous profusion of tropical rainforest foliage, in a hundred different colours which all must be called "green" in our poor grunting language; a saltwater pool with its own waterfall; fans whickering overhead in our room: and that glorious realization, so confusing to Canadians, that one is actually more than sufficiently warm. It was a wonderful place to sleep like a dog for thirty-six hours.

My thirteen-year-old keeper Terri made a beeline for the TV, sampled a few soap-operas to get a baseline, and computed that this part of Australia was, by her standards, about three years behind Canada — except that they only got two channels here, which put them twenty years behind. Then she headed for her permanent quarters by the side of the pool. (My daughter desperately wants a case of skin cancer; from her point of view, Australia is a tanning salon where people talk funny.)

Once we were all coherent again, we checked out the pricey Colonial Club and set out to explore this strange new world. We drove our rental car 10 splendid kilometers up the Marlin Coast to Clifton Cove, where we found a two-bed two-bath with dishwasher, washer-dryer, stocked bar, private patio, gas barbecue, freshwater pool and sauna, twenty yards from the beach, for \$490 Australian the week! (The Australian and Canadian dollar hover around par.) I submit that prices that reasonable take you right out of the realm of science fiction and into fantasy.

But bear in mind that this was in May, which is winter there and thus is insanely considered off-season, despite the fact that it is the most pleasant time of year to visit. By May the air temperature has dropped to the high 20s or low 30s, and the water temperature has "cooled off" to 24 degrees Celsius, or Canadian blood temperature — which is a very good thing, because 26 is the minimum temperature acceptable to the box jellyfish, also called the sea wasp, the deadliest creature in the water — and so in May it is possible to swim off Queensland without the unpleasant aftereffect of dying.

Once we were established in the splendid Argosy Arms (do give our love to Ian and Helen when you get there), we began the second science-fictional component of our adventure: First Contact with an alien culture.

The first thing that seized our attention was practical: like being ridden out of town on a rail, learning to drive on the left is a profoundly interesting experience which need not be repeated. I had grasped most of the basics within twenty-four hours, but for the duration of my stay I retained a tendency to signal turns by putting on the windshield wipers. No worries mate: Queenslanders are so used to tourists that they *recognize* wipers on a sunny day as a turn signal.

The second thing we almost literally tripped over was the money.

Australia is slowly phasing out paper money, a ghastly error which we must never allow the government to foist on us here, and everyone leans to the right from the weight of all the coinage in their pants. There is utterly no logic to the coins: size and weight have nothing to do with denomination, so you must haul out *all* your specie every time, sort through it for the right sum, and then puzzle over your change. But you have to admire a culture that puts the platypus on its money. (Heinlein once said that the platypus is proof God has a sense of humor.)

And we tripped constantly over minor disparities of culinary custom: you must tell them, for instance, if you don't *want* a slice of beet with your cheeseburger. "Tomato sauce" is local for catsup. Bacon as we know it is unobtainable, but try the minipancakes called "pikelets," served with jam and cream... and don't miss the scones. Above all, avoid the dreaded vegemite, a dark evil roofing paste which all Australians eat three times a day for arcane tribal reasons.

But the most pleasant surprises came from the Queensland people themselves.

As in any good science fiction story, the salient characteristics of the alien creature derive from the ecology of their environment. Queenslanders live in a place which is climatologically perfect, very big, sparsely populated, and relatively poor. Of *course* they are informal and casual and friendly almost to the point of mania. The rest of Australia regards Queensland in much the same way that Canadians regard the Maritimes: beautiful but backward, desirable only to fishermen and cane farmers and abos and those who earn their living by milking tourists. Thus Queensland is pleasant in the same way that the Maritimes are pleasant: the people you meet there will probably not be dangerously crazy, and they will treat you as a pleasant addition to their day. (And if you visit at the right time of year, when the climate is comfortable, you will see beauty that will stop your heart — in this way too, Queensland resembles the Maritimes. The difference is that its intervals of tolerable weather last much longer, and that even its worst weather does not involve the shovelling of snow.)

And as I should have expected, Queensland worked upon me the same magic that the Maritimes did when I first moved there from New York in 1972. Jeanne and I found that the years melted from us, that youthful passions of several different kinds returned to us like the storms of Spring, that once again and for the first time in years we felt ourselves — not believed ourselves to be, but felt *ourselves* — as one with all nature and the world that sustains it, the way we did when we were kids, and again when we were wide-eyed hippies in our twenties: we time-travelled about fifteen years backward, and loved it. We smiled at strangers, and were invariably smiled back at in return; everyone we met was unfailingly chatty and helpful; if there is a grumpy Queenslander, the Tourist Board has got him under house arrest.

The scenery, for only the second time in my experience, refused to wear off. The last walk I took along a Queensland beach stunned me as much as

the first. It healed the soul, nourished the heart.

And the language was a constant delight, because of its close superficial resemblance to English. It uses the same words, but it won't *hold still*. Let us take, for example, a commonplace situation: boy meets girl. In Australia, bloke meets a tart, figures she's top sort; he puts the hard question on her, and if she reckons he's got the clues, they go back to the shack, drop their gear, jump in the cot, and root until sparrowfart. They're all perfectly good words, and you know what has happened, but still you have to ask to have it repeated.

There are words which in English-speaking countries are considered indelicate, but which are in common use in Oz — as long as you don't actually use them to mean what they mean. It is possible, for instance, to hear a sentence such as, "The old bugger was playing silly buggers, got things all bugged up and committed a crime against the order of nature upon her." And all females are called "tarts." (If these examples give you the idea that Oz is a bastion of male chauvinism, you are correct.)

Next there are the words which started out as English but have been shortened and made to end in "ie" or "o." "Afternoon," for example, becomes "arvo," and every December you buy the kiddies pressies for Chrissie. Somehow it doesn't sound like baby talk when they do it, but I can't explain why not.

And there are the terms with no relation to Canadian English. A "dole bludger," for instance, sounds to me like someone who beats people to death with pineapple rounds... but it's merely Australian for what we might call a "welfare bum." And apparently Australians find paying for alcohol physically painful: when you buy a round of drinks, it's said to be your "shout," as in, "Shout me a pot o' Cooper's, wouldja, mate?"

Which leads to further proof that Australians are an alien race: their standard units of measurement, for their most basic and beloved commodity — beer — are inexplicable to a human being. Beer comes in glasses, middies, pots, ponies, small beers, beer sixes, sevens, and eights, schooners, handles, and pints. Is that confusing enough for you? Not for Australians. If you want 285 ml of beer, you must ask for a pot in Queensland, and also in Victoria — but if you're in South Australia, what you want is a schooner — and if you're in New South Wales or Western Australia, the same amount is called a middy. If you order a pot in these last two states, it will be not 285 ml but 575, a significant error. So play it safe and ask for a glass, which is 200 ml everywhere except Queensland, where it's 225 ml, and South Australia, where it's a butcher, and New South Wales, where it's a seven. (Seven what? I keep wondering.) It gets worse from there; small wonder that they shout.

I found a simple solution. When the barmaid asks, "And how much would you like, luv?" simply hold your cupped hands apart to indicate the size of the head you'd like to wake up to the next morning, and rely on her experience and judgement.

Following the first rule of interplanetary travel — when in Rome, buy souvenirs — my family and I allowed ourselves to be attached to the tourist-milking machines on three major occasions... and each paid large unexpected dividends.

The first excursion we signed on for was the Kuranda Railway. An engineering feat of stupendous magnitude, it begins at sea level just outside Cairns, and over the span of 46 miles, rises 1073 feet through tropical rain-forest, clinging by its fingertips to the sides of mountains. There are 98 curves, 15 different tunnels blasted through rock, multiple nervous-making bridges across deep chasms, and a panorama of stunning views. It represented five years' backbreaking labor for upwards of 1,500 Irish and Italian workers, many of whose bones are buried along the tracks, and it opened up North Queensland in 1891.

But once you get to the charming 1915 depot and wolf your complimentary scones and tea, Kuranda itself is, in essence, Just Another Tourist Trap, albeit a classy one. I suppose it didn't help that the tropical rain forest was tropically raining. After window-shopping for a while, I was ready to hop back aboard the restored coaches and repeat that magic journey in reverse.

And then Jeanne saw a sign advertising performances by an aboriginal troupe called Tjapukai Dance Theatre. My wife is a former Modern dancer, a gifted choreographer, and was the founder/Artistic Director of Halifax's Nova Dance Theatre, perhaps the finest modern dance company the Canada Council ever failed to support: her ears grew points. Terri and I followed her, and had... there is no other way to say it... our minds blown.

Led by David Hudson, a gifted aboriginal choreographer and musician, the Tjapukai troupe sings, dances, plays the eerily haunting didgeridoo, and discourse on Aboriginal customs, history, and technology. Talk about an alien culture!

Science fiction's greatest editor, John Campbell, used to tell writers, "Write me a critter that thinks *as well* as a human... but not *like* a human." White Australians fulfill this requirement, at least to some extent — but Aborigines, like Ghurkas or Navaho, see the world so differently from any white person or any North American that they might as well be Martians. The Tjapukai did *not* tell us Everything There Was To Know About Abos. What they did was to make us begin to grasp how impossible that would be... and whet our appetites enough to ensure that we would give some study to the subject of abos and their Dreamtime for the rest of our lives.

Indeed, over the days to come we found ourselves sensitized to the plight of abos in white Australia, and saw things we might otherwise have missed. White Australia treats its own native people just slightly *worse* than Canada or America treat their native peoples and blacks. When, as always happens, it was recently discovered that some of the abos' "worthless" reservations were sitting on priceless mineral resources — in this case, uranium — the white establishment went into a convulsion of moral rectitude ending in the decision that it would be immoral to allow mining or sale of uranium in any form for any reason... until they can figure a way to steal the land

back.

Just as here, they are hoping the abo problem will just go away, that the abos will one day be quietly absorbed into the monoculture by osmosis. Just as here, there is dread danger that they are correct. As I watched the Tjapukai dancers demonstrate elegant, brilliantly simple technology and profoundly religious art, the thought that came to me, a science fiction writer, was that we as a species, Terran Technological Man, are in the process of failing our past pop quizzes before the Final Exam in relating to alien cultures. When one day we have finally finished building a homogeneous monoculture, overwhelmed all the different cultures and mindsets and takes on reality with television and industry and commerce... then a *really* alien culture is going to show up, from the stars, fellers to whom *we* will be the abos.

*

Our next tourist outing was the Daintree River Train, a charming string of canopied boats that poots up and down the exotic Daintree River, through rainforest which has been essentially unchanged for something like a hundred million years. It lies over 100 klicks north of Cairns — as far north as you can go in Queensland without a good four-wheel drive — but it's worth the trip. Happily the rain was past and the weather perfect. Unhappily we went up that lazy River on the wrong day and time to see a corroboree by the local aboriginals, the Kuku Yalanji — but in its stead we got an extremely absorbing and educational rainforest walk, guided by a local family. We saw fantastic natural sculptures of mangrove root and other exotic tropical vegetation that reminded me powerfully of the "alien-planet" sets in bad sci-fi movies. And to the delight of all, once we were back on the river, our canny guide managed to provide the other basic attraction of sci-fi movies: a scary monster. In this case, a lizard fourteen feet long, with jaws powerful enough to sink the River Train on a whim which fortunately did not occur to him: a bull crocodile, sunning himself with saurian arrogance perhaps five meters from where I sat, firing my camera like a laser cannon. Only the year before, a lifelong river native named Beryl had gotten a little tight on New Year's Eve, and taken her first — and final — swim in the River. She knew the croc that got her by name.

I enjoyed the River Train, enormously — but I enjoyed a sidetrip on the way home more.

It's not in any of the tourist guidebooks. On our way to Daintree, I'd just happened to notice a sign nailed to a tree: "COFFEE PLANTATION — 5 KM." I love coffee, and had not known any was grown in Australia; I asked the River Train pilot/guide about it. "Oh," he said, grinning and shaking his head, "you mean that mad old bastard Geb. Built himself a bloody castle in the middle o' the bush, he did." Needless to say, I was intrigued.

In a land where madness is greatly respected, Geb Keyserlingck is considered something special. Yes, his home really is a castle, crenellations and turrets and all, smack in the middle of the jungle. He and his family built it themselves when they emigrated from Germany. And spreading uphill behind it for acres and acres is something very like Paradise.

When Geb arrived, he was astounded that the lush land for kilometers around was used to grow a single crop; sugar cane. Vy do you grow only sugar cane he asked. Well, you can't grow nothin' else round here, an' the gummint pays us to grow the sugar, mate, and it's dead easy: we'd be daft to muck around experimentin'. But it seems a shame, Geb said, all zis sugar and no coffee. Oh, but you can't grow that around here, mate.

Today Geb's lovingly tended orchards produce oranges, lemons, limes, plums, cherries, mangos, grapefruits, passionfruits, tangerines, avocados, bananas and kiwis. Scattered around through the orchards are small gardens of herbs and spices. Geb's neighbors try to pretend he doesn't exist.

And around the orchards are acres of coffee trees...

Yes, I know they're technically coffee bushes. These were *trees*. Bursting with red coffee cherries. Arabica coffee, of the rich robust variety called Bourbon. Geb picks his cherries by hand at peak ripeness, disdaining machines. Then he sun-dries them, roasts then in a hundred-year-old antique, and grinds some by hand when you wander back to the castle and order a cup. He watched me take my first sip... and as my face lit up, he began pouring my second cup. He was barely in time.

Geb will have no truck with middlemen; if you want some of his coffee you pretty much have to go to Daintree and buy it from him. I submit that it is almost worth a trip to Australia by itself.

*

The most frustrating thing about our final excursion is that there is no way I will be able to convey to you how much fun it was. I make my living with my imagination, putting feelings into words; I like to think I can visualize a new experience, anticipate things, on the basis of verbal descriptions. I read a lot about it before I left home, and so I thought I had some idea of how much I was going to enjoy snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef.

And it sideswiped me.

So I know there is no way I can convey it to you with words. I can tell you a real, if non-man-eating, shark swam within yards of me... and you yawn. I can tell you that for a measureless time I inhabited a *totally* alien world, a place of fantastic, other-worldly beauty in which even constants like gravity and time were gone... and you check your watch. I can tell you the sea floor was scattered with coral like the shards of shattered rainbows, and that even more richly colored and exotically shaped things *lived* and swam around me, schools of them coming straight at my face like a technicolor exploding galaxy by Kubrick... but it won't mean anything. Words won't do it. Let's just say that if you approach the Barrier Reef expecting the time of your life... you'll fall short by a factor of ten. Is there such a thing as Rapture of the Shallows?

There are several ways to snorkel the Reef, all of them good. The best and most expensive is to hire a private boat to take you out to one of several uninhabited coral atolls, and pick you up at an agreed time. But the cheapest commercial excursion to anyplace in the Outer Reef is very nearly as memorable (Inner Reef excursions are merely terrific). Snorkeling in crystal-

clear, blood-temperature water is not a whole lot different from the kind of flying I do in dreams. Except I don't dream in color that vivid.

*

We did other things, before we blasted off for the long trip back to Earth. We left Queensland altogether for several days, spent a day at Expo in Brisbane — a yawn for anyone from Vancouver, but the Canadian Pavilion was so good it made you happy for once that you'd paid your taxes — and we spent four fascinating and delightful days in Sydney as co-Guests of Honour at the Australian national science fiction convention (called Conviction) at which we had a wonderful time. But even cities as pretty as Brisbane and Sydney are not all that different from cities anywhere: paradoxically I felt less like a space traveller at the sf con that I had anywhere else in Oz. All too soon we were at the airport, and airports are the same anywhere in the known Universe: we resigned ourselves to beginning our return to reality.

And again we got a little dividend. The airline had a schedule glitch, and had to put us up for twelve hours in an airport hotel in Auckland, New Zealand. Unfortunately, those 12 hours were 10 pm to 10 am, so I can't say I've seen New Zealand... but, you want to talk about an alien culture? As God is my witness, from 10 pm to 10 am in Auckland, there is *nothing on television on any channel*.

I hope to return there one day soon.

*

Our transition back to Earth-normal conditions was aided, perhaps inadvertently, by the airline. From Sydney to Hawaii, we were pampered by solicitous Australian attendants who took visible joy and pride in anticipating our vaguest whim; I mean, these people danced like Baryshnikov. But in Hawaii they were replaced by Canadian employees — savage, surly misanthropes who clearly hated their jobs almost as much as they hated us.

This prepared us for Customs and Immigration... and before we knew it, only an hour and a half after the plane touched down —

— Oz was behind us, and we were in Kansas again, Toto. ◊

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IN ZAREPHATH

by Trevor Murphy

illustration by Andrea Baeza

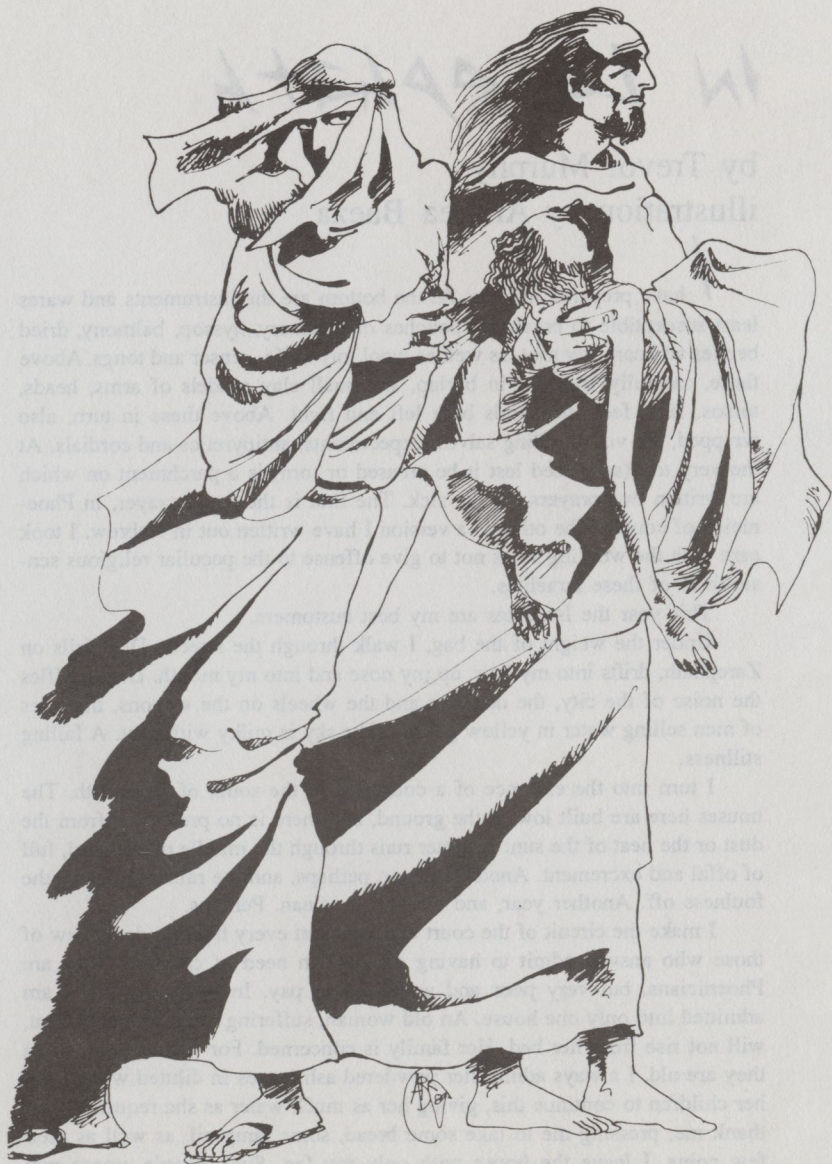
I have prepared my bag. At the bottom are the instruments and wares least susceptible to breakage: pouches of rosemary, hyssop, balmony, dried beetles and comfrey root, as well as wool, my knife, censer and tongs. Above these, carefully wrapped in burlap, are small clay models of arms, heads, torsos, legs, feet and hands both left and right. Above these in turn, also wrapped, are vials holding salves, expectorants, antipyretics and cordials. At the very top (so placed lest it be creased or torn) is a parchment on which are written two prayers for the sick. The first is the usual prayer, in Phoenician of course. The other is a version I have written out in Hebrew. I took care with the wording so as not to give offense to the peculiar religious sensibilities of these Israelites.

This year the Israelites are my best customers.

Under the weight of the bag, I walk through the streets. Dust falls on Zarephath, drifts into my hair, up my nose and into my mouth. Dust muffles the noise of the city, the donkeys and the wheels on the wagons, the cries of men selling water in yellow gourds. The sky is milky with dust. A falling stillness.

I turn into the entrance of a courtyard in the south of Zarephath. The houses here are built low to the ground, and there is no protection from the dust or the heat of the sun. A gutter runs through the middle of the yard, full of offal and excrement. Another winter, perhaps, and the rains will carry the foulness off. Another year, and we will be clean. Perhaps.

I make the circuit of the court and knock at every house's door. Few of those who answer admit to having afflicted in need of comfort. They are Phoenicians, but very poor and unwilling to pay. In this courtyard I am admitted into only one house. An old woman, suffering much from the heat, will not rise from her bed. Her family is concerned. For such a case, when they are old, I always administer powdered ash-leaves in diluted wine. I tell her children to continue this, giving her as much water as she requests: they thank me, pressing me to take some bread, some lamp-oil, as well as their few coins. I leave the house with only my fee. Such people amaze me:



thanking comes very easily to them. They have no consciousness of themselves, no awareness that others may not see things as they do. They never think of how foolish, how eager they must look.

Past the courtyard the street continues on through the city gates. Beyond, it is interrupted by ditches. The flags of the pavement have been torn up and some houses burned. Close to the wall Zarephath continues almost as usual. Houses stand in clusters, intact. A little further on it is mostly ruins. Trees from the hill country invade the houses, streets radiate out into fields of weeds. This is where the herding tribes camp and hold their markets, every autumn trading cattle and wool. This is where most of those who have fled Israel are living now.

I walk up the street, to a high building with broken shutters. Men sit in the doorway and watch me.

I greet them in Hebrew. In the five months since they came here, I have learned much Hebrew: all I need to conduct my transactions. It is a language of prattle.

"Are there afflicted among you?" I ask them.

They chew on their gums, their thin cheeks moving. They say nothing. Their eyes watch me from sunken, discoloured sockets.

"Have you any of the afflicted among you?" They have many afflicted, I know. The drought has followed them from Israel.

"We are all afflicted," one says. They sit proudly, their eyes narrowed. They have no conception of my profession's dignity.

"Yes. You are very unfortunate. I have seen. Is there anyone sick within?"

"All Israel is sick," another man says. "Sick. Do you see this? This," he says, picking up dust from the street, "this is the soil of Israel. Do you see the dust in the sky? It is the soil of Israel. It blows over the mountains and falls in drifts on Sidonia. Israel is sick with idolatry!"

Such men need pity, certainly water, but they will not have my medicine. When the heat steals their wits like this I can do nothing for them. "I came here before. I come to heal your afflicted. Let me within, please."

He will not move. "You cannot heal the idolatry of Israel. Yahweh will heal us, in His time. King Ahab will be humbled!"

"Let me within, please." I step through them, across them, into the doorway. It is cooler here, and the dust is less. I walk down a hall and down a stairway, and behind me the Israelite is still shouting. "Phoenician! They say the Tishbite will humble Ahab and heal Israel! Are you from Tishbe?"

The stairway goes down into a cellar, once the granary. A little dusty light comes in through a window, high up. A family of six lives here in one corner, a girl and her father in the other, in a nest of rugs and barrels. The air is close and smells of sweat and urine. Only when I become accustomed to the darkness do I set my bag down.

They look at me without speaking.

"Now," I say, "I come. With medicine. It will be a long time before I come again; tell of your afflictions now."

They look towards me without looking at me. Their eyes are on the

floor, the ceiling, the stairs behind me.

"Very good. You are all healthy, healthier now than when you left your homes. Such healthy people I have never seen. Goodbye."

As I turn one speaks in a low dry voice. "Please. No."

It is the girl, the one in the east corner. I hear the father speak to her, angrily, too quickly for me to understand. He is, I see now, lying on a filthy rug in the middle of the barrels.

His daughter moves aside and I stand over him. "You. What is hurting you, where?" His forehead is dry against my palm, feverish.

When his daughter sees he will not answer, she says, "It is in his leg. He scratched it on thorns, it does not heal."

I move the robe back from his leg, revealing many long gashes above the knee. The skin of his thigh is marked with angry red streaks.

"It does not heal?" I ask.

"It will heal," he says at last. "It will heal without your help. My daughter looks after it."

These people are talk and talk and more talk. One must know how to take what they say.

"Good. I leave you to the care of your daughter, then. When the leg begins to rot, and your body begins to rot, she can bury you."

"No!" his daughter says. "Please. For two weeks it has not healed. Please do something for it."

"I cannot help the unwilling patient."

"Please?"

"It lies with your father."

"You must . . ."

"What is his will, I do only that."

She looks at him, and speaks rapidly for a long time, more Hebrew jabber. He closes his eyes, covers his face and lets his head drop against the floor. At last he says something, talking too low for me to hear, but in the tone of his voice I understand consent.

"Do you have money enough for my fee?"

His daughter nods.

I will heal him, then. His stupidity needs healing as much as his leg. Kneeling, I pinch the flesh of his calf between my thumb and forefinger. The skin does not resume its shape: it has lost all elasticity. This is an affliction of the drought.

Firstly I take from my bag a small bronzed dish, my censer, and heaping up a pile of balmony on it, I then light it with a spark from my knife and a flint. This is to purify the air: the demons which impede healing cannot stomach the smoke of balmony. I take a clay image of a leg from the bag, thread a thong through the hole in it, tie the thong.

"Put this around your father's neck."

"What is it? Why?"

"A leg; because I told you to do this."

While she does this I read out the prayer from the parchment. Then I

cleanse the wounds with water from a small stoneware bottle from my bag. I cannot afford to use much: I will run out soon. I spread salve over his thigh, and he shakes when my hand touches the torn skin. Lastly I bind the leg with wool, and it is done.

"How is that?" I ask him.

He waits for a moment. "Better. I do not feel the breaks in the skin."

"Keep the talisman around his neck until the leg heals," I tell the daughter.

"Thank you," she says. "It is so good of you . . . we have few to help us."

Ridiculous. It is so good of you! If I am not careful, she will want to touch me. She finds all this easy — she tells me her father is sick, she pays me to treat him, and now we are all friends! These people, they have no pride.

"Well. I am glad he gave up his stubbornness. Now, please, my fee."

From under the rugs and blankets she brings forth a leather purse, counts out this Israelite money of hers.

*

The afternoon I spend inside that house and others, searching from room to room, listening to more prattle. There are many afflicted. They recognize the dignity of my profession, at least. No other healers come here, because of the poverty of the Israelites. So this is my reward: I help them in their sickness and they give me their thanks. They think that if it means something to them it means something to me.

In the darkness of this narrow street I feel a plucking at my sleeve.

"Healer? You are the healer?" It is a Phoenician woman, old, dressed in black.

"I am. You are afflicted?"

"Come — it is my son. Come quickly."

She leads me down the streets, further out among the ruined houses. We come to a lean high building flanked by charred wooden skeletons.

"Here," she says. "Come quickly."

She takes me inside, up stairs and through dark corridors. The dust is bad here. It fills corners and lies in the angles between wall and floor. Somewhere near the top of the house she leads me into a room lit by a single oil-lamp. A few men stand around a bed, one kneeling to hold the shoulders of the boy who lies upon it. He is twelve, perhaps thirteen. His eyes are protuberant, fixed on the ceiling; he coughs, and his chest shakes with the strength needed for every ragged breath.

One of the men turns to the boy's mother. "Where is the Tishbite?" he asks in Hebrew.

"I could not find him." Speaking to me in Phoenician, she says, "This has come on him before, but it has never seized him so badly!"

The men (Israelites, lodgers, I suppose, in the house) turn to me, their mouths tight. The child's skin is hot to my touch, and his pillow and a towel beside the bed are streaked with bloody phlegm.

"It is an affliction of the lungs," I say. "The demon takes them in the

winter, often then, but it takes them also if they are weakened by drought." I choose a vial from my bag. To one of the men, I say "Take his nose and hold the nostrils closed."

"But he cannot breathe!"

"When he takes this, then he will breathe through his mouth."

I know this man's mind. Like all of them, he is reluctant, but even more he fears acting on his own thoughts. The boy could die, and he does not want to have to answer for that. They have no courage, these people. He takes the boy's nose between his thumb and forefinger.

I uncork the vial with my teeth, holding the boy's tongue aside with one hand, and pour the medicine in with the other. He shakes again with the effort of breathing, and swallows; I nod, and the man lets go of his nose. There is quiet for a moment. The boy closes his eyes, opens them again, takes a long breath. Then he coughs convulsively, spews mucus and blood and medicine into my hands.

I will not have this.

"Leave." I say. "All of you. Leave the room, now." I dig into my bag again, spilling out its contents in my haste, searching. Behind me I hear them shuffle in the doorway. They cannot bring themselves to keep from watching.

At last I find the censer, the knife, the flint, hyssop and a clay image: I must lay them out in a line on the floor to make sure I have them all. The child is coughing, his shoulders trembling, his head jerking into the pillow, but I cannot work while his mother and the lodgers are watching from the doorway. I shut the door, find a thong, hold the boy's head off the pillow and tie the likeness of a man's chest around his neck. Now I must burn the hyssop, for relief of the lungs. I heap the hyssop on the censer and strike flint to the knife. There is no spark. I strike again and again, and harder and harder and the knife slips and cuts my thumb. I keep striking, and the boy twists with coughing and my hands tremble. I force them to be steady, to hold flint and metal steady, and with my hands like two dead things I strike. And now there is a spark. At last. I throw my knife to one side. The dry hyssop smoulders, and I blow gently, and it catches fire. Smoke pushes itself up across the air.

The door swings open and slams against the wall. The boy's mother and one of the lodgers and men I have not seen before tumble in; the men rush to the bed; the Phoenician woman stops above me and stares down.

"What are you doing? What are you doing?" Her voice is high and hoarse and water trickles down her face from the corners of her eyes.

"Don't worry," one of the men says. He takes her by the elbow. "Don't worry about him now: the Tishbite is below." He is leading her to the bed when I cut them off.

"Get out!" I cry. "Get out! Do you suppose I can work like this if you are running in and out? Go!" I force them out, and the doorway and the hall are filled with people, watching me. I shut the door again. It comes to me that I have treated some of those people.

The room is full of the sharp smell and the smoke of hyssop. It hangs from the ceiling down to the level of the sickbed, and still the boy is coughing. He has not ceased since I gave him the medicine. I find the parchment in my bag, start reading the prayer in Hebrew before I remember he probably does not understand that, and start reading it out in Phoenician before I realize that it probably does not matter. The boy is twisted on his side, one arm hanging to the floor, coughing faintly into the sheets. His eyes are open and a thread of saliva links the corner of his mouth to the pillow. I go to the bed and watch him as he dies, and once I thump him on the back, between the shoulderblades, but it does not matter.

He dies.

I am left sitting on the bed with him, wondering when the door will open and his mother and the lodgers and the people I have treated will come in and see me sitting on the bed with him. Perhaps it will not open. Perhaps.

When it opens they gather round the bed, filling nearly all the room. With the exception of his mother they look not at the boy but at me, women and men looking at me with wide flat open eyes. They are surprised to see me; they look at me as if I had promised to make it rain for them.

I wish I had my knife with me.

His mother is alone with him, cut off from everyone else in the room. She takes her fingers and runs them over the bones of his skull, through his hair, catching the curls between her fingers. She takes his head in her hands and holds him there, up against her breast, talking to herself. I am sitting on the bed behind her. I could put out my arm and touch her hand. If I dared. We sit there on the bed for a long time, the three of us. Then a man shoulders his way through the crowd at the bedside, and she lets the boy drop.

She turns around. Her eyes close and her face tightens. She turns to the man and says:

"What do you have against me, man of God? What do you have against me to bring my sin to remembrance and cause the death of my son?"

He is very tall, a tall man like a carrion bird with bristling eyebrows and a haircloth cloak. "Give me your son," he says to her. Whispers run around the room, from mouth to ear to mouth. They recognize him. The Tishbite. Elijah.

He takes the body up from beside me and the child looks empty and small, folded in those old strong arms. The boy's calves and his head dangle unsupported and the old man takes him up and through the door and up the stairs. The crowd parts for his going and follows behind, leaving me on the bed, the boy's mother hunched against the wall. I fear to see what is going on above, but I am more afraid of being in this room when the Tishbite returns.

At the top of the stairs is a high dark room, and over the heads of the people gathered there I have a glimpse of a bed, the Tishbite and the boy. The boy is on the bed and the Tishbite crouches over him, straddling him, stretching himself over the body and covering it. In the darkness the two are one dark mass. Twice more the Tishbite measures himself along the length

of the corpse, and then rising to his knees he cries "Yahweh! Yahweh my God! Let this child's soul come into him again!"

And in the darkness the child stirs.

*

Now they are below, and now and then I can hear the sound of the mother's weeping and the boy's weeping over the shouting of the crowd. "All praise to the Tishbite!" they shout, "All praise to Elijah!" Now I, the last, begin the long descent. On the landing I move through them, among them, wishing that at least, as I pass unnoticed, some might turn to me and call out curses on my name. ◇

Silver Sisters

by Jena Snyder

Silver sisters on the bank
warming their little selves
little elves
innocents like you
caught in the wrong place at the wrong time
born to stupid girls without the wits to keep their knees closed
their lovers' promises
tight

Those same promises turned secrets
are hidden away in far-off villages
under the stern and watchful eye of some great-aunt
And the secrets
find a home in the river
bagged like unwanted puppies
Yes, very like.
No kiss of holy water
no absolution,
the little secrets quietly sink,
helped by the stones that are tucked in the bag

Similar sisters' nimble fingers untie the cords
loose the new ones with watery cries
Join us! Join us!

And up the muddy bank the silver ones scramble,
clambering, giggling,
Silver sisters like little fishes
cold as river water

The silver sisters wait on the sand
hoping new friends will come
sweet, silly-faced innocents
like you
Come to the river to weep over promises not kept
Come to the river to wait in vain
for a liar who will never come

J*oin us! Join us!*
Fishy voices cry out with glee shrill as heartbreak
sharp as lies
Round and round on wet baby feet they'll dance you
Join us! Join us!

round and whirling and stumbling and round and round
to your knees in the mud and up again
on tripping feet round and round till the water closes over
and the silver sisters take you down to their home

And in the morning only trampled lilies will be found
and a hundred footprints in the drying mud ◇

ALBERTA RE/BOUND, to be edited by Aritha van Herk and published by NeWest Press, asks all Alberta fiction writers to submit their **best** contemporary short stories (up to 2) for consideration. **Deadline Dec. 1/89**. Stories can have been previously published in magazines, but not books. Payment: yet to be determined. Include SASE and bio. Contact: Aritha van Herk, Department of English, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB T2N 1N4.

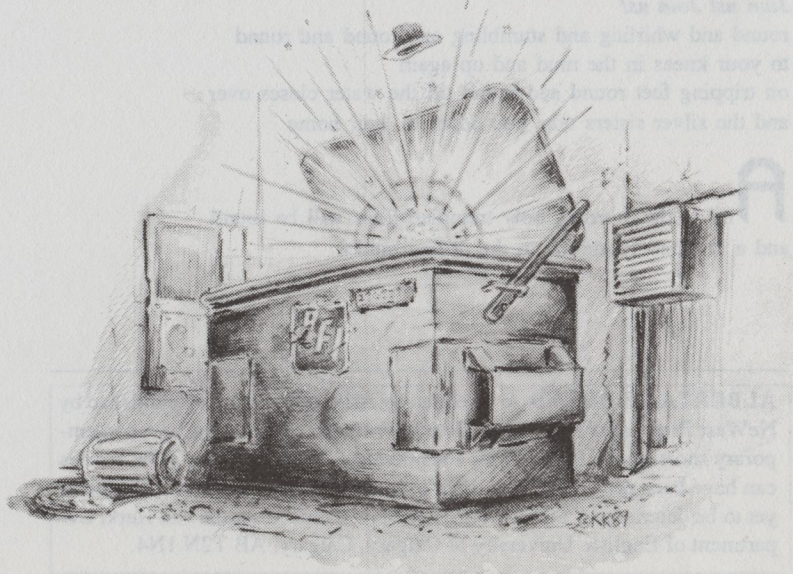
Wagner's Magic

by E.C. Bell

illustration by Kevin Kurytnik

Wagner J. Gump told me he was out behind Mario's, down by the dock, when he found it. The wand, I mean. He'd been eating back there when the wand fell in the dumpster and nearly hit him on the head.

"People throwin' junk in here, wreck a man's dinner!" he yelled. His gout was acting up again, so he was kind of cranky. Now, he knows all that rich food from Mario's makes his feet act up, but he just can't seem to stay away from it. Anyhow, he dug around, just to see what it was, buried in the old pasta and meat sauce. Kinda twinkled, you know. Like a bottle or



something.

Maybe there's a drink left in the bottom, Wagner thought, *cause I could sure use a drink about now!* But it wasn't a bottle, half full or otherwise. Wagner turned it over in his hands a couple of times. He didn't really know what it was.

A stick with twinkly bits on one end. "Looks like a god-damned toy," he grunted. "Somebody tried to kill me by hitting me over the head with a toy." He waved it around a bit, to get the strands of spaghetti off it. Sparks flew like tiny bolts of lightning.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Wagner yelled, and threw the thing to the other side of the dumpster. It lay among the rotting lettuce leaves and twinkled at him.

Wagner picked up a couple of meatballs and stuffed them into his coat for later. He kept his eyes on the stick all the while, but it did nothing more, just sat and sparkled at him.

Hesitantly, he put his hand out to it again. Touched it. Nothing happened. Picked it up. Still nothing.

"Batteries must be wearing down," he murmured, and brushed a little garbage off the stick. He was surprised by the smooth feel of it. *Must be metal,* he thought, *but it's warm.* It lay in his hand, almost pulsing with a life of its own.

"Maybe I can get somethin' for it," he whispered. Carefully, carefully, he opened his coat and put the stick inside. A wave of sparks flew from it, enveloping his head in a halo of blue-white light. But it didn't hurt, just gave him a sort of a warm prickly feeling, like the whisker rub you get when you kiss your dad. Something like that. Anyhow, he wasn't scared anymore. Just closed his coat over the stick, and felt it warm him, warmer than he'd been since summer went away.

He climbed out of the dumpster, trying to land without hurting his feet. It didn't work, and he leaned over his knees for a minute, trying to get the breath back that the pain had driven away. Then he hobbled down the back alley, toward the tracks. Big white snowflakes had started to fall, covering his battered hat and shoulders like heavy white icing, so that soon he looked like a gingerbread man. Ha, that's kinda funny, but it'd be more like a gingerbread bum. Anyhow, on his way to the tracks, he passed Ricardo and Monty, who were huddled by the side door of the Bargain Basement Store.

Maybe they'll buy this thing, Wagner thought, even though he was kinda getting used to the warmth of it. He shuffled over to them, and tapped Ricardo on the arm. You know, just to get his attention. Well, Ricardo acted like Wagner had burnt him — or given him some kind of disease.

"Christ!" he yelled, and pushed Wagner away from him, "get your roach-infested body away from me, old man!" Wagner fell back on the snow-covered ground, and rolled around for a minute, like a turtle on his back. Sometimes that happens when you wear lots of clothes. Anyhow, he got right side up again, and pulled himself to his aching feet, hanging onto the wall for dear life.

"Now, don't go touchin' Ricardo, man," Monty said. Monty was

Ricardo's right hand man. "Just stand over there," and he pointed across the alley, "and talk. Maybe Ricardo will listen and maybe he won't." Ricardo laughed out loud, but Wagner did what he was told. The kid was miserable, but he usually had money.

"I got this thing here, Ricardo," said Wagner, shuffling from one foot to the other, "and I wondered if maybe you'd like to buy it." He pulled open his coat and took out the stick. The sparkly end twinkled softly in the mud-coloured streetlight.

Ricardo turned around and looked at the thing Wagner held out with a trembling hand. "What the hell is it?" he finally asked.

"I dunno," Wagner shrugged. "Found it in the dumpster down by Mario's, you know, where I eat, and..."

"I don't want to hear about it, old man. Just tell me what it's good for." Wagner shrugged again.

"I dunno that, either. Looks kinda pretty, though, don't it?" He held it out a little further, and a spark or two zapped from it. Ricardo and Monty both jumped back, hitting a dumpster and causing quite a bit of racket.

"Looks like it's got a short, Ricardo," Monty said hesitantly. He always spoke hesitantly around Ricardo. Bad temper.

"I know what it looks like, man!" Ricardo cried, and flipped out a real ugly-looking switchblade. "It looks to me like that old man was tryin' to cook us with that thing, and then rip us off." He took a step toward Wagner, waving the wicked blade in his face.

Now, I figure Ricardo was just mad because Wagner made him look scared. I mean, kids Ricardo's age don't like to look weak, right? Especially not out here. Looking weak can kill ya. But Wagner didn't really have the time to sit down and work the whole thing out for himself, so he did the smartest thing he could've done. He ran away.

"Let's help the old man on his way, Monty!" Ricardo yelled, running carefully on the icy pavement. Monty didn't say anything, just puffed along behind him. Monty's a fat kid, running's not really his style. But it is Ricardo's style. He's as fast as the wind, and it scared Wagner something fierce hearing that kid moving up behind him like some kinda jungle cat. So he tried to speed up. Bad mistake.

He hit a patch of ice, and fell flat on his face. "We got him now!" he heard Ricardo snarl, and so he just curled up into a ball, and waited for the beating to begin. Until he remembered the knife.

"Sweet Jesus," he grunted, "that kid's gonna kill me! He'll kill me!" He tried to pull himself up, but his boots kept slipping on the ice, so he was kinda stuck on his hands and knees. The wand lay in the snow beneath him, and he picked it up and clenched it in one hand.

"Why won't they just go away?" he groaned, then scabbled around so he was facing the running pair. "Please leave me alone!" he cried, but Ricardo just laughed, and slid to a stop beside him.

"Too bad, old man!" he gasped through clenched teeth. "Today is just not going to be your day!" He kicked Wagner over, and Wagner curled back

into a ball, the shiny end of the wand right by his face.

"I wish you'd both go away," he moaned.

The screaming white light from the twinkly end of the wand nearly blinded him. The light flashed away from Wagner, and jig-jagged toward Ricardo and Monty. Wagner closed his eyes for a second, against the light, then opened them, and wiped the tears away before they froze to his face. Monty and Ricardo were gone. He was completely alone in the windswept alley.

Wagner crawled off the patch of ice, and hauled himself up, hand over hand, on the side of the Sally Ann. Then he carefully checked behind, and in, the nearest dumpster to make sure the boys were really gone. Then he looked down at the wand in his hand.

"You ain't a toy, are ya?" he asked it, but it just sat there. "So then, what the hell are ya?" He got no answer, so Wagner tried to think. Hard for him, though. Too many years seeing life through a Three Feathers bottle. But he tried. Finally he nodded and smiled a little. "I know what you look like. You look like somethin' my ma used to read to me about. Some story, what was it? Don't remember now, but you look like the wand the old broad had in the story. Some kind of relative, wasn't she? I dunno." He carefully put the wand back into his coat, and felt the warmth spread out through his chest.

He picked his way back down the alley, trying to keep out of the bigger snow piles. Snow in his boots really made his gout act up. He licked his dry, cold-pinchd lips. "I sure could use a drink." Then he thought of the wand hidden in his coat.

"Hell," he whispered, "maybe it'll work." He pulled the wand back out of his coat, after looking around to make sure no one saw him with his prize.

"OK wand," he said "I'm awful thirsty, so if you'd be so kind as to supply me with a bottle of Three Feathers, I'd be mighty beholden." Nothing happened. No whoosh, no blue-white light, nothing. Wagner shook the wand a bit, but still nothing. So he sat down to think again. Big night for Wagner, thinking things through twice. But he did it.

"I forgot to say I wish," he whispered, laughing a little under his breath. "That was the problem." So he held up the wand again. "I wish I had a bottle of Three Feathers." Nothing. "Aw, come on, wand, gimme a bottle of Three Feathers." And he shook it again, kinda hard this time. Not even a spark from the twinkly end. "Ah, hell!" Wagner said, and for a moment he felt like crying. "I musta broke it."

But as he put it back into his coat, he was relieved to feel the warmth at his chest again. "Maybe there's just a trick I don't know," he murmured to himself. "Maybe Fred can help me."

As he turned the corner, and passed by the front windows of the Bargain Basement, he looked in, and was kinda surprised to see Ricardo and Monty sitting next to the fake Santa, looking real confused. They noticed him, and starting moving their mouths real fast, like they were trying to speak to him, only Wagner couldn't hear them through the glass.

He smiled a little, and pressed on the front of his coat, just to feel the

warmth of the wand.

"Fred's gotta see this," he whispered, and tottered on aching feet toward the railroad tracks. To find me.

*

We were all down at a good protected spot by the tracks — you can have a little fire and nobody bothers you much. Me and Horace Myers were on one side of the fire, and Ramblin' Jack was on the other. He'd just come in from picking bottles on the highway, and was whining about how much his leg ached. Which was kind of a laugh, since he doesn't even have it anymore. Anyhow, he was the one saw Wagner walking up to us kinda fast. Purposeful, almost.

"Got a bottle, Wagner?" he yelled. Now he always yells that when somebody comes, just the same as we do to him, when he comes up. Kind of funny the way Wagner acted, though. He stopped stock still, and his mouth worked for a while, like he was trying to say something, but it wouldn't come out.

"Musta drunk it all before he got here," Horace Myers rasped. He's always been kinda moody, Horace has, but it's gotten pretty bad since he took to wearing his underwear outside his pants. Says it keeps him warm, but I just can't believe that. Anyhow, I just told him to shut up and wait for Wagner to collect his thoughts. After a minute Wagner did just that.

"I got something to show you guys, you're not gonna believe it," he said, kinda jiggling back and forth, like he was real excited.

"So you didn't bring a bottle," said Ramblin' Jack flatly. He was kinda put out, but Wagner ignored him. He opened his coat carefully, and pulled out the wand. We all stared at it for a moment. We really couldn't see what Wagner was so excited about.

"Looks like a toy to me, Wagner," I said. He smiled kind of foolishly, the grin plastered all over his face.

"I thought so, too, at first," he said, looking around quickly, like he was trying to make sure nobody had snuck up on him in the dark. "But then I got this thing to work, and I figure —"

"You what?" Horace yelled. "You got it to work? What kinda work a toy gonna do, Wagner? Huh?" But Wagner ignored him. Concentrated on me. Guess he figured I'd give him a listen anyhow. So I did. What the hell, I was comfortable, and the fire was warm. He told me his story.

"...and you shoulda seen that little bastard Ricardo cryin' and carrying on in the window! It was wunnerful!" Wagner wheezed his story to a finish, then pointed the wand at me. "But I think I broke it, cause I asked it for a bottle and it never did nuthin'."

Well, I have to tell the truth. I was gonna laugh, but Ramblin' Jack beat me to it.

"Christ, Wagner," he guffawed, hauling himself up onto his crutches, "Now I know why you didn't bring a bottle back. Drank it all, now yer seein' things!" He trundled over to Wagner, laughing all the while. "Crazy old Wagner!" he shouted, "Now he thinks he's magic!" We all laughed for a

while, until Wagner shook the wand at us. It sparked out its blue-white light, and that shut us up some. Got our attention, if you know what I mean. Wagner looked quite pleased.

"Well, what do you know," he whispered. "Maybe this thing just needed time to recharge or somethin'." He held the wand before him, the twinkly bits on the business end vibrating just a little. "OK now, jist watch this," he said, and pulled himself up to his full height. Which isn't much.

"I wish," Wagner said in a loud, sort of commanding voice, "I wish Ramblin' Jack had a bottle of Three Feathers."

The blue-white bolt flashed from the wand, knocking Wagner over and scaring the hell outta the rest of us. It whizzed around us all, circling Horace, then me, and finally settling on Ramblin' Jack. It flew around him three times, as if trying to figure out the best place to settle, then decided on his pocket. White light streamed from within the pocket for a moment, then sort of fizzled out.

We all, especially Ramblin' Jack, sat and stared at his pocket. Jack looked like he wished the pocket wasn't attached to his coat anymore.

"Go ahead," Wagner said after he picked himself up again. "Look in your pocket."

"Like hell I will!" Ramblin' Jack shouted, trying not to touch his own coat as he leaped up and scabbled away from Wagner. "Yer tryin' to kill me, ain't ya?" As he moved, we could all hear a gurgling and chiming from way down deep in his pocket. All of us except Jack himself. He was just too scared.

"No — no, Jack!" Wagner cried, a horrified look on his face. "I'd never hurt you, you know that! Yer my buddy!" But Ramblin' Jack waved at him with one crutch and tried to balance on the other. He managed, barely.

"You just get away from me, putting firecrackers in my pockets, trying to set an old bum on fire, what kind of a friend are you?" And he yelled and yelled, and his pocket clinked and gurgled until I finally piped up.

"Don't sound like no firecracker in your pocket to me, Jack. Sounds to me like maybe you gotta little hunk o' heaven in there."

Jack stopped dancing around, and stopped waving his crutch at Wagner, and just listened. Of course he heard nothing for a minute, but when he took a little step sideways, he finally heard what we'd all been hearing. He plunged his hand into his pocket, and came up with our form of mother's milk, lovingly wrapped in glass.

Horace was the first to break the silence.

"That was some trick, Wagner," he said sourly, as he pulled the bottle from Jack's loose grip and tipped it up, draining away a quarter of it. He wiped his mouth on his dirt-stiffened sleeve. "Didn't think ya had it in ya, to make a good trick like that on yer friends. Ha, ha, got a good laugh on us." He handed the bottle back to Jack and turned away.

Jack just stared at Wagner for a long time, the bottle hanging loose in his hand. He pulled the bottle up to his mouth and took a big swig of it. Then

he said, "Yeah, yeah, good joke, Wagner," and gave the bottle to me. He went over to the other side of the fire and sat down, letting his crutches go with a crash, and settled down with his eyes closed. Tight.

"Don't think he was that impressed with yer joke, Wag," I said. "Maybe ya shoulda given him the bottle first." Wagner's mouth worked, and his eyes filled up with angry tears.

"Even you?" he squeaked, snuffling mightily and wiping his nose on his arm. "You don't even believe me?" Then he kinda cried, a little. "Aww, Fred, even you!" He carefully put the wand back in his coat, and shuffled away from us. Every once in a while I could hear him say, "Aww, Fred, even you," but it got harder and harder to hear. Then he turned a corner, and was gone.

*

He told me later that he walked for a while, until his feet ached something fierce. Then he sat down at the end of a bus stop bench, watching the snow and newspapers at his feet, and waiting for the pain to let up some.

"They didn't believe me," he whispered. "None of them believed me." A lady that was perched at the other end of the bench looked at him kind of funny, covering her mouth with her scarf, like she'd all of a sudden smelled something bad. Wagner reached into his coat, and pulled out the wand, and the lady kinda gasped. Wagner turned to her, and smiled his best smile, really trying hard to seem sociable.

"Want me ta grant you a wish, lady?" he rasped, waving the wand in her direction. The lady squealed as the blue-white sparks zapped out from it, and skittered away as fast as she could. Wagner shook his head and sighed.

"This ain't gonna be easy at all." He pulled himself up and hobbled down the street, the wand dangling from his hand and occasionally sending off little sparks as it rubbed against his long coat.

*

By the time Wagner reached the warehouse, it was getting dark and he had nearly given up. No one wanted to have a wish, as far as he could tell. He'd tried everyone he'd met, and the only one who had even noticed him had been the old lady with the shopping bags, and she had just screamed for the police. So, when Wagner saw the kid slouched down on the doorstep, he'd been tempted to just walk on by. But he'd stopped, more out of force of habit than anything else.

"Wanna wish, kid?" But the kid didn't even look up. He just sat there and stared at his boots. The snow had clung to the black curls around his face and to his long eyelashes until he looked like he was all decked out in diamonds.

Wagner brightened a little. At least this one hadn't screamed for the police. "What's the matter, kid?" he asked, shuffling a little closer.

"I dunno," the kid said, then looked up, the streetlight sparkling through his diamond mask. When he saw Wagner standing in front of him, he grimaced, and the mask fell away in an almost musical tinkle. "Great," the kid breathed, "just what I needed. A bum."

"Hey, kid, maybe I can help," Wagner said, jiggling around a little. He was getting kind of excited. Maybe he'd be able to grant somebody a wish after all.

"I don't think so," the kid said, "unless you can help me get outta here." Wagner nearly jumped up and down with excitement, in spite of his poor feet.

"I can do dat, kid, I can get ya anywhere you wanna go!" he cried joyously, clumps of snow flying from his head and shoulders. "I can do it, just like that!" And he tried to snap his fingers, but it didn't work so good with gloves on. Even if the fingers are more gone than not. The kid just stared at Wagner capering around in the snow like an old fool, then he sighed, kinda heavy.

"Right now I'm so cold and wet, I just want to go home," he said, more to himself than to Wagner. "But I have —"

"I can get you home!" Wagner shouted, almost beside himself. He held up the wand and screeched, "I wish dis kid here was home!"

The blue-white light flashed from the wand and circled the kid three times, almost lazily. The kid's eyes were so wide, Wagner could see the white all the way around them. But as the lightning picked the kid up and carefully carried him to the top of the warehouse, the kid found his voice, frantically. Hysterically.

"I don't wanna go home, mister, please let me down! I can't go home, I got an audition, it's my big chance! It could change my life!" The blue-white light shot off across the city. The last thing Wagner heard the kid scream was "I DON'T WANT TO GO HOOOOOME!"

Wagner watched the light zigzag across the sky, then plummet down somewhere on the other side of town. He realized he had been holding his breath, and let it out, gustily.

"You work mighty fine," he whispered to the wand, and prepared to put it back in his coat.

"Don't you *no*ve!" The voice bellowed and bounced between the low warehouse and the building on the other side of the street. Wagner froze, but felt a sob escape. He was sure it was Monty and Ricardo. They'd gotten out of the window, they were going to take the wand, and probably beat the hell out of him, just when he finally figured out how to use the thing. That really made him mad.

"If they think they're gonna get you without a fight, they're crazy," he whispered to the wand. "Wand, I wish they were in the river. Yeah, that's it. The river. Freezin' cold at this time of year. Yep, I wish they was all in the river." Nothing happened. The wand just sparked gently. "Aww, come on, wand, I said 'I wish' and everything!" Wagner said frantically. "I'm gonna get my head kicked in! Please, please send 'em to the river!" Still nothing. Shit, Wagner thought, and held the wand like a club. He turned around to face them.

The lady stood about four feet behind him. Her grey wispy hair was standing out wildly around her head, as though she had been caught in a

wind storm. Under her huge winter coat, Wagner could see a fancy ball dress, all diamonds and lace, and billowing out everywhere, like the surf on the sea. When she moved, two little bells on her shoes twinkled merrily. Wagner just stood and stared, the wand still clenched in his upraised fist.

"It won't work on me, you know," the lady said, pointing to the wand. "It's mine, it just can't backfire like that. Sort of a built-in safety catch." She laughed a little, and shook her head. "You are certainly a hard man to catch up with. I've been looking for you the better part of this evening."

"What the hell are you?" Wagner squeaked, slowly lowering his hand. The lady smiled.

"Why I'm the owner of the wand, of course." She pointed at Wagner's wand, and he hastily hid it behind his back. He could feel the warmth of it through his coat.

"So how do I know that?" Wagner shrilled. "Maybe you just wanna steal this thing here," and he shook the wand a little, causing sparks to fly around him in an aura. "Maybe you just wanna rob an old bum!"

The lady tapped her foot impatiently. "You have to give me the wand back, sir! I am so behind on my schedule, I may never get caught back up. If I hadn't been stupid enough to drop it down by the docks, I'd be —" But Wagner held up his hand, silencing her.

"You dropped it down by the docks," he said, sadly.

"Yes, yes I did," she answered. "By a restaurant, I believe."

"And it won't work against you, will it!"

"You know that, sir. You already tried." Wagner's face sagged, like all the bones had moved down an inch or two.

"Well, I guess this is your wand after all," he whispered, and pulled the wand from behind his back. "I'm an honest man, y'know," he said, and handed the wand to her.

She smiled. "I know you are." She took the wand, and cradled it in her arms. "Thank you, sir. You don't know the trouble I could've gotten into, if I hadn't found this. Thank goodness I saw the spell stream..." And she pointed up to the black sky. Wagner noticed the glistening light still hanging in the sky.

"That's the guy I wished home," he said softly. The lady looked a little surprised.

"You managed to transport a human?"

"Yeah, the only thing is, I don't really think the kid wanted to go home, exactly."

"Sometimes it's hard to know exactly what they do want," the lady laughed gently, and patted Wagner on the back. Snow flew everywhere. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"OK."

"Did you give anyone else wishes?" the lady asked. "I need to know, for inventory purposes."

Wagner shrugged, looking a little sad. "I tried, but people weren't real interested, know what I mean?"

"Yes," she said, "I know exactly what you mean." Wagner and the lady both sighed. "Ever since Cinderella, nobody believes much anymore. But we keep trying."

Wagner grinned. Cinderella. That was the story. "So," he said, "You're the broad with the wand in that story, right?"

"A fairy godmother," the lady laughed. "I am one of them, yes."

"Well, I'm real pleased ta meet ya," Wagner said. He waved once, more to the wand than the lady, and turned to leave. The fairy godmother called him back.

"Before you go, I owe you something for returning my wand to me. How would you like a wish? I'm not your regular godmother, you understand, but it'll be all right, just this once."

"You mean, I got a regular fairy godmother?"

"Certainly. Everyone has one."

"How come I never saw her?"

"Maybe she thinks you are doing well enough on your own." Wagner kind of laughed, and looked down at his worn boots, sole nearly off the right, and his more-gone-than-there gloves.

"I think maybe my fairy godmother's behind in her schedule, too." The lady smiled and nodded sympathetically.

"You may be right, sir. But now, what is your wish?"

Wagner stood for a long time and thought. The snow seeped into his boots, and around the openings in his clothes. Finally he came to a decision.

"I know what I want, more than anything else," he said. "I wish, more than anything else, I wish .."

*

Now, I wish I could tell you Wagner wished for world peace, or an end to all diseases, or something noble like that, but it just ain't so. You know it, and I know it. And I wish I could tell you he wished for a house and warmth and a family and all that, but he didn't. In fact, those kind of things sort of drove him to where he is now, if you know what I mean.

No, Wagner really only had one thing on his mind when he was standing there with the snow drifting in the holes in his boots. He was thinking about his gout. So he wished it would go away. And it did.

The fairy godmother threw in another bottle of Three Feathers, 'cause Wagner was so honest.

Now, I wish you coulda seen Wagner dancing up to me like a man half his age, smiling and waving the full bottle in my face. It was a sight, believe me.

And that sort of brings me to the reason why I finally believed Wagner enough to tell you this story. It wasn't him dancing like that, although that would have been a pretty good reason, I guess. No, it was because he came back and shared that second bottle with me.

Now, believe me when I tell you, Wagner J. Gump never managed to get two bottles of Three Feathers in one night before. So, he musta got it from a fairy godmother. If not her, then something damned close. At least, that's what I think. Hey, but why believe me? I'm only a bum, right? ◇

Gobi, Childhood Moon

by Tor Åge Bringsvæld
translated by James Manis

For many and various reasons, in Anglophone Canada it is difficult to gain access to speculative fiction written in the non-English speaking parts of the world. A mild case of the "Us Romans/You Barbarians" syndrome? In the hopes of furthering international exchange and mutual appreciation, On Spec will occasionally publish stories from authors outside of Canada. In this issue we present a brief excerpt from Gobi, Childhood Moon, a fantasy novel by Norwegian Tor Åge Bringsvæld. The book will be released in translation in the spring of 1990 by Reidmore Books.

I was a child.

I knew only that the Earth was a vale of tears, harried by hunger, war and pestilence.

I knew the signs were everywhere to be seen. That comets flew like dragons across the heavens. That the dead arose from the churchyards. That people were born with the heads of swine, and that it rained frogs in Hamburg.

The year was 1212 AD.

I knew that we were living in the final days.

But I had a happy childhood, do not misunderstand me. I've seen children — in other places — play hide-and-go-seek among rotting corpses. I've seen them — half dead from hunger — toss their marbles against walls that had once surrounded homes, and were now only smouldering ruins. I've seen apathetic little faces brighten up like stars in the night sky at the telling of some old tale, or a couple of clownish grimaces.

I've often performed for children. They are so easily captivated. I've heard my fellow actors say that children are the most demanding audience one can play to. My experience has been just the opposite. They are easily seduced. An exciting chase, a few cheap tricks, and they sit like moths around a flame. Are children not easily deluded?

I had a happy childhood. I must have done. I must have had a happy childhood, for children are the very devil at seeing the bright side of things. In relation to body-size, they have more blood than adults. It's warm and flowing, and consists mostly of fire and water. It makes them more vital and

optimistic than the rest of us. Amidst all the misery.

*

The great crusades lay behind us. Three in number. Filled with the radiance of great deeds. Small anecdotes grew, became fairy tales and great legends. Each year new verses were added to the old lays. But it all seemed so long ago. Where were such noble knights to be found in our day? For we had all heard of a fourth crusade — they began as soldiers of Christ, and ended up bandits, who sacked Byzantium the year I was born. The common people were scandalized and ashamed. Were the noble heroes all dead? We prayed to God for a deliverer.

Nor had Pope Innocence III given up hope of a new crusade, the final one — one that would clear the way for our Lord once and for all. All that summer he urged penance, vigils and holy processions. The Jews were driven like dogs from town to town. Once again heretics fueled the fires.

Even a child must be gripped by it.

You heard the flute?

I heard the flute — and followed it.

Not one, but many. A swarm of rat charmers swept over the land. And all of them pointed to Cologne.

Those of us who lived close by were accustomed to hearing tell of all manner of glorious wonders in this city. Cologne... in my day... was the largest city in the Holy Roman Empire. Nearly 40,000 souls dwelled within her walls. And in all of Christendom, only Rome could offer pilgrims more distinguished relics. And yet...

You ran off before anyone could stop you?

I had only one thought in my mind. I had to hear more... had to see with my own eyes. I crept aboard a river barge, hid myself behind heavy wooden crates. My heart was beating like a drum roll. If the beginning of the end was taking form just a few miles away, then I wanted to be there... I who had always stood outside... I wanted to be included. For this time it was the little ones who were being called upon. Not the great and the mighty, but those whom the world had cowed and oppressed. They were crying out for us!

And the one who summoned you was himself a child?

Only two years older than I.

He was called Nicholas?

Like myself, he came from one of the small villages along the Rhine.

He was just a common goatherd, they said?

But now God had called him to be a shepherd of men. His message was a simple one. Thus it was worded: *Only the innocent can save the world.* Is it not written: *Suffer the little children to come unto me?* Does it not say: *The kingdom of Heaven is theirs?* It is the children who will redeem the world, convert the heathen and bring peace to that other shore. Those ports which have withstood the onslaught of sword and battering ram will spring open at a single glance from the shining eyes of a thousand children. For is it not written that faith can move mountains? And who among us has greater faith than a child?

Thus I sit talking, playing finger puppets with myself. Always these two fingers of my right hand are the inquisitors. They are calm, self-assured. Often it seems as though they do not belong to me at all. While the fingers of my left hand flounder about, poking the sand, pacing nervously, anxiously. I feel I know them better.

"And you were to meet him in Cologne?" ask the fingers on the right.

"He was awaiting us in Cologne," the fingers on the left whisper in reply. "He promised to wait for us."

"Let the little children come to me..." the fingers of my right hand say, drawing themselves into a clenched fist. "Would it not have been better to say: Let the little children come to themselves?"

*

It wasn't really difficult.

We all seemed to be going the same direction.

And then, finally, I was standing in the great cathedral square, amidst a throng of people, a mob, elbowing their way ever more closely together in an attempt to get to the front, everyone wanted to see, to hear... and those who were ill, or carried the sick on their backs, wanted to touch him.

Can you describe how you felt?

He was the sun?

He was the sun we turned our faces towards... the sun that warmed and blinded us. The little evangelist with the blue eyes, clear and bright as bleached linen, and with hair like a cloud about his head... a boy like myself... just as small and thin... but when he spoke, he became a titan... a gilded tree, which spread its branches out over the entire square, its crest reaching into Heaven itself. Children and adults, women and men, burghers and peasants — all stretched their arms into the air, grasping for a branch to hold on to... for when the tree swayed, the whole square rocked... and when the wind went whooshing through boughs, even the cobblestones had to sing along. And I understood that the flutes which had filled the Rhine Valley from one end to the other had been but a rasping echo, that the monk who had played in my own village had only been practicing scales... beautiful and seductive, enough to ignite dreams and longings... but that only now, in the Square of the Three Wise Men, was I hearing the melody in its entirety, in all its incomprehensible beauty. For he was radiance itself, a miracle. He was an angel and a saint. And he made us feel that it wasn't he alone who had been called and chosen of God... we were all of us children of God... existed in God's grace. Together we would inherit the Earth.

I drank in every word.

You didn't notice the strings...

I was silent when the others were silent. I called out when the others called out.

... attaching themselves to your head, wrists, elbows, knees and ankles?

It was as if my heart would burst from pure, unadulterated joy.

You didn't notice that someone was pulling the strings?

I believe this is the only time I have ever been really happy. Without

reservation. Without its being somehow shaded grey.

"One day, as I was out in the fields, the heavens were torn asunder by a mighty bolt of lightning."

I recall how he stretched himself up on his toes and drew a large arch in the air with his hands.

"I was afraid." His voice became a howl. "I ran to find my father..." His voice sank. "And I found him, lying motionless on the ground. His clothing was smoldering. His body was stiff and heavy. As if he'd been transformed into a pillar of salt." Nicholas made a pause. Dried away a tear.

I held my breath. All about me there was murmuring and whimpering. When he began to speak again, it was barely a whisper. "I thought I had lost him. I thought he was dead." He leaned toward us with an air of familiarity. "But... a man came walking, a stranger... and he gave me this — "

Suddenly, he raised up a cross. "The cross of St. Antonius — the patron saint of the lost and vanquished!" He held the cross straight out in front of him. It was shaped like a large letter "T." Nicholas turned slowly, first right and then left, so that all could see it. "And I noticed that the stranger was noble and beautiful... I saw that there shone a light from him... and I heard him say: 'Make the sign of the cross over your father's body, and he will live again!' And I did as he said..." Nicholas made an "X" in the air with the great cross. "And lo! At once my father threw open his eyes!"

All around me there was a hum of prayers and thanksgiving. *Praise God! Praise God!*

"And then I understood..." A movement of his hand, and the whole crowd held its breath. "Then I understood..." His voice grew calm. He spoke softly and clearly, emphasizing each word. "I understood then that the stranger... was none other than our Lord himself."

My heart was pounding in my chest. And at the foot of the stage, right beside Nicholas, a tall man was stretching his hands to Heaven. I had been watching him for some time, for he had been nodding affirmatively after each sentence. His face was sober, and his lips tightly knit. Now he called out so that it rang through the square: "Just so! That's how it was! Praise God — who through my son has raised me from the dead!" There was a sudden, indescribable jubilation. We hollered and cried, jumping up and down and dancing.

It didn't occur to you that this was the same tale he had told every day for several weeks?

I was only eight years old.

But someone... there must have been someone who...?

There were several. One of them stood right beside me. He was large and heavy, looked like a blacksmith. When Nicholas spoke of the sinfulness of the world, of perdition and the tortures of Hell— this fellow grunted derisively and blew his nose in his hand. When Nicholas told us of the holy burden God had placed on his shoulders... the commandment he had received from the Lord's own mouth — the fellow stuck out his tongue and made faces at the people around him. And when we repeated the call: *To Jerusa-*

lem!... when the entire square cried out as with one voice — the smith broke out in open laughter.

He frightened me. I was afraid to be standing next to him. I expected that at any moment an angel would come and smite him down. I tried to move away, making myself flat as a plank, but it was so very crowded. I only managed to put five or six people between myself and the smith. And the whole time I mumbled the Lord's Prayer.

So there was a tear in the fabric after all.

Perhaps.

Was there no one else who offered other than words of praise?

I didn't want to hear.

But you do remember?

"We need bread — not pretty words." Things like that, for the most part...

And your blacksmith?

I remember his voice. Coarse and deep. He shook his fist at the stage and roared: "A few weeks ago you let your son dance and sing in the taverns. Today he's performing here! Does he bring you more money as an angel?" People crossed themselves and tried to hush him up. But he only laughed at them. I wished that I was grown. I wished someone would stop that blasphemous mouth of his. He was going to ruin it... he just wanted to ruin... all that was pure and beautiful.

But surely you must have noticed yourself how often Nicholas had to bend forward, so that his father could whisper the right words to him?

I saw only that they were fond of one another, that they were very close.

And you never doubted?

All of us long to be part of something greater and mightier than ourselves.

"It is right and just..." Nicholas looked at us with those blue eyes. His voice quivered. I wished that I could run forth and embrace him. Stand at his side. Aid him against evil and injustice. "It's wise of you to doubt..."

But I didn't doubt. He was God's own voice. I knew it!

"...for the world is full of false prophets. Many are those who would lead us astray."

I will be true to you, Nicholas, I thought to myself. I want to be where you are, go where you go!

"The Antichrist is in our midst. And those who follow him and do his bidding —" He bent down to his father again, hugged him and caressed his back. When he stood up again, he had tears in his eyes. "This we have seen and heard here today!" Many turned and looked at the smith. The little evangelist continued. His voice grew firmer. "They dare not yet confess him openly, dare not bear the mark of the beast on breast and brow. But we know them!"

I noted the warmth spreading throughout my body. The crowd was with him again.

Then he began to bare his chest.

We held our breath.

For a moment he just stood there, a thin, half-naked boy. A wisp of a thing, like a baby bird. But when he cried out, there was triumph in his voice. "Behold — and believe!" Slowly he turned his back to us.

And we fell to our knees. All those of us who believed. All those who wanted to belong to Jesus.

For between those narrow shoulder blades shone forth a golden cross...
Anyone can paint a cross between his shoulders.

I know.

"Who dares call us liars!" His father sprang up onto the platform and held Nicholas close in his arms. "Beware the wrath of God! And are there not those among you who have seen my son lay hands on the sick — and heal them in the name of Jesus?"

"Let us see it!"

It was the smith again. Would he never give up? Was he deaf and blind? Did he understand nothing of this? Or was he already lost? Was it the Devil himself sitting on his tongue?

And how suddenly the winds can change... for now his cry was echoed by others. "Let's see it then! Let us see!" I felt the words like a blow against my ears.

I saw that Nicholas had turned pale.

But his father supported him. And I saw the father give a sign to two monks standing close by whom I hadn't noticed before.

The monks disappeared for a moment, and when they returned, they were carrying a young girl between them. She was shrieking and howling, her body twisting in convulsions.

Her body was arched stiff as a bow, and with her hands she clawed at her belly and thighs till they bled. It was as if she were giving herself to an invisible lover. An unclean spirit who would not turn her loose, was insatiable, who was hurting her — but whom she nonetheless clung madly to.

Nicholas sat down beside her. Placed her head in his lap. Rocked her gently. Spoke to her in a voice sweet and low, stroking his cross over her tortured body. Made the holy sign on her head and breast. He commanded the spirit to leave her.

And she stood up?

She got to her feet — and praised God.

"I'm free! I'm free!" She wavered. The two monks supported her again. "I've been born again! I'm saved!" The girl embraced Nicholas. Drew him tightly to her. Covered his face with kisses.

The crowd was jubilant. I remember that I screamed until my neck was in knots and my voice was like the squawking of birds..

The two monks led the girl away.

*

Today I know better. I have myself lived a long life as an actor and jester. I know what it takes to capture an audience. I know a good performance when I see one... ◇

A Fertile Mind

by Clélie Rich

illustration by Adrian Kleinbergen

T here goes James again. James Bezoar. James Bizarre. God, he's strong. I can sense him so clearly, reaching out into his world, tendrils extended to grasp whatever he can. Like winter aconite pushing up through clay. He'll do well. He'll be a politician, I think, or maybe a judge. I'm not sure which, but he'll be very important. Dr. Imogen says that the first of a batch is always the most successful, the most aware of the needs of his time, and she should know.

I don't know about Jennifer and little Kaitlin. I thought I'd sensed them, but this is still so new to me that I can't be sure. It's only my third time. I *want* so much to feel them. As for Henry, he's nothing but a terrible heaviness, a dead lump in my throat.

Dr. Imogen keeps telling me not to worry. "That's *my* job," she says as she checks the IVs. "You just lie back and keep healthy." And she smiles. She always smiles when she adjusts the IVs.

When I signed my contract with Dr. Imogen, it was for the money more than anything. I had always wanted a garden. Imogen explained the procedures, and the risks. Especially the risks. She explained everything until she was satisfied I understood it all. And I did. I did. All I have to do is stay healthy, eat, drink, listen for the babies and dream of all the money. The Chronobiology Clinic takes care of the legal side and everything else. But it's not easy. I can't even move around any more like I did with the first batch, and there's a limit to what I can do from this damn bed. And my throat hurts so much. But when all ten batches are gone, and I'm done with the contract, I'll get my garden, hire some good gardeners and grow everything I can.

And I'll buy protection of course. Not from the plague. I'll never have to worry about that. But I'll still need protection. From the ones who are left, who have lost their sense of time and of themselves.

I'm a real single parent. Violets reproduce like this. Or is it pansies? I've looked at so many gardening videos that my brain is overgrown with names and varieties. *Ligtu Hybrids* keeps popping into my head. I really don't like them, such hybrid monstrosities — so it must be the sounds of the words that fascinate me. *Lig-too-high-brids*, *lig-too-high-brids*, *lig-too-high-brids*.

Where was I? Yes. It's Johnny-Jump-Up pansies that self-sow so freely. I remember them from before. Mum and I spent hours weeding them out of odd corners and crevices. Sometimes she'd say, "Come on, Suzie, let's just leave that one there. Your father'll never notice, and it'll look lovely under those roses." Of course Dad noticed. He saw everything in his garden.

I'm glad he can't see *me*. He always hated forced propagation and



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chemical methods of fertilization. "Let nature have her own way," he used to say. Well, she had her own way with him. Poor Dad. He was one of the first to go.

What will Imogen do about Henry? He's my first one to go wrong. I suppose we can try again with the next batch. Not until James and the girls are out in the world, though. Can't interrupt germination at this stage. But Henry had better not contaminate the other three. I won't stand for that.

Mother is outside. It's been such a long time since she was here. What will she think of me now? Imogen has made me all presentable: hair tamed, the more obvious IVs hidden. I really don't know why she bothers. Mum always used to know exactly what was going on. She just never says what she thinks.

Oh Mum! Her hair's so thin and wispy. So much white in all that wonderful chestnut hair she used to have. And her skin — so red and sore. But she's smiling at me. Not like Imogen's lopsided death's head grin. Mum's smile and Mum's perfume — like honeysuckle on the wind. I wish I could say something to her, but I just can't get the words past my throat. She's brought me some sweet peas. It must be summer. How odd. I thought it was autumn.

Mum kisses me, careful of the IV at my throat. She lifts the sweet peas right under my nose for me to breathe. I can smell them clear through the hospital odor and the chemicals. They smell so good; they take me right back to my childhood, to Dad's first proper garden. Mum wipes my tears gently and holds my hand.

Imogen hesitates at the door. "I'll leave the two of you alone, Mrs. Armstrong. But only for a short while. Suzanne tires very easily now." She clicks the door quietly behind her. Mum raises her eyebrows at me and grins. I wink back at her.

She sits in silence for a while and just looks at me. "You *do* look tired. Your eyes look all bruised. But they look brighter than last time." Another pause. As she breathes, I can hear the breath rattle in her lungs. She knows where she is, certainly, but I wonder if she knows how late it is. So little time left. For both of us. Her fingers stroke the back of my hand. I like that, even though her hands tremble and her skin rasps against mine. She lets me inhale the sweet peas again.

"Suzie, can you see my hair?" I blink once for yes and keep watching her face. "I've got all the symptoms." I know that. She looks just like Dad did when the mould got him. Blotchy, somehow. "I have difficulty breathing — and the headaches are almost continuous. Only my most basic clocks are still functioning. All the subordinates are completely out of phase, or else . . . well, that's why I haven't been to see you.

"I've been trying to think. About this plague . . . and about you. Otherwise, I would have just marched right in here and brought you straight home, contract or no contract."

I wince and snatch my hand away. My throat starts to ache, and a pulse begins to throb there.

Mum takes my hand calmly back in hers. "But it's all right. I know I don't qualify for your babies. I just want you to know everything's all right now."

Jennifer chooses that moment to begin to unfold. I am so excited that I lose track of Mum for a moment and lie back, sensing Jenny as she becomes aware of her universe. Mum must realize something is happening because she heads to the door to fetch Imogen. Unnecessary of course. Dr. Immy's spy machines keep her alerted to everything except my thoughts, although sometimes I even wonder about them.

She hurries in. No smile. Mum stands back and keeps out of the way. Imogen checks my pulse. "Mrs. Armstrong, you'll have to go now. Suzanne will need to sleep. If you'd like to come back in two days, she can see you then."

Mum comes and leans over the bed, strokes my hair. Her hands shake. She bends down and kisses me on the forehead. "Goodbye, baby. I do love you." Then she straightens up and leaves the room. Goodbye, honeysuckle mother.

I lie there with my eyes closed while Imogen pokes and prods. I know Jennifer is okay, but of course Imogen doesn't. James becomes aware of Jennifer, and I hold my breath until I am sure that he accepts his baby sister. Then I relax. Imogen's hand wipes my eyes roughly. "Your mother is still very beautiful. Just like you. You should be proud of her." Proud of her? Why? I don't understand. Aren't I the one to be proud of?

Then Imogen leaves me alone with the babies in my night garden.

Well, Mum, what do you really think? Dad's gone already. You'll go soon. Won't see little Suzie again, or the babies. And I won't see you again either. The honeysuckles are over. And no more Johnny-Jump-Ups.

*

In the morning the door swishes open. Imogen makes her entrance, flanked by two diminutive CC nurses I've never seen before. Their skin clocks must have stopped a while back — their skin is beginning to go rough, like Mum's. While Imogen examines me, they watch in silence, looking everywhere except my face. I wonder why she brought them in. Oh, of course, she must think it's time for James.

She dismisses the nurses and turns back to me. "Not quite yet. We'll give it another couple of hours or so. Are you having any pain?"

I blink no. Why should James give me pain? If she was asking about poor Henry, it would be a different matter.

I've decided about Imogen. I initially thought she was bindweed, growing everywhere, smothering and killing off everything underneath her. But I've changed my mind. She's not bindweed, she's stinging nettle. Not for the stings of course, that would be silly. But because when she is dead and finished, she will make wonderful compost. I try to laugh at that and choke instead. Imogen frowns and sits down to watch me.

Compost, yes that's it. That's important. She shouldn't use all these chemicals. Can't she see how dangerous they are? It should be nothing but the

best natural compost for Imogen's special flowers. Oh yes, flowers. I do know I'm not the only one. Mum went into the wrong room once by mistake and saw three other girls like me. *Three* in the same room. They must have been beginners. Still, at least I know I'm not the only person still firmly rooted to her body clocks. But Imogen never mentions those girls.

The hours pass until it is time for James. Imogen's nurses creep back into the room and prep me. They still won't look at my face, but they are very gentle. Not at all like Imogen. I suppose they think I can feel them. I can, just, like tiny fluttering birds — but not as distinctly as I felt Mum. When Mum's here, everything's all right.

*

After the operation, they wheel me back into my room. *All* my glands hurt, not just the place where James was. There is a huge lump at my throat all wadded up in a bandage. From what I can sense, Imogen has removed Henry at the same time as James. I hope the girls haven't been too disturbed. Jennie does seem lonely, but little Kaitlin'll be awake soon.

I hate this plague. Not like Mum hates it, not because it kills. Of course it kills. It's the early mould that blights the weaker honeysuckles. Why can't they see that? No, I hate it for what it does to my babies. Tears them out of the warm fluids of my body, into the open where they have no protection other than themselves.

Except that they don't need protection. Bezoars. Imogen wouldn't even know what that means. *Wardstones*. In the middle ages, people found them in the gullets and stomachs of birds and wore them to keep away diseases. Mum and Dad would have known that. Imogen just knows how to insert them in my throat, make them grow, then pull them out and implant them in the highest bidders. Sowing the seeds of time and the seasons.

I wonder how James will do. I wish I could remember if James O'Neill is the politician or the judge. We'll have to start all over again for Henry Skopik. He's that oil man, and Jennifer Partridge the inventor. So it must be either little Kaitlin Freeman or James O'Neill who is the politician. It's all so much to keep straight. Just like *Happy Families*.

Still, even if I can't remember James O'Neill, he must remember *me*, every time he looks in a mirror and sees Imogen's scar at his throat. But he won't. People like him, like Imogen, they'll only remember us when something goes wrong. And my babies are strong and healthy. I hope baby James will like his new home. If it wasn't for me and my glands and baby James, Mr. O'Neill would be dead in a year, like the honeysuckle and the others whose bodies have run amuck.

Dad was wrong. You can't let nature have her own way, or we'd all be dead. Except for me, Dad. Without me and the rest of Imogen's special little flowers, there'd be no antibodies, no carefully synthesized bezoar stones to ward off this plague, to keep their bodies working. I just wish she'd stop using these chemicals. I'm so confused nowadays. Where's my mother? She really should be here. It's springtime.

Oh, James. Goodbye baby, I do love you. ◊

WRITERS

Coralie Adams reports herself to be a novice in writing horror although she can "feel the genre beckoning." Her award-winning poetry has appeared in *WomanSong*, *Western People*, *Bogg*, and *Secrets From the Orange Couch*, among other places. She lives in Innisfail, Alberta.

E.C. Bell, who lives in Antler Lake, Alberta, has published one other short story, in *Western People*. She is currently working on a novel.

Tor Åge Bringsvæld is one of Scandinavia's most successful novelists. *Gobi*, *Childhood Moon*, is the first volume in a series of five related works.

James Manis is a scholar of modern Scandinavian literature. After living and teaching in northern Norway for five years, Manis returned to North America, and received his PHD from the University of Washington. Manis lives in Edmonton, where he teaches Scandinavian languages and literature at the University of Alberta. He is currently working on a translation of Danish novelist Dorrit Willemsen's *Suk Hjerte*.

Richard Davies, who teaches English at Strathcona Composite High School in Edmonton, reports that "Teechurs" was inspired by a student who thought Richard never left the school. He has published over 50 poems, which have appeared in *NeWest Review*, *White Wall Review*, *Alberta Poetry Yearbook*, *Edges*, etc., etc.

Drake Dresen is a non-practising Edmonton lawyer who is presently undergoing the trial of writing a novel (described as a "family adventure psycho-thriller"). "Springdeath" is his first published short story.

Leslie Gadallah is the author of the SF novels *Cat's Paw*, *Lozemasters*, and the upcoming *Cat's Gambit* (in March from Ballantine/Del Rey Books). Before becoming enmeshed in fiction, she wrote extensively for newspapers and radio as a popular science writer, as well as serving as technical editor for the Alberta Research Council for a number of years. She lives near Spruce Grove, Alberta.

Paula Johanson lives with her family in a downtown industrial neighbourhood and does monthly poetry readings at an inner-city community centre.

Eileen Kernaghan of Burnaby, BC, is the author of *Journey to Apriloth* and *Songs From the Drowned Lands*, which won the Canadian SF and A Award in 1984. A third fantasy novel, *The Sarsen Witch*, was published this April. Her poetry has appeared in *Light Like a Summons*, an anthology of five BC women poets. "Carpe Diem" is her first published SF short story in 8 years.

Trevor Murphy is an undergraduate student in Classics at the University of Calgary. "In Zarephath" is his first published short story.

Clélie Rich has lived in Britain, France, Switzerland, and Italy, and has now

settled in Burnaby, BC. A graduate of Clarion West '87, she has had poems published throughout the US. "Fertile Mind" is her first fiction publication, but, like everyone else, she is working on a novel.

Spider Robinson writes what he calls, "science fiction for people who don't read that crap." Nonetheless, he has won three Hugos and a Nebula, and his books consistently make the SF best-seller lists. He lives in Vancouver with his wife Jeanne (with whom he is presently writing their second collaborative novel), and his daughter Terri. His current novel is *Callahan's Lady* (Ace Books).

Jena Snyder lives in Edmonton, Alberta, where she is putting the finishing touches on a pair of novels set in Dark Ages Britain. She has had one short story previously published — in the premiere issue of *On Spec*. This is her first published poetry, but more will appear in *Underpass #3*.

Janet Elliot Waters lives in Burnaby, BC and is an instructor of psychology at Capilano College. She is a graduate of Clarion West '87 and writes short stories, poetry and novels. This is her first publication in the speculative fiction field.

ARTISTS

Andrea Baeza is halfway through her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. She works at a local comic shop.

Richard Bartrop is an artist living in Calgary.

Tim Hammell is having his first gallery showing at Art Channels in Calgary this October.

Marc Holmes is currently working as a samurai extra in the film *Heaven and Earth*, being shot near Calgary. He is also developing his skills in special effects makeup.

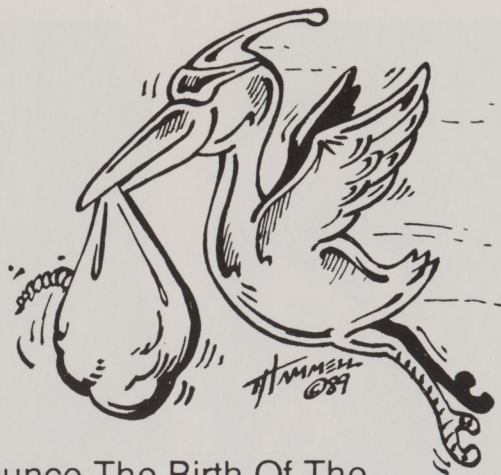
Adrian Kleinbergen is a talented sequential artist known for his *Starstone* and *Darkewood* comic series. His work also appeared in the controversial *True North* comic.

Kevin Kurytnik is another Calgary artist with an off-the-wall sense of humour and unique style.

Nancy Niles is a Calgary resident whose childhood fantasies, supplied by Rackham, Crane, *et al*, drove her to ink (also pencil, paint and anything else that gets interesting results). She prefers fantasy-oriented subjects, but has also designed graphics and logos for small companies.

Robert Pasternak, who supplied our cover art, is a very innovative artist living in Winnipeg. He has had art published in *Amazing*, *Aboriginal SF*, and other SF magazines.◊

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