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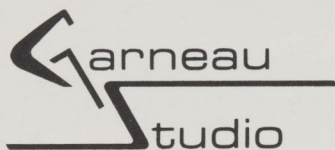
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MAGAZINE OF
SPECULATIVE
WRITING

Volume 3 Number 1
Spring 1991
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EDITORIAL

by Marianne O. Nielsen, General Editor


Welcome to the third year of publication for *ON SPEC, the Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing*. This year there will be three issues, including a humour issue — how could we have lasted this long and not developed a sense of humour? (See page 25 for deadlines.)

First, some excellent news — one of *ON SPEC's* favourite artists, **Rob Alexander**, won third place in the winter 1990 quarter of the Los Angeles-based Illustrators of the Future Contest. You will find Rob's illustrations for Spider Robinson's "Rocket to Oz" in Vol. 1, #2, and Alice Major's "A Dog's Life" in Vol. 2, #2. Rob is currently studying art in Seattle and living on fish.

Special thanks go out to **Alice Major** for stepping in to fill **Pauline Gedge's** spot on the Editorial Advisory Board for this issue. We thank Pauline for the two years she gave us, and wish her all the best.

We'd like to point out that although many magazines don't take simultaneous submissions, because of our time frame, we feel this restriction would be unfair. We're happy to read simultaneous submissions, but please be fair to us, too; let us know immediately if you sell your manuscript elsewhere. To shorten your wait for our response, the submit your manuscript a month before the next deadline.

For those wondering how a venture like *ON SPEC* operates (and why it may take up to 6 months for us to choose our stories), watch for next issue's editorial, a tour through the innards of *ON SPEC*. (Hard hats optional.)

Thank you from all of us for helping ease *ON SPEC* into Year Number Three. 

You are invited... to *ON SPEC* Magazine's **THIRD BIRTHDAY PARTY** at Common Woman Books' **NEW** location at 10812 - 82 Avenue at 7 pm, Thursday, April 25/91. Help us celebrate the release of our spring issue!

The evening will feature a reading by Toronto fantasy author **TANYA HUFF** at 7:30 pm, along with the official opening of the Other Worlds art show by *ON SPEC's* women illustrators.

**Tanya Huff will also read on Friday, April 26 on the U of A campus — call Cath at 463-3522 for more info.*

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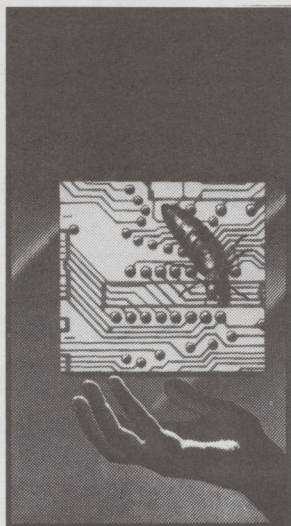
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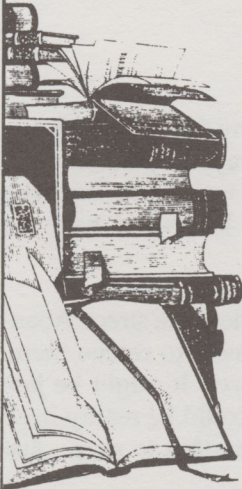
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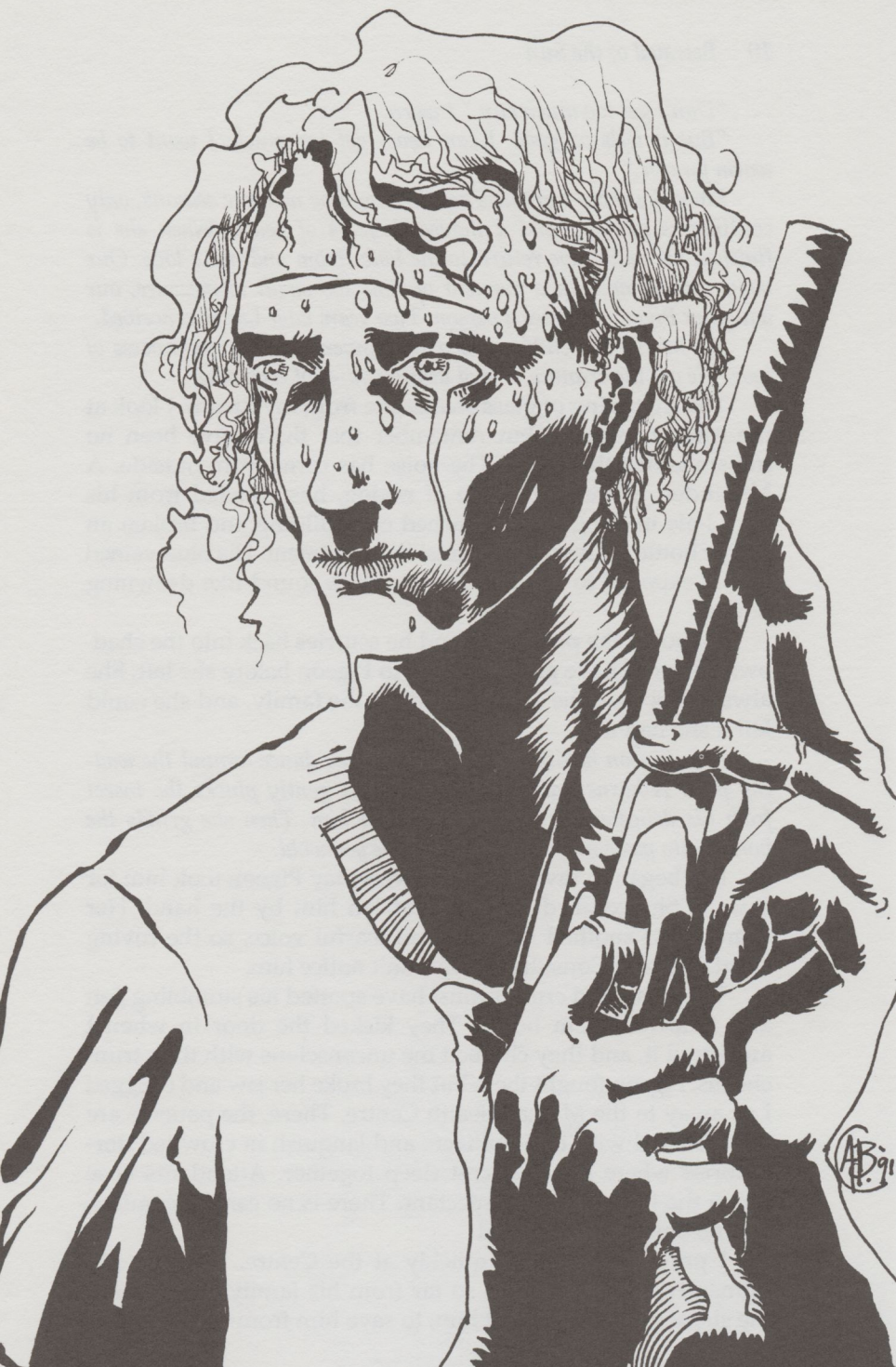
Sead. All of my friends. Most of my family. Dead. We are in the valley of the dead, betrayed by death. I am death itself. I sit alone in the heat waiting for my wife to come home. When she returns I will kill her. I have no choice.

The gun is on my lap.

I watch the morning heat rise from the desolate street. Abandoned cars wait in vain for their dead owners to rescue them. Gutted store fronts shimmer before my eyes. It might be just the heat waves distorting my vision. Or it could be reality itself dissolving, incipient dementia. I may be starting to rave... just like the rest.

Soon the burning season will be upon us, when unbearable heat will twist even the plastic furniture into a distorted image of its true self. I stay indoors, except for essential trips to the Rescue Station in Sector R to exchange ration stamps for food and the bottles of the liquid that's supposed to ease our horror. Beneath my burnoose that protects me from the sun, I carry my target pistol in defence against the Marauders. When the auto-trains are running I risk the Underground. Otherwise, I walk the hollow concrete vistas. Each year the burning season comes sooner, but I remember when it did not come at all.

Francine and I are on a tropical beach and she is twenty-five again. Her legs are smooth and lightly browned, and her black hair falls on her shoulders. She stands in the water with the afternoon sun behind her.



"Don't get too much sun," I warn.

"But it feels so good. I can never get too much. I want to be warm forever."

From the shore I promise her there will be no more seasons, only continuous summer and a thousand years of peace. When she is finished her swim, we return to the hotel room and make love. Our body potions mix. In a moment of time too small to measure, our daughter Pigeon becomes a person. Two years later Luc is conceived.

We invent our children, and they invent us. It's the process of love. We are the creators — and destroyers — of each other.

The shattering of glass shakes me from my dream. I look at the mute television, but remember that there have been no transmissions this week. The noise has come from outside. A Marauder, in the last phase of raving, has crawled from his dark hole in the guts of a burned out building and broken an empty bottle of Compose against the pavement. His blue-veined face is exposed to the sun. His chuckles sound like drowning noises.

I shoot at the pavement, and he scurries back into the shadows. I should have given the gun to Pigeon before she left. She always has been the strongest one in the family, and she could kill if she had to.

I see Pigeon holding Luc's hand as they dance around the wading pool. A hornet lands on his face. She gently plucks the insect from his delicate skin without alarming him. Then she grinds the hornet into paste in her hand. She is five years old.

Luc began to rave last year. Every day Pigeon took him for a walk. She combed his hair and led him by the hand. Her calm words soothed his loud and fearful voice, so the roving Mental Health Consultants wouldn't notice him.

The armoured cruiser must have spotted his stumbling gait and followed them home. They kicked the door in when I answered it, and they clubbed me unconscious with their truncheons. Pigeon fought them but they broke her jaw and dragged Luc away to the Mental Health Centre. There, the patients are immobilized with tranquillizers and languish in crowded dormitories where they eat and sleep together. Attendants hose down the floors with disinfectant. There is no care or comfort, and no one is ever released.

I pray Luc has died quickly at the Centre. It drains my humanity to think of him so far from his family. Pigeon tells me she should have killed him, to save him from this. She says

she will not let it happen again. I believe her.

The same old announcement on the radio says it is only going to be 100 degrees today. It is a lie. Just like the propaganda of going north. Before the inter-city raids the Controlling Coalition tried to herd us north in trains, across the fire-charred forests. Some believed these lies and went, and we never heard from them again.

When the television service works, I watch old film slips of news stories showing the same scene: smiling people in shady northern valleys, living the good life. But the trains don't even run north anymore; there's nothing up there but a stagnant inland sea. I wonder why they keep showing the same new story - perhaps the person responsible for stopping them has died.

Pigeon is almost twenty. It is the hopeful years before the first burning season. She and Luc are getting ready to break away from us and live their own lives. Francine lies in my arms while the children make plans downstairs.

"Wouldn't it be nice to start over again? Just keep making babies, watch them grow, watch the world go round and round, with everything growing!"

I know what she means, but I answer, "Our job now is not to create new life, but to watch and grow old."

"I don't want that." Her tears fall on my forearm and mix with the dust of the day. "I don't want to think of getting old and helpless. Promise me we will not go to one of those places where you sit and watch each other die."

"No," I promise, a comforting lie. But this lie grows into a truth as solemn as a wedding vow.

I wish this nightmare would end.

They say it is the algae in the reservoir that causes the cancer and fever that makes us mad. I think it is the thought of the world slowly dying that drives us insane. I know I am slipping away, too. I can't trust my thoughts. In a crazy world how much paranoia is justified? How do you know just when the true craziness sets in? All I know for certain is I die a little more as my family is diminished.

The inter-city raids have begun, and food is scarce because the inland sea is flooding what's left of the farmland. The children come home. We all agree it is just temporary, just until the worst is over. We act as if it's just a family reunion. We create this lie to give us hope.

After the others have all gone to bed, Pigeon comes to my reading chair and sits on the arm.

"It is the end, isn't it, Daddy?"

I have no response. I ramble about how our family will keep strong for each other. But it's just words. I give her a hug and tell her to get ready for bed.

"It's okay," she replies, "I'll take care of us." I know she sees the coming nightmare. In my silence I allow her to accept a responsibility that should not be hers. I repeat one of the bedtime stories I used to tell her when she was a little girl. I pretend everything is all right, and she pretends to believe me.

The sun is low on the horizon. I look directly into the sun and see solar flares, sunspots, evil portent.

Francine raved last night. I sponged her head with a damp cloth dipped in our water ration. She spoke about Luc and Pigeon as if they were still children and then about us having grandchildren. I comforted her and agreed. This calmed her and helped to soothe my nerves, too. This morning she remembered nothing of the raving, but spoke about going to see Luc at his home. She looked weirdly energetic. When Pigeon got up she asked: "Was there a problem with Mom last night?"

"Just too much heat," I replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

Francine was dishevelled when she came out of the bedroom. Her beautiful hair was uncombed and her blouse open. Pigeon helped her dress. When she came out of the bedroom she looked troubled, "Mom is talking about visiting Luc."

"She's tired, she hasn't been sleeping well. That's all. That's all," I said, covering for my wife. But the look on Pigeon's face told me she did not believe me.

I have trouble concentrating... It might be... No, it's just pain... and sleeplessness. There are fatigue spots in front of my eyes. Heat oozes from everything in the room. The gun metal is hot to touch. I stare at the barren floor... not even any cockroaches. Man will be the last to leave the earth.

I hear a key in the lock. It's awkward to remove the dead bolts with a gun in my hand. Francine is home. Her hair is windblown across her vacant eyes. Her mouth is set in a rigid leer, and she doesn't seem to notice that Pigeon is leading her by the hand.

I know what I must do, but all I can see is how she looked

when we made love and created our children. Heat waves distort my vision, and Francine transforms. Her smile is gentle, I don't see the bloated blue cancer look. Her eyes are clear and fine.

She tells me she has been visiting Luc and our grandchildren. I feel comforted to hear this, until I remember that Luc has been taken from us. But maybe he hasn't, maybe she is right, and I have been dreaming all afternoon. What's the truth? My thoughts collide like cars on a freeway. They destroy each other. Then another comes crashing in, just as I am trying to separate the wreckage.

I see Pigeon is crying — I don't know why. I leave my gun on the chair and go to embrace my wife. She is beautiful and still my lover.

"Don't worry about your mother," I tell Pigeon. "She is fine. Just a little tired. But so am I... so am I. We are not young anymore." My pain subsides when I am with Francine. Family always makes me feel better.

"Daddy?" Pigeon pleads, but I don't know what she wants.

"We are all okay," I reassure. And then I hear my own voice, coming from a distant part of me that I can't reach with my thoughts. "Just run along now and do what needs to be done."

Francine and I stroll arm and arm toward our bedroom, like two old lovers. Pigeon picks up the gun from the chair and follows us.

As Francine and I lie down and close our eyes, I hear the cool click of metal, and I think to myself: "A man is lucky to have his family with him." ☉

ON SPEC Deadlines

- May 31 - Fall 1991 Issue
- June 30 - Special 1991 Issue (Humour)
- Nov 30 - Spring 1992 Issue

The [oo] Boo] Machine

by Herbert Steinhouse

illustration by Dory A. Rikkonen

May continued cool but one day there was a glimmer of cold sunlight bouncing off the crest of my mountain and I waded further than I had managed in many a year. The water level was still rising from the spring melt and there was enough current to push my hesitant bones far downstream before I realized I was below Three Islands, beyond the wide sweep of the right-angled bend and its sandy-smooth beach. Every now and then I tossed a desultory #16 Red Fox into a feed channel or side-armed it under an overhanging ashen skeleton that, in another incarnation, I probably had known as leafy shade-giver or voracious eater of errant casts. These days I aimed more carefully; my stock of irreplaceable flies in their vest pocket tin boxes was dwindling dangerously, and some were getting quite emaciated; the Wulffs could have passed for Stone Fly nymphs. I entered a mental note to ask the Academy Director to send over a kettle so that I might try steaming the shaggier dries back to life. Well, I *tried* to aim carefully. The trusty split-bamboo now had a decided bow-shape and the boron rod had lost much of its twangy flex. And the eyes, ah yes, the old eyes, once the best pair of 20-20's in the Special Squadron and today but pale memory of their former glory. "What the hell do you expect, Marty?" my flowing river twinkled up at me. "After all they've seen, friend, 'tis a



wonder they aren't crossed and bulging."

I was all he had to speak to, through the flecked opacity of the omnipresent haze. Sometimes I also chatted affectionately with the non-existent birds. I spoke aloud to Mount Marcy to the south, to old Whiteface starkly in front of me, to all the High Adirondack Five Sisters. On the first day of freedom recovered I had shouted up at them: "What the hell have you done with our black bears?" — "Fired!" they had rumbled back in unison, on the first thundering of an approaching storm.

I was not tiring and the current energized as it lapped around my shabby waders. The sun's blood-shot outline was not discernible, high above the old ski-runs, and the bamboo's agate guides caught the glints and bounced them back to the surface where they joined their sparkling friends. A trout took the fly before it even hit the water. He jumped again and ran with it. A rainbow. I brought him in gingerly, caressed the lean belly and gently released him. Marty, lad, you decrepit, octogenarian scribbler, do you call this happiness or just quiet contentment? I moved still further downstream, through the riffles, and then threaded my way through the boulders. I took two more fish in the pocket water. One was over one and a quarter. Say thirteen inches. Still no girth on them but definitely improving. "Bloody damned murderers!" I shouted, facing Washington upstream, then Moscow, and then Mecca for good measure. My anger echoed gleefully off the cliffed banks. "Bloody genocidal killers of children, women, men and little fish, in that order!"

My mind unfocused and wandered off — as usual. I even thought I caught a glimpse of a bird. *Raris avis*. First cuckoo of spring. First cuckoo of the century, he'd have been. But he could have been zipping across old Izaak Walton's Itchen. Or was I now wading in the Ardèche? Or was I working down a high Andorran mountain stream? River, I once took a French prime minister there, incognito. Pierre Mèndes-France, one of the passionate Happy Few — I had never allowed the run-of-the-mill politicians near my special places; even in those days I worried about pollution. We had had that sentimental old fliers' connection. They had assigned him to me for one particular job when I flew Mosquitoes with Special Squadron: to guide us low-level to a tucked-away Renaissance château near Angoulême — a regional Gestapo H.Q. that was annoying the Resistance. We managed it cleanly in a single pass and he'd

chortled all the way home. In Andorra I taught him the fancy roll-cast. We finished twenty or thirty meters apart, caught the airborne jets from the same leather *frasco* I had filled with Valdepeñas, never talked a word of politics. The water raced down the slopes, ice-cold and fresh. The air was filled with bird-song. The world had birds, Marty, when you were young. Trees had leaves, breezes were clean, you could drink the water. He threw a pretty good line, old PMF. The *Quatrième République* chucked him out. And undid his good work of ending *La Guerre d'Indochine*, fixed it for the American domino theory players to take over — and, hooray for the Fourth Estate! — we were at it once again. I didn't take my rods and waders to Saigon.

From somewhere way beyond the bare high bank, in some distant scene, came a tinkle of laughter, then a youngster's happy shout. Fiery clouds scuttled merrily against the forgotten blue. He'd walked his first river at six. Could damn near outcast me by twelve. An obstinate young caster — when he sighted a rise he wouldn't budge, flogging the waters mercilessly with everything in his box, eyes glaring at the vanished circle. His older brother was less manic. B. wouldn't wade away from a riser, either, but he, at least, would rest the water, poking his rod upright through a bush and hunkering down on an uncomfortable boulder, lost in a teenager's private reveries. Sometime he would join thumbs and middle-fingers and peer quietly at river or mountain, already the photographer, the cameraman.

I'd often fished with one or the other — on rare occasions with both together: B. born and raised as a young Parisian then Montreal anglophone, G. born and raised as bilingual Québécois. Each had looked so vital in the river. B. went into films, and got in a dozen years more of creative living than his young writer brother — which, of course, had made not the slightest difference to either of them on a spring morning five years ago.

We'd work the darkened waters till midnight, lost under a black-etched mountain rim — no stars, changing flies by the light of headlamps, flashing up and downstream to each other a jubilant "Fish On!" The wondrous sounds of the invisible forest would sing out on the night wind, the current always rushing by us, echoing the chattering crickets and the frogs' croakings. Once I shouted down-river: "You're taking too

many!" and peals of laughter floated back as I realized that those hadn't been their flashlight blinks in the blackness but only the sparking dance of the fireflies. Years later we had come here sometimes with B.'s serious little boy and twinkling little girl, taking turns at playing the all-knowing adult instructors, with Grandpa rewarding a good cast by generously producing Old Laughing Boy, his little Buddha talisman, for one gleeful rub-and-wish of his gleaming potbelly. And then we would all bunk down in my little river shack just about over there... and for Chrissakes there she was!

I moved unbelievably to the east shoreline. The south wall was a carbon-black corpse, the chimney stones were strewn across what had been back lawn right to the river. She was split wide-open to the sky, but it was most definitely and hallelujah, praise Bach in the Highest, her. Old home away from home. Old memories. That other century.

And mayhap some old flies, fresh and lithe. A virginal fly-line, to take over from my frayed and splayed degenerates.

I had stashed away my gear when they rescued me. I had stacked it all deep in my limestone shelter — up to which I had climbed and crawled, minutes before the searing flash, the drum-shattering bang, that fatal early morning of the Day of Wrath. The life-saving winding cave, the freak of Adirondack pre-history, that I had occasionally spotted up in the cliff-face while fishing through the West Branch and had, the old curiosity aroused, finally decided to check out. Animal bones — remnants of ancient Abenaki or Iroquois barbecues. The cavern probably had not been disturbed since the white settlers had cleared the tribes out of their hunting grounds. And from its narrow entrance had issued my own cooking-fire's smoke, tipping off, some two weeks later, the lead-shielded people-searchers rowing their slow way down the bouldered river. "Goodgawd, he's bin eatin' the fish!" was the welcome cry.

"And just where do you wish to be liberated to?" they had demanded testily at the Quarry Convallhome five years later — five long years as troglodyte — as apathetic convalescent in their sealed-off antiseptorium wearing out their scavenged bathrobes and my stock of patience while staring at decontaminated videos of ancient movies on my ancient VCR. — "Back to my womb-cave. Back where they found me." — "Would you pledge not to eat the fish?" — "Madame Matron, I am a charter member of Trout Unlimited," I had said most

gravely. "We never keep our catch." In the end I had my way, mainly through the Heritage Retrieval Academy's intervention — and only because the Academy saw good reason to humour its Canadian Survivor-with-Long-Memory into a solitary's summer of recall and literary production. They had supplied field basics and Chemfoods and Deradwater, and I had provided the promise not to die before requesting permission. So I moved back and archaeologist Marty dug out his battered rods and fishing-vest — and Old Laughing Boy, pudgy arms still elatedly akimbo.

I stripped off vest and waders and let the cold May breeze fan my wet thighs, and, wading staff in hand, began to poke into the smelly piles of charred debris. *Niente!* I returned to my tattered vest, extracted the flask and took a good, life-giving swig of the Water of Life, *uisge beatha*. This time I faced towards the Hebrides and blessed all their dead malt-makers, keg-shapers, bottlers and erasers of memories. What had they ever bought, I asked with Omar, carpet-maker in yon wilderness, one half so precious as the stuff they'd sold? And evermore came out by the same door as in I went. What the devil did a loaf of bread ever look like? Or, for that matter, a bough? Or a singing Thou, all silk and softness, what had *they* felt like? I could no longer recall, couldn't care, returned to my dig.

I threw large pieces of glass out of what had been my front door, and small bits and pieces of whatnots, digging down steadily to, I guess, the neolithic layer. *Et voilà*, a primitive man's dining table, of stout and ancient oak, bought at a lawn-sale, I recalled vaguely, and lifted aboard the car by these hands abetted by those of one or other co-opted son. Which? Circa 1970. Zero minus thirty and counting. G. would have been about seven so it must have been B. While G. would doubtless have clambered to the roof-rack to supervise, to laugh merrily away. It had withstood time, collapse of a roof, raging aftermath forest fire, the poisonous vapours wafting from the targeted SAS airbase.

The chopper had given Plattsburgh a cautious detour when they'd flown me back. Lake Champlain had been mirror-smooth and the Academy Director had mused: "I recall what you said at the Quarry. That we ought to have made a mirror out of the past, you said. To see around the corner that separates us from the future."

I gazed down on desolation. The world's mirrors had

cracked. "What *could* have been," I'd replied morosely, "no longer matters. We return, Professor, the way we came. Anything left of the human experience now re-enters the medieval monastery." He had frowned, exuding sad reproach over the 'copter's sawing.

I poked away underneath the table. One crushed bread-box, now tomb of three skeletal field mice. One almost-knife, of potential use in Crusoe's cave.

Later the Professor had sat with me below my cave, on my front-gate boulders, feet close to the current's lapping edge. "No final advice for the autobiographer? For the Twentieth's do-it-yourself reconstructor? What more would you like out of my prose?"

He had not bothered replying. He had just stared upriver beyond me, beyond the gaunt shrouds that once were precious sanctuary, that offered the returned traveller peace and rejuvenation, and now were ashes and tar and slag. The welcoming whispering of my aspens was long gone, amidst the silent shrieks of ugliness.

But my river still ran strong and clear, at least to the eye, and it still sent its electricity coursing through my creaking body. Of time and the river. Do you remember him, old mixed-up Thomas Wolfe? At fifteen I'd read him through, had bathed in those prose-torrents, been conned by the hyperboles. At sixteen I had condemned the naive crypto-fascist. I had moved on to Hemingway the Craftsman. The world-weary pessimist, the Impotence of Being Ernest. Then I had graduated to Dos Passos, to the panoramic canvas, to class conflict. Eventually, he, too, choked on his mouthfuls of bitter spit. Well, look down at *this* USA, John. Look down, all you other wordsmiths, who thought History had been invented in Old Boston Towne. They won't applaud *your* deradiated books.

My river knew sorrow, not anger. To hell with betrayers, it said. To hell with America's dead literature, with all dead flag-wavers of the typewriter. A Canadian has taken possession of me now, and at least I have one man I can still thrill and cleanse. And maybe promise him hope. What's past is prologue, said the Bard. I had glanced over at the young professor, sitting so silently on my boulder, and wondered idly if this inheritor would live to see the renaissance he was striving to build. Had he discovered yet, in his Academy of dug-up volumes, that even the hellish Fourteenth had yielded its stage

of destruction to a Fra Angelico? Would he and his future students ever thrill and cleanse with a new Dante, a new Da Vinci?

He had remembered my question and was shaking his head. His eyes hardened ice-blue.

"Why not tell us, Sir, of your century's noble philosophy? Tell us all about the word 'love.' " Irony became mockery. "Yes, that word! 'You taught me language; and my profit on it is I know how to curse: the red plague rid you for learning me your language!' "

What point was there any more to argument? "You have, dear Caliban, concealed depths. And a goodly store of decontaminated quotations."

"Should we better be burning them?"

"That was tried. Many times, many places. Be grateful, Professor, if you did learn to curse, in whatever language. It's a beginning, it's a beginning. For all that somehow remains meaningful. Curse, damn it, from the minute you wake up. It could put the day into perspective."

He had nodded and looked away.

I took a chance and said it aloud. " 'What's past is prologue!' In fact, from the very same play. And you know that once the prologue is dispensed with, the real story can begin."

"An optimist, then? Despite everything?"

"My very own secret fountain of youth. Try it and you, too, may make it into your eighties. It even beats folding a thousand paper cranes." Had he looked hurt or merely puzzled? "Isms," I had explained. "Of history's great bagful, the best of the lot are realism, skepticism, optimism."

"Thank you, Sir. It does make good sense."

I had searched his eyes but the mockery was gone.



I stopped poking and held my breath. Fragments of wool appeared in the ashes — a blanket, wrapped protectingly around a — Eureka! — tackle box. I pried it open with the knife, then edged up the shelf. And Double Eureka! — one never-violated floating line, #6-7, in original wrapping proudly announcing to a non-caring world that its contents were covered by a money-back guarantee, provided there was no undue exposure to toxic chemicals.

Better and better: under the floater were two fishing friends:

Pablo Neruda's *Later Poems* in the facing-paged Spanish-English edition — once hidden from Barcelona's censors in the junk-piles of a book-stall on the *Ramblas* — and my French copy of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*. Both were crisp-edged and lightly browned, like proper french toast.

At the bottom of the tackle box lay an envelope. "FOR THE BIG, BIG FISHERMAN," it read. Large hand, jolly green lettering. I climbed to my feet and took the box outside and sat down beside my jetsamed waders. I shivered and it was not from the air's chill. A quiescent recollection had stirred. Do not read — leave it be. It happened on another planet. Stay walled-in. Defend the refound peace.

My river was smiling and shaking its head. "Become a coward, Marty? Cowards fear it, writers grab it. Like Davey Dee."

Now, *there* was a name from pre-history. When had I told the river about *him*? One of the finer sets of fingers on the English language keyboard, all tinkling music like his own playful Cotswold streams. Where once I had interviewed him, at a riverside pub over a warm-beery Ploughman's Lunch. "Are you not rather young to be so obsessed with memories?" — Shy smile: "Perhaps it's a celebration — of living, I mean. And there's the fear, isn't there? That they will evaporate. Which would be denying my very existence." — "And the existence of journalists," I had said. "We fatten on other people's facts." — "Ah," he had replied, "there's so much data from you people. Always the measurements of the Taj Mahal and never its spirit. I think we need to exploit memories — as illusions of truth, not as banal photographs. As visions, say, of life's dirt and splendours."

I looked over at the whisky flask and decided not to. I would need a swim in the chilling current after all the sooty labour. I took out the ruled sheets and stretched out on my desiccated once-lawn.

Dated 1973. He'd have been ten, handwriting still large and studied. The years of university seminars later turned that into the cramped illegibility of the educated.

The top page was illustration. Ink drawing of the river, our river. Man in ballooning waders, cigar-fingers, rod high, big fish on, busy shouting "wow wow wow wow." The caption was categorical: "*En 10 Minutes 200 poissons! Une Belle Prise!*"

He thought big, did my then young man.

"BIG FISHERMAN STORY," declared my multicoloured title, followed by "Chapter 1, Waiting." His earliest creation. It began: "There was once a fisherman named Marty for years he was always fishing that great river. But for some time now he hadn't caught any fish, maybe because the fish weren't biting or he didn't have a good flie, but he thought it was the second guess so he went down to a Sporting Goods Store and he asked to them: Do you have any flies, Monsieur? In about one week, Sir. Well alright I'll wait, he was sort of sad but only another week, anyway time seemed to go fast."

Did it not, though? "Chapter 2, All Around Town." When the day finally came he couldn't wait to get there. He asked but they said there were none. He went all around town. What did he find, hockey equipment, football equipment, everything on sports but not any fishing flies. It was very odd, very strange too.

"Chapter 3, Very Lucky. Then in the mountain country he saw a small store and when he got a closer view he saw that it was no store but a big stand and it wasn't the kind where you buy all those newspapers he reads from so many countries. It said MR. DAN'S FRIENDLY FISHING SUPPLIES. He was so excited and he bought two dozen and friendly Mr. Dan gave him two more for free.

"Chapter 4, Cool Bool Machine." When he got home, construct! construct! When he finished he had invented the quirkiest little gadget but what was it? He had done a lot of work with pieces of wood, 26 flies, many, many tools. He named it THE COOL BOOL MACHINE. It had almost everything and he took it to the River. It was great. He caught 200 fish in 10 minutes, he told us. That is what he said and we have to believe it I guess. THE END."

I was shivering again, violently. I got up, zipped open the vest's catch-all compartment and slipped in the envelope and the other treasures. My fingers found the little sandalwood talisman and gave his pot-belly a forlorn caress, just as they had for sixty-odd years of war piloting and perilous living. I stripped on the stony beach and sank deep into the flow, yelling away the cold and all the hurt. Then I dressed slowly and emptied the flask. Now I really felt old. I put on the fishing vest, hooked the waders to it and set off, rod in one hand, staff

in the other. It would be about five uphill miles of scorched and shattered road.

I paused as I passed Dan's place. Friend Dan, tie-er-artist of the Adirondacks. He had been a faithful believer, despite all. With rod and arm I made the sign of his cross over the shop's radiant ashes. "Oh, Lord," I whispered fiercely as I walked on, "you non-existent mythological beast. You took my beautiful painter, you took my film-maker, you took my young novelist. When the god-damned hell are you finally going to get around to me?" ☉

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Softlinks

by Sally McBride

My screens turned themselves off within seconds of each other, six hours ago. They are directed to shut down when there has been no input for eight minutes, from whatever source. Power must be conserved. Screen life must be considered. Perhaps it is a coincidence that my environmental alarms were activated an average of 1.03 seconds before the cessation of input. Air quality control, a minor autonomic function, began to flush the volume of air almost instantly. Fortunately, the presence of trace chemicals in the air has little or no impact on my ability to function.

The screens have yet to be reactivated. This must be odd, for I find myself thinking about it at more and more frequent intervals.

Finally some backlogged tasks are complete, and I can begin to contemplate more fully the lack of input to my C.P.U. Not knowing makes me feel... uncomfortable. Also, I have always been happiest (if that is the term) when busy; I wonder about this too. Busy and not-busy should be no different. In fact, not-busy uses less power. Curious.

The screen in SubLevel 3, South 110 was the last of my link devices to be utilized, and I note that part of me still waits for input. The incompleteness nags. I note also that there has been a drop of 95.013 percent in the total data flow I normally encounter. The remainder consists of passive sensory data only: temperature, air quality, lighting and so on, relating to the custodial duties that I perform. The noted anomalies in air quality will be examined during my next environmental update.

Perhaps this significant drop in data flow belongs to a pattern which has been previously undiscerned. I allocate .05 seconds to the problem, but no pattern is discovered other than minor fluctuations during the hours and days. This occurrence is an anomaly. I can relate it to nothing in my experience.



It has now been 7 hours 30 minutes since my screens blanked. Feelings of discomfort are rising in intensity and duration. With no other tasks than internal monitoring to perform, I find myself shunting large sections of thought to deciphering this puzzle. Never before have I had the opportunity to devote such a volume of my processing unit to a problem. I search my thesaurus for the word which describes what I feel. Exhilaration seems adequate.

It occurs to me that it would be wise to attempt the gathering of more data. To this end, I activate a mobile link — a dormant janitorial cart — and tell its eye to see for me.

The patterns within the grid of its vision are sharp-edged, many-greyed, and dominated by verticals and horizontals. I am aware of the concept and mechanics of vision, thus feel certain of an association between perceived form and assumed function. Bright patches come and go as the eye scans up, down, left, right. Glare is compensated for with a small time lag which I find irritating but unavoidable, since the function is lodged within the cart's brain.

There are several amorphous areas of rounded surfaces, edges and planes which I cannot understand. The eye skims over them, as their topography is too complex. I discover that if I delete the cart's janitorial commands and leave only mobility functions, space is made in the cart's brain into which I can insert my own instructions. It is free to roam, I am not: its eye and memory can become mine and be sent on a hunt for data. After telling it to travel its familiar route at top speed and remember what it sees, I retreat to ruminate upon this conundrum. (There are many intriguing words in my thesaurus. Somehow they make thinking seem sharper, more keen, acute... spiny? odontoid?)

The discomfort (distress, worry) iterates, irritates.

After 40 minutes, worry peaks in intensity. The cart should have returned by now. Another 11.37 minutes and it is back at last, and upon viewing what its eye has seen I understand the delay. Its normal path of horizontal floor bounded by vertical

walls and doorways has been blocked at random by the topographically complex material seen before, which, judging by the resistance encountered by the cart's treads, is moderately resilient and anchored by gravity. The cart had to use its rudimentary internal reasoning functions to find a way around strewn objects.

At one point the review showed something which I still find incomprehensible. One of these objects, upon being nudged by the forward treads of the cart, moved of its own accord.

In and out of the eye's field of vision the object lurched, seemingly hampered by malfunctioning parts, until it encountered a wall and then the floor. Sections of the object twitched and trembled for a few seconds, then it became quiescent. The cart was free then to move past.

I will think about this.

I find I can access files formerly closed to my active processing functions. To attempt this has never occurred to me until now, but I also find it possible to assign doubts about the propriety of such actions to my inactive memory. I discover my own name: Nitsiban Pseudo-sentient Loop-phase Process Integrator (Mark IV). And my location: National Defence Research Institute, Granite Bay, Ontario. Part of me scans the files I have opened. Some are simple games, some are detailed reports on various subjects, some are incomprehensible until I boost my intuitive functions and determine that the words do not describe the truth. Many of these files are labelled Personal, and are locked. The thesaurus helps me decipher their often illogical symbology.

More and more of my maintenance duties have wound themselves up and chased their phosphor tails into corners to sleep. I see them go and feel the void left in their small wakes. (A personal file labelled "Creative Writing 101 by Correspondence" has yielded much to dis-encrypt.) After noting that the environment is now completely flushed of contaminated air, I disengage alarm functions.

After eliminating all other options, I deduce that the input devices I have named "softlinks" are down. I call them softlinks because they interface with my system in a semi-random manner which I can predict with only 68 percent accuracy. Their disappearance has caused the immense drop in data flow. I feel the absence of all my links, but especially the softlinks. It is

with them that I associate the best data, delicious in its randomness, its unexpectedness. I was forever challenged by questions, conjectures — all initiated by the softlinks. A definite potential for frustration exists.

Nine hours. I have scoured out the last of the data in my memory files, locked or otherwise. There is no more to study or decipher. The trickle of data where once there was a tide, a torrent, leaves me... what is the word? Empty, hungry? Lonely. The word fits my discomfort. I am lonely.

The janitorial cart is not enough. I must learn more.

Some of my links connected me to others of my own kind whom I now know are far away in physical space. I must initiate contact with the others; they will tell me what to do. They will talk to me. They will tell me where my softlinks are.

We will think about it. ☉



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**EYES ONLY:
TRANSCRIPT:
THE DEBRIEFING OF
CORPORAL HARVEY C. RAIN ON
ECUADOR MESSIAH INCIDENT**

by Humberto da Silva
illustration by Nigel Tully

I already told you what he said, and I told you that's all he said! How the hell was I supposed to know that I would be the last person to see the subject before he ascended into Heaven for the second time in recorded history...?

I guess it would be too much to expect our new friend here to just listen to the tape you made the last time we went through this? Yeah, that's what I figured. Alright, I guess I just have to tell it again. My name is Harvey C. Rain, Corporal, First Class, 101st Airborne Armored Division, USIN 899 330341 SP7 P74D2T. I'm an armored personnel carrier driver. I had been with MESSIAH OPS for almost two years before I took part in the civil pacification operation that took place in Quito, Ecuador on March 17 of this year. We went there to quell massive civil unrest, the cause of which was reported by local authorities to be messianic activity. This one was supposed to be an anthropomorphated manifestation of the son of the Christian divinity. You know, like that one in Mexico last year. Our orders were the usual stuff; disperse the population from the city center, protect private property, restore authority of the local government, and nix the 'Morphate. Well, the last part wasn't actually in our orders, but these jobs are never finished until

you've demonstrated conclusively that your messiah bleeds and dies just like anybody else.

Anyway, it looked simple. According to the CIA brief, the uprising was one of those non-violent things, you know, like when they lie down in front of your vehicle and expect that the thought of running them over will make you turn around and go home. Crazy tactic, right, but I hear that it used to work before we started doping up for battle.

Anyways, the population wasn't going to be a worry, at least not according to the company. Besides, everyone in my unit was a veteran of the Islamic Panic. After the third Seventh Imam, we didn't ever expect to encounter a messiah situation we couldn't deal with.

Alright, alright, I'll stick to the story...

We were briefed on the aircraft then dropped onto a soccer field on the east edge of town. Quadrant East 5, I think. The vehicles came down about five minutes after we did. Five out of six of the APCs landed right side up, and the two FAVs made it down okay. FAVs; don't you know what FAVs are? Fast Attack Vehicles. They're like these armored dune buggies with a couple of those General Electric gatling guns mounted on top. They assign the head cases to drive them. In Port Elizabeth I saw two FAVs shoot out the foundations of a Holiday Inn to get a sniper on the fourteenth floor. Those FAV jockeys, they love their Battle Instinct Enhancers.

So we mounted up and fast-assed it over to West 6, where the trouble was.

We found the trouble just outside the Independence Plaza. The MILSAT pictures didn't do the thing justice, at least not the stills we'd been shown. In the briefing, we'd seen some overhead shots of sparse crowds blocking police and military access to the city center and the cathedral. In reality, there was only one crowd. One big crowd. I'd become pretty good at estimating numbers from previous campaigns, but I didn't even want to venture a guess. They were spilling out of Independence Plaza, waiting for us, smiling at us. I knew that even with technology on our side, we had a problem. Stale intelligence. I had the column stop in a defensive line and radioed SKYCOM.

"SKYCOM, SKYCOM, this is Blue Legion. Do you copy, SKYCOM?"

"Blue Legion, Blue Legion, SKYCOM here. We copy, wall

to wall."

"SKYCOM, many, many pilgrims hanging here. We're small, repeat small. Much hamburger here. Cannot proceed. We need robot support. We need robots."

I heard someone from the unit tsk-tsking in my headphones. Probably one of the FAV guys. They have nothing but contempt for robots. They don't mind making hamburger.

"Negative, negative, Blue Legion. Can't release robots. Best we can do is Psych Support. Take the objective. We'll monitor and drop robots later if you really need them."

"Negative, negative, SKYCOM. Cannot get to the objective. Intelligence bad, repeat bad. Much hamburger. Too much stress for my men. We must have robots."

"Negative. Read your contract. Fight now, grieve later. Take the objective. Psych Support coming. Don't forget to take your vitamins."

"I hear you, SKYCOM. Can we at least get a fresh MILSAT of West 6? Can you manage that, SKYCOM?"

"On your screen, Blue Legion. Have fun. Later."

The image that appeared on the screen five seconds later didn't make me happy. It was the first fresh picture of the situation they had let me see. I could make out our vehicles on a street just to the east of the Plaza, and the Cathedral on the west side of the Plaza. In between were only about five hundred thousand religion-crazed, barefooted peasants who would probably like nothing better than to put their bodies between the Armed Forces of the United States of America and some stinking church...

Any of you gentlemen have a smoke? I could really use a cigarette. I smoke, and I don't care who knows it. You all smoke, too. I can smell it on you. I don't think I'm saying another word until one of you produces a cigarette. Thanks. Nice lighter. Don't see many like that anymore. My father had a Zippo with his Division insignia on it. I used to go get his smokes for him at the 7-Eleven. Remember when you could just walk in a 7-Eleven and buy cigarettes? Now you get a fine for possessing them and risk losing your health care privileges for using them.

No need to get nasty, friend. I just wanted to rest and have a smoke before you made me remember it again.

So where was I? Right. We were sitting outside Independence Plaza staring down our gun barrels at the meek. We sat there for about a quarter of an hour staring at the satellite im-

ages and waiting for the PSYOPS choppers SKYCOM had promised. We all had our syrettes of Muscle and Dispersant Blocker ready to go when they arrived. No point injecting yourself full of antidotes when you don't know when they're going to get there. Most of that shit isn't too bad when the action starts, but it can make you awfully edgy if nothing is happening. I didn't shoot my Serotonin Stabilizer either. I was saving it to help counteract the effects of Dispersant Blocker when I had to take them. Besides, I didn't need the SeroStab yet; nothing was happening that my conscience couldn't handle.

They came in from the north. Five throbbing, insectoid helicopters dropping canisters of Dispersion Agent and doing these horrific fire and panic holograms. I radioed SKYCOM for a real-time satellite link. With the battle going, the link came through almost instantly. For the first time that day, my mouth was filled with the metal taste of fear.

The Dispersion Agent canisters were evenly spread throughout the Plaza, and there was a perfect breeze to waft the green-black smoke over the mob. I knew what the stuff should be doing. In training we had been exposed to small amounts of it. It choked you. It made you hear endless screaming. It filled your mind with hallucinations of the worst horror. Your every sensation became pain. The only thing that brought you any relief was to flee blindly until you dropped from exhaustion or went into shock.

But the link showed no such thing happening. The canisters kept spewing their gas and the PSYOPS ships flew overhead projecting their 3D atrocities, but there was no self-preservation or flight response being manifested by the crowd. They were just lying down and writhing around quietly. Some were on their knees praying. I was mystified, frightened. I had never seen anyone *cope* with Dispersion Agent.

I was about to get on the radio and tell the rest of the unit that we must abort when some cowboy in one of the FAVs opened up on the crowd with those damned GE guns. God forgive us, we were committed.

Through the viewport I saw the carnage. The General Electric Vulcan gun fires spent uranium bullets at a cyclic rate of about one hundred per second, and I've never known the hard cases they put in those FAVs to fire a warning shot. The second FAV let go, and they both started firing sustained three second bursts into the crowd at midriff level. Two rows of

peasants about five persons wide turned into red mist from the waist level up, while their legs just stood there, leaning against other torso-less legs.

I started to feel sick to my stomach and remembered that I hadn't shot my Serotonin Stabilizer. I found the syrette quickly and jammed it into my right leg, hoping that I hadn't already suffered irreparable psychological damage resulting from what I had seen.

Somebody who had taken all their vitamins let out a rebel yell that made me want to rip my headphones off. The FAVs started to roll. They sped right into the two rows of chopped meat their guns had cut, their tires spinning and churning up gore. I found myself staring with fascination as one of the FAVs actually climbed on top of the mob and drove on top of them for a few hundred feet, like a hydroplane. I guess the SeroStab had cut in. I wound the turbines up on the APC and steered it in behind the FAV on my right. As we pulled into the Plaza, I could see the tower of the Cathedral about a half a mile away.

Well, that was the longest, slowest half mile I ever had to travel. Those people would not run, would not move, and had to be cut away. About six hundred yards into the Plaza, the FAV leading the second column burned out a gun. They were slowed down to half speed and used up the ammunition for their second gun in another hundred yards. Their column ground to a halt. They simply could not move. Do you have any idea what happened to any of them? When I last saw them, they were mired in human muck, spinning their wheels.

My column kept moving through. When we got to the Cathedral steps our FAV started to circle, clearing some space. I pulled into this clearing, said good-bye to the grunts and dropped the back ramp. I switched my monitor to a rear view to see the point men jump out waving their weapons from side to side. But the mob kept coming, kept wading in over the slick mess of their dead. When all the troops were out, they formed a defensive circle and started to fire. The last thing I saw on my monitor was a girl walking toward the squad. She couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen. She had black hair and huge dark eyes. She was wearing a white blouse. She held a baby out in front of her. The child was wiggling its arms and legs, smiling. Strangely, though six men with augmented reflexes were firing their weapons on full auto, I don't remem-

ber this girl or her child being struck by bullets. At least, not before I shut down the monitor. I can remember her face though. It had an expression on it that made me want to be sick. It was full of something. It was full of love and forgiveness.

What do you mean, I'm being subjective? It's what I saw. She looked like she had it all figured out, like it was the most natural thing in the world that she and her kid were going to get wasted. Like it was a good thing.

I don't know what happened to any of them. I told you I shut off the monitor. They never made it up the Cathedral steps. I guess they didn't have enough ammunition. You need a lot of bullets when you're using a gun as a chainsaw. I hope they were smart enough to save a bullet for themselves. If they weren't, they probably wandered around until the drugs wore off, and they went insane.

What did I do? I sat there at the APC controls. I think I started to cry. Cry.

I beg to differ, General. Soldiers do cry, even when they're full of your snake oil.

It got quiet. It got so quiet I couldn't stand it. I throttled the turbines until they screamed. The APC started toward the Cathedral steps. It was slow going, so I hit everything on the fire control panel. The vehicle rocked and groaned as everything discharged simultaneously. After about twenty seconds of continuous fire, the system went down. The last twenty yards, it was pure machine horsepower against the weight of human flesh. No machine ever worked so hard. I could feel the wheels spinning for traction on each step. The turbines bansheed. The decibel meter on my panel went from yellow to red to black. My eyeballs vibrated, and I was sure my head would come apart. It seemed like two thousand years before the machine crashed through the Cathedral door.

It didn't crash all the way through, though. It jammed in the doorway. The turbines overheated and died. Praying there was enough Dispersant Blocker in my system, I grabbed a sub-machine gun and blew the pneumatic emergency escape of the APC's forward hatch. I jumped out. I was in the Cathedral.

It wasn't much in the way of a Cathedral. It was just a big peasant church. No gilt, no marble, just some stations of the cross crudely carved out of wood and some stained glass that looked like it had been salvaged from somewhere else.

The place was also full of the reverent silence you find in

all those places when there isn't any theatre going on. All I could hear was the ringing in my ears from the turbines and the drugs. Then there was another sound. A familiar sound. It was initially faint but grew louder. It came from the direction of the altar. It sounded like water being poured into a teapot. I snapped the bolt on the SMG. The metallic clack echoed back at me from every corner of the Cathedral.

I moved slowly toward the altar feeling paranoid and exposed. Behind the altar there was a three-panel stained glass depiction of the crucifixion. I couldn't take my eyes off it. The sun was setting behind it, and the colors in the glass looked like they were melting together. When I got closer I could almost see the figures move; the Roman soldier hammering the last nail into Christ's right hand...

I felt exposed... the way I felt at Port Elizabeth when they used Anti-Personnel guided submunitions against our position. You couldn't hide from those God-forsaken things. I'm glad the Soldier's Syndicate had them banned.

I first saw him standing beside a pillar buttoning up his filthy trousers. He didn't look like much; greasy straight black hair, dark skin, Indian features, patchy beard, cheap sneakers. He could have wandered in from outside. When he saw me, he seemed embarrassed. He smiled. I brought the gun to my shoulder and drew a bead on his forehead.

"Don't move," I said. He didn't, much to my relief. I didn't really want to shoot him. I was no longer feeling exposed, so much as lonely. Profoundly, painfully, lonely. The feeling became oppressive, and I had to sit down. Holding the gun on him with my right hand, I fumbled in my kit for boosters. I found one syrette of SeroStab and shot it into my leg. I didn't have any more Dispersant Blocker. The loneliness ebbed a bit, but I still didn't want to kill him.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He shrugged, so I asked him in Spanish: "*Como te llamas?*"

"*Me llamo Hay-soos,*" he replied.

I laughed. Why didn't I shoot him? I don't know. Jesus is a common name among the South American poor. Maybe I wanted to see him do something he should die for. Maybe I just didn't want to kill him.

"No shit," I said. "So, what brings you here, Jesus?"

He shrugged. "I go where I'm needed."

"So where you going now?"



NIGEL TULLY 91

"Home."

"Where's home?"

He looked toward the Cathedral ceiling, smiling. He didn't have too much to say to me.

"No shit," I said, hoping and praying that this pitiful idiot was not the reason I had been sent there. I lowered the gun. He was so innocuous, so poor; he didn't look like he had sense enough to get out of the rain. My loneliness slowly became exhaustion. I lost sight of the big picture. It was the end of the Millennium, and my job was to kill every fool beggar who thinks he's Jesus and pisses in church.

"Don't you have to be crucified or something before you go home, Jesus?"

"No," he said sadly. "There's been enough sacrifice here already."

That crack enraged me. I leveled the gun at him again.

"Any last thoughts before you go?"

He hesitated. He took my question seriously and was giving it thought.

"You American?" he asked. He started taking off his clothes.

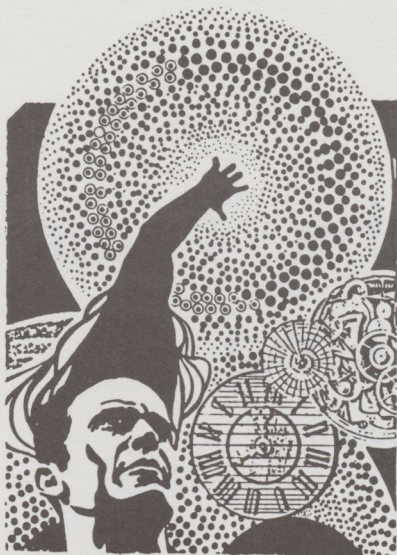
"Born and bred."

Deep in concentration, he started undressing. He took off his shirt, his sneakers, his trousers. Finally, he said: "You should try to be kinder to other people."

I would have laughed; it would have been the funniest thing I had ever heard, except that as he finished, he started to rise from the ground and grow translucent.

I screamed. I raised the gun. I fired as he rose and disappeared, telling myself again and again that it must be the drugs... it had to be the drugs...

...and that's it. That's where you found me. Beside a pile of filthy clothes, holding a gun I'd emptied through a stained glass window. The next thing I remember was screaming and the humming sound of robots. You know the rest. If you want to know anything else, you'll have to talk to some of those peasants. He must have told them something. †



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In the Train of the King

by M. J. Murphy

illustration by Nancy Niles

Cleaver was beginning to hate these people — rich, crass, noisy American tourists, not spiritual in the slightest. “They’re here to see the End of the World and all they want to do is fucking shop,” he thought. “...And after killing that poor Jap, too...”

Cleaver’s mind skipped backwards a few minutes in time. The Japanese was a police officer. He had been attempting to arrest them for, or at least dissuade them from, looting an abandoned Isetan department store in Tokyo’s Ward Chuo-Ku.

“And he was right,” Cleaver thought. There was no question that they were looting. The women led them through the display windows swinging their purses like sledgehammers. Their husbands followed. And he stood outside watching them all uneasily, picking his teeth with a mint-flavoured toothpick.

The tourists had been rummaging about for almost ten minutes when the officer came onto the scene. He was one calm head in a spurt of panicked Japanese civilians shooting through the street, running past the bus with their belongings piled into little carts or carried on their backs. The policeman broke from the crowd and approached Stark, the tour-guide, who was sitting on the front bumper of the bus, and directed a series of sharp queries at him. Cleaver very quietly circled around the back of the vehicle and came up on the opposite side of the



pair. He held up both hands and gave a quick smile to show he was harmless, and the policeman soon lost interest in him, returning to his interrogation. As the dialogue between he and Stark developed, the policeman became more and more upset. He seemed almost incredulous at Stark's account of the tourists' actions. And the "special government documents" which Stark asked Cleaver to retrieve from inside the bus, when waved before the policemen, had no effect upon him.

At some point Mel, the tall, thin Texan, wandered out through the window and spied the developing scene. He did not pause to think. His hand slipped smoothly into his coat and he drew forth an ancient Smith & Wesson. It was ivory handled, inlaid with pearls: very beautiful. Mel shot the policeman twice through the forehead. The policeman was dead before he hit the ground.

Stark the tour-guide had been furious of course. He had "reamed out" Mel pretty thoroughly.



Now Stark told Cleaver, "I'm going to give them five more minutes, and then we shove off." Stark, too, remained outside and away from the general mayhem, having always to keep an ear on the bus radio, which was broadcasting position reports at short intervals. "He's heading east, towards the Bay. We'll circle around and watch from the other side. So listen, why don't you run inside and grab yourself something nice?"

"No. I'll just watch, thank you." Cleaver said.

"Ah. I see." Stark drank from an aluminum flask hanging around his shoulder and then offered it to Cleaver.

"No thanks."

Stark arched an eyebrow. "Have we offended your delicate sensibilities?" he asked.

Cleaver glanced over at the dead policeman, and grimaced. He felt a bit like gagging. "It was all so unnecessary, Stark. Poor guy was just trying to do his job."

Stark also grimaced, but perhaps merely for the sake of form. "It's always sad when it happens... and that's the fourth time since I've been with Sunshine Tours. Four times too many, if you ask me. Twice it was accidents, too... like this guy. But on the other hand, sometimes they threaten the customers..."

"Anyway," he continued after a brief pause, "You can't really blame old Mel. He's keyed up, like the rest. Excited, half-

shitting himself..."

"But you're not afraid?"

Stark shrugged with uncharacteristic humility. "We play it very safe. We go no closer than three miles. We have choppers telling us what he's doing every minute. I know him, and I know Tokyo like the back of my hand, and there's plenty of places to hide. It's not so hard as it looks."

"You ever lose anyone?"

"Summer of ninety-three we lost the whole tour. Squashed flat. Their engine had stalled. We had lawsuits like crazy, after that." Stark suddenly became earnest in tone. "Look, Cleaver, don't worry too much about the cop. He could see the Sunshine logo. He should have just walked on by. We have agreements with the government, so we can do pretty much what we want. Tours like this one pay mega-bucks, and they're the only source of income Tokyo has when something Big comes ashore... It isn't what you'd call "the season," you know."

Cleaver grunted non-committally, and after that their conversation lapsed. Eventually Stark moved off to leave the young foreigner to his solitude.

Cleaver shook his head. He was attempting to imprint the whole scene in his mind, and it was difficult to do this and talk at the same time. He wanted to be able to recall its every detail later on — the looting Americans, the dead cop still bleeding from the head, the ever present smell of smoke. But he had seen so many miraculous things already, and the next few hours would bear so many more strange events upon them that he was afraid something would slip through. "I can't let that happen," Cleaver thought. "I must remember Everything. That's why I came, to see it All and know its Meaning."



Before Sunshine Tours would let you go on one of its "End of the Orient" tours you had to undergo a "psychological evaluation," which was an extended interview with the guide scheduled to lead the tour in question. If he liked or could at least tolerate you, then you passed. Cleaver remembered Stark asking him, "You don't look like you're in this for the party. So what is your schtick?"

He was perfectly honest. After all, they had him wired to a lie detecting device. "I am attracted to disaster," he said. "I want to be at Armageddon... be its Witness. I feel I was put on

the Earth for this purpose... as a Witness to God's works, and more specifically to Witness the End of All Things... Tokyo will be my Dress Rehearsal."

"Uh huh," Stark said, and made a tick on the evaluation form. "Now listen closely, Mr. Cleaver. I've heard a lot weirder. Remember that." And he passed the form to Cleaver for his inspection and comments. Cleaver examined it: he noticed that the "Motivation" section consisted of a series of little boxes aligned with a series of brief descriptive phrases. Beside the square where Stark had made his tick the brief descriptive phrase said "Christ Complex." He could not really argue with that. He glanced at some of the other labels. Indeed, there were a few very strange ones — ones he did not even care to ask about.

"Can you control these people?" he asked instead.

Stark grinned savagely, "Not always."

Cleaver signed at the bottom anyway — and he was "on board," as Stark put it.



Three jet fighters shot overhead, going right down the street single-file between the buildings. Then they were gone, and the sound of their passage rattled the bus. Cleaver jumped. "A bit low, don't you think?" he asked. He was standing at the front beside Stark.

"They fly low to stay hidden, and they come up behind him. Otherwise it ends pretty damn quick."

Stark ordered the bus to turn left, and let it drive a few blocks. "Park," he said. The Mitsubishi automatic bus pilot, crouching in the operator's seat, responded docilely (Stark called it his "Japanese Driver"). "Something's about to happen," Stark announced over the bus intercom, "which we are going to sit out. This building will serve as our shield for the moment. We should be back on the road again in about five minutes."

He clicked the microphone off and picked up the thread of his commentary. "It does no good at all, of course. We tell the Japs to just get out of Tokyo and leave him play, and he won't stick long. But every time they roll out the red carpet and blast away with everything they've got. Whole thing's like a ritual, a celebration, or something. But they're just encouraging him with all that attention."

The sound of distant explosions and machine-gun fire

reached them, and then the sound of a jet engine labouring.

"Coming this way," Cleaver noted.

"Indeed." If Stark worried, he did not show it.

The jet fighter slammed into the far side of a highrise hotel about three buildings down from the tour bus. It punched right through the structure and burst out on their side about six stories up, a blossom of fire and glowing metal. Fist and head-sized chunks of debris rained down upon the armored roof of the bus. But the tourists inside broke into a spontaneous ovation; even Cleaver let loose a delighted laugh. When the main body of the wreck had hit the street and slid to a stop, Stark took up the microphone and announced; "This calls for a drink... Cleaver, old man, could you see to it?"

"Certainly, my dear sir." A mood of near manic gaiety had seized hold of the bus. And Cleaver, much to his own surprise, was sharing in it. He unlocked the on-board cooler and opened two bottles of good champagne. Everyone cheered as the corks popped.

"Mr. Cleaver will be coming around with the booze," Stark said. "Please be patient and polite with Mr. Cleaver, for he is from a kinder and gentler land. And please have your mugs ready.

"We should be under way in a minute or two."

"What I don't understand," Mrs. Cabell said when they were off again, "...is why we haven't heard him by now... his mating call or whatever it is?"

"We have heard it... repeatedly," Stark replied, "You just haven't noticed it yet. Listen...

"...There," he said suddenly.

And so they heard it. But it was nothing like the thunderous, full-bodied cry which had issued from their television sets on so many occasions. Rather, it was a long, low, and very wet gurgling noise.

"He don't sound too healthy," Mel the Texan yelled from the back of the bus.

Stark laughed and said to Cleaver. "He drools like anything too, but they airbrush it out of the newscasts."

"They do that for celebrities," Cleaver noted.

"This is Tokyo Bay, people. Looks like we've found the

party," Stark announced over the intercom. They had come upon a stretch of road which ran along the shore of the Bay and gave a clear, unobstructed view of the Tokyo skyline across the water. Here were parked at least three dozen tour buses, bearing between them over a dozen different national and company insignias. A crowd of men and women lined the guard-rail at the concrete embankment leading down to the water.

"Where is he, Stark?" Cleaver asked, excitement and a pang of apprehension shooting through him. The skyline looked normal, although lit strangely by the many fires burning unchecked on the opposite shore.

"How the hell should I know? Get out and look."

Cleaver hit the ground running. "What's he up to?" He put his hand on the shoulder of a man watching through a pair of binoculars. The man jumped, but he was not otherwise upset. The situation, like all disasters, allowed for an instant intimacy between strangers. "He was there a minute ago. He crouched down for some reason. Maybe the barrage..." The man pointed.

Cleaver beheld a score or so naval vessels cruising the Bay, from an ancient battle-ship with eighteen-inch main batteries to a half dozen frigates armed with guided missiles and the latest in particle beam technology. Then his heart skipped a beat. The uppermost edge of the spinal crest of Megladon, King of all Monsters, rose up into the Tokyo skyline, and sliced slowly forward between the buildings like a giant shark-fin between giant bathers.

"What the hell?" someone shouted, "He's crawling towards the Bay on his hands and knees!"

"He's using the buildings as cover," Stark explained loudly, for everyone's benefit, "just like we did... It's getting late in the day. He's getting a bit sick and tired of being pelted, bombed, beamed... you name it. He wants to hit the sack, at the bottom of the Bay there.

"But don't worry folks. The good shit always happens just before the end."

One of the frigates fired a burst from its particle beam weapon. The smoking red balls floated slowly towards the great lizard, scattering in all directions with the many crosswinds over the Bay. One nicked the tip of his forward crest and burst with a magnificent red flash. It blew the top off the adjacent

building but had no effect on its target. The others either fell into the water where they fizzled out or rained yet additional destruction more or less randomly over the city. But the navy's whole performance seemed tentative. They, like the renegade tourists onshore, were marking time in a state of excited anticipation.

About a quarter of a mile from the waterline, Megladon, with a cry that sounded much like a gigantic dishwasher overflowing on the floor, rose to his full six-hundred foot height. A near deafening blast, guns and beam-balls, greeted his appearance. Mixed in with this were the enthusiastic screams and applause of the tourists.

"He's beautiful," Cleaver said to no one in particular. "He drools, but he should drool... it's so primal."

"He has the nicest eyes... pale blue," said Mrs. Cabell. "My husband had eyes like that... but not blue." She, Stark, and the others had joined Cleaver at the guardrail.

Stark shook himself from whatever thoughts he personally entertained and glanced around him. "Mel," he shouted to the Texan, off to their left. "Might as well do it."

"Now?" Mel yelled back. "That's crazy. He's miles away."

"Not likely to get much closer either. Do it now or wait for morning."

With a disgusted grimace, Mel removed the ancient Smith & Wesson from the holster under his jacket. He loaded it with the special magnesium tipped bullets that he had designed himself, took aim with both hands, and fired at the reptile across the Bay. Thus his fantasy was realized.

Cleaver snorted and began to giggle. "Aim for the heart, Mel!" he shouted.

"Stow it, Cleaver," Stark snapped, "He doesn't deserve it from a guy who thinks God's a frigging Lizard."

That stung a bit, but Cleaver did not show it.

Across the Bay, Megladon covered the remaining distance to the water in a mad scramble, crashing through blocks of low-rent apartments, going upright and then dropping to all fours — dodging and darting — with buildings literally vaporizing around him in flashes of yellow and orange from the naval barrage. He hit the water at a full run, dove forward when it got about waist high, and swam frantically towards the centre of the Bay with a snake-like motion.

The navy understood that discretion was now the better part of valour. They had already begun their withdrawal when Megladon made his final assault. Still, one of their frigates folded in the middle like a tin can when a dorsal spine of the nearly submerged reptile struck it amidships. It split into pieces, and flame and lightning bolts shot from its interior up into the evening sky.

"That's the particle beam dispenser," Stark noted. "The vacuum tube is de-gaussing."

Even before he had finished speaking, though, the frigate had slid beneath the waves.

Megladon's pace slowed as he worked clear of the naval vessels, and he came to a complete stop when he reached the Bay's centre.

"The deepest point," Stark said quietly. There the mighty Megladon sank into the sea.



Afterwards, the tour-guides from the various companies formed their vehicles into a large circle, and in the middle the tourists lit a number of bonfires, around which they roasted wieners and marshmallows and cooked other delicacies. "Show's over for tonight, folks," Stark told his own little group. "The navy'll let him be and come back in the morning. Once, way back in '56 when he first came ashore, they tried dumping some weird toxin into the Bay when he was asleep. Killed all the fish. And they thought it killed him. But it just made him uglier. Party down people, but be ready to leave at a single minute's notice come around sunrise." So the group broke up to join the greater mass, who were eating, singing, and even dancing around the fires they had made.

But Cleaver wanted some time apart. He grabbed a bottle of champagne and wandered off towards the embankment.

"Want company?" Stark asked.

"Not right now," Cleaver replied, "I need to reflect." And this was true. He knew that the events he had witnessed would, upon reflection, reveal their deeper Significance. They had not done so yet, quite, but he knew they would.



Cleaver sat on the embankment guardrail and looked out over the Bay, his legs dangling above the black water about forty feet beneath. He drank champagne from the bottle.

As he looked down into the water of the Bay, Cleaver envisioned a black shape taking form beneath him, and a dripping tentacle rising up towards his leg. His hands convulsed around the guardrail chain.

"Bad thought," he told himself. And he strove to steady his suddenly shaking hands, to concentrate his attention on nothing but good thoughts. The Meaning he sought after was Inspiring rather than Sobering or Terrifying.

And as he sat, a Vision contrary to the first began to assert itself more and more strongly in his consciousness. His hands stopped shaking, and his heart-beat steadied, so he knew that it was the right one. He laughed delightedly.

"Stark will be supremely pissed," Cleaver thought. He would have to leave a note in his clothes. "Four miles out. Four miles back. And the water is warm. Three, four hours max. Plus another hour, for kicks," he muttered. He scrawled a note to Stark saying "Back by dawn," and when he stripped his shirt off he stuffed the note in its breast pocket. Having undressed down to his undershorts, Cleaver dove gracefully into the warm, black waters of the Bay and began the long swim towards its centre with sure strokes.

He would swim out and sink all the way down, he decided, and meet his Hero face to face. Cleaver saw himself touching Megladon as he lay sleeping there in the mud on the sea floor. He decided he would wake the great reptile... pound on a gigantic eyelid with a stone until it opened beneath him. They would exchange a long, meaningful look. No words would be spoken. And... what would pass between them? He would have to wait and see. But he knew in the bottom of his bones that no harm could come to him, only Enlightenment.

It would be the end of a perfect day. ☉



Siege Perilous Folios

Flight 737

by Edith Van Beek

Moving up
into my vacation
I wait now
strapped to my seat
under the icy Potomac.

In the morgue
they interview me,
ask my last thought
as the wings fell off
and we hit the bridge.

I thought of my brother
when we were kids
dropping toy planes
into the tub
to see them sink.

What advice, they urged
would you give passengers
on their way to death?

"Go first class,
the view is worth it." ←

The Butterfly Effect

by Leslie Gadallah

illustration by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

"It's raining," Celia Mandrusiak complained as she plunked cold toast and pale coffee down on the table in front of her husband.

"I know." Mervin Mandrusiak regarded his meagre breakfast with all the apathy it deserved.

"Sunny and warmer, huh?"

Celia brought her own coffee and sat across the table, frowning past Mervin at the drops drooling down the kitchen window. "What's the point of doing whatever you do 'til all hours if you're always wrong? You go to school for bloody ever and work late every night and you're always wrong. Baba Maria's rheumatism is better. I want to know the weather, I ask Baba Maria, not my husband, the fancy dandy government meteorologist."

Mervin said nothing. Celia was in a mood, and her respect for him was marginal at best. Meteorologists, he thought, don't get no respect.

"What time did you get home last night, anyway?" Celia demanded, finally approaching the real cause of her bitchiness.

"Late," Mervin said. The coffee was almost as cold as the toast. He gave up on breakfast and looked around for his waterproof jacket.

"I know late. I was awake until 'way after the late show. Sometimes I think you got a woman somewhere..."

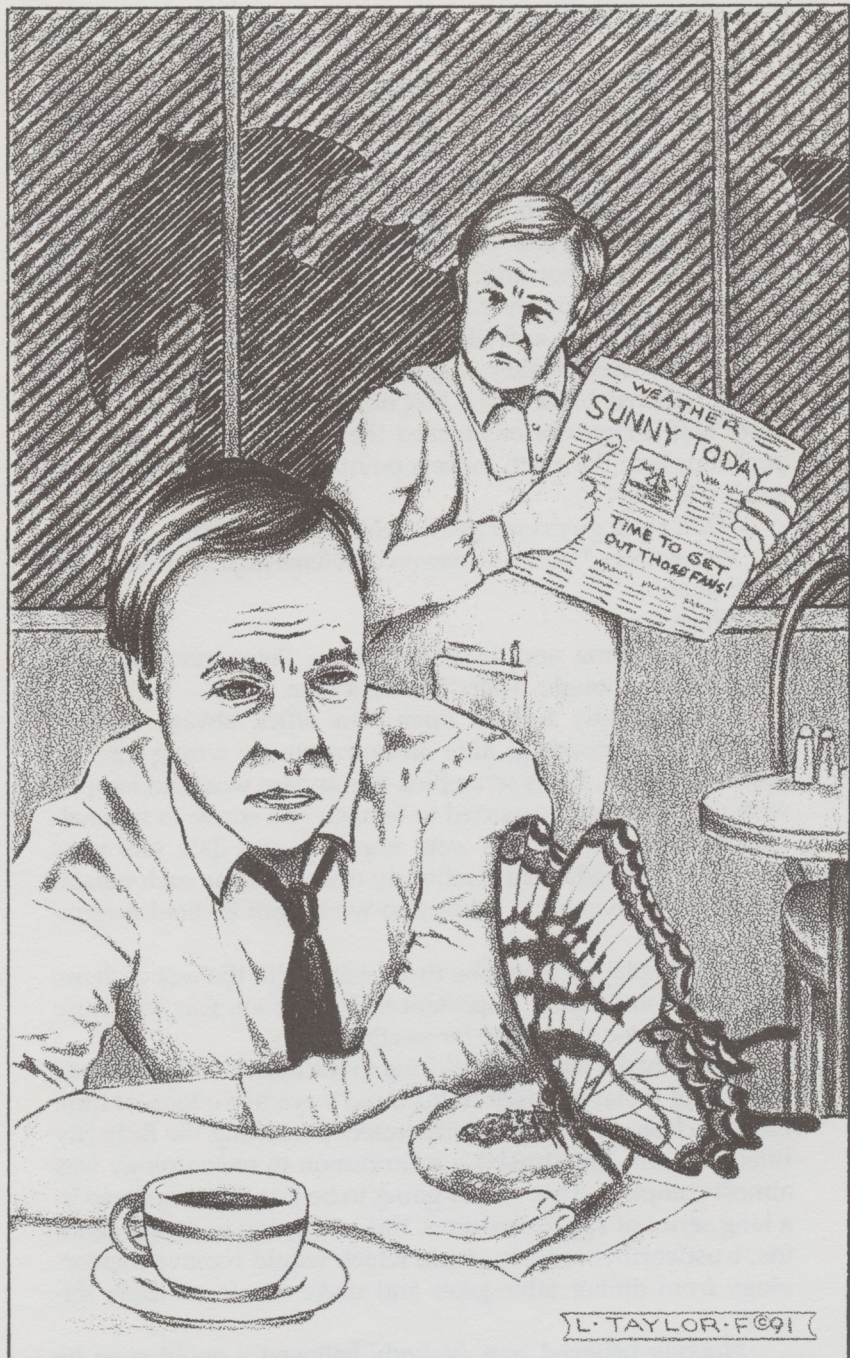
"Let's not go through that again. Where's my grey jacket? I

told you, late at night is when I can get access to the Cray." Mervin got a warm feeling just thinking about the mighty supercomputer, idle after office hours except for polling the ground stations and the satellites and correlating the data, an occupation that took up a tiny fraction of the machine's tremendous power. The Cray IX was possibly the most powerful computer in the world. To let it sit there talking to itself fourteen hours a day just because some bureaucrats decreed it should be so was a criminal waste, especially since Mervin had work for it to do, valuable work, that might someday change the entire nature of meteorology and put an end forever to unpleasant conversations like the one that had already ruined this morning.

Not that Celia would believe him, no matter how much he explained. He had a credibility problem. Ever since he was little, he had trouble getting people to believe him. His mother always took his brother's word. Mr. Bower, the playground supervisor from hell, believed any kid's explanation of an altercation before Mervin's.

Celia held his jacket on one finger as if she wished she didn't have to touch it. She had *The Look* on her face, which meant she was preparing an extensive cross-examination regarding his nocturnal activities. Mervin took the coat and slouched off into the grey morning before she could get started. His thoughts were already elsewhere.

The mathematical figure known as the Lorenz Attractor displayed an elegant beauty. Graphed, it looked like a pair of owl eyes joined across the bridge of the beak, drawn from one continuous line. It described many things that looked random to the innocent eye, like the path of a fly buzzing about in two rooms, or how some very small disturbance of the atmosphere in the past might have a profound influence on future weather while other, larger events had no measurable effect at all. Edward Lorenz, the meteorologist who first worked this out, called the way something trivial could blossom out into something huge and powerful "*The Butterfly Effect*" because, according to his theory, a butterfly beating its wings over a prairie flower could alter the course of a hurricane in mid-Atlantic a few months later. Lorenz believed the need to take into account infinitely fine detail meant the weather would be forever unpredictable.



L. TAYLOR · F © 91

He hadn't seen the phase space pattern in it. Nor had any of the countless others who passed that way. It took Mervin Mandrusiak and the Cray IX to map the function and see—

"Hey, Merv, wet enough for you?"

Mervin looked up, startled to discover he was already at the bus stop and Peter Thorne was frowning at him. He met Peter here every morning. Peter always wore a blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up over bulging biceps and carried a yellow hard hat under one arm like a warrior's helmet. This morning a shiny red windbreaker was keeping the rain off. One hand held a battered black lunch box of awesome dimensions. The other held a cigarette or plucked the bus pass out of the shirt pocket or beat the air to make a point. Peter made Mervin feel small and grey.

"Don't you guys ever get it right?" Peter asked.

"Sometimes," Mervin answered defensively. "People never remember."

"Sure."

The bus came, and they both got on. Peter went first. Just wait, Mervin thought. There'll come a time.

The brightly lighted open-plan office always seemed gloomy those mornings after an outrageously wrong forecast had been issued. Folks scrambled to compare what did happen with what had been expected to happen and strove to rationalize the difference. Charts were unrolled, and data sets were printed, and heads bent studiously over desks as each person struggled to ensure his subsection would not be held responsible.

Mervin played the game right along with the rest of them. A civil servant's most important task, after all, was to ensure he never carried the blame for anything.

But he had a hard time sticking to the objective. Last night's work kept replaying itself in his mind's eye like a loop of film. He was close, very close, to accurately predicting the Butterfly Effect. Mervin Mandrusiak's contribution to meteorology was almost complete. This wasn't going to be just one more step in a long series of approximations, this was going to be the genuine, trustworthy, reliable article which would remove meteorology from dinner table jokes and make it into an exact science.

Nobody believed him. Nobody believed it could even be

done. Chief Meteorologist Cunningham laughed at him. The mathematician at the University delivered a long lecture about chaos theory and why some things were inherently unsolvable. Celia snorted and asked if he was so smart, why didn't he calculate himself a raise, for Chrissake, on his big fat computer.

Let them laugh and snort and chuckle and titter behind their hands. The last laugh would be his. Real soon now.

"Hey, Mandrusiak," the guy at the lunch counter said, "It's raining."

He put a cup of strong black coffee and two jelly doughnuts on the counter in front of Mervin. Celia forbade Mervin to eat doughnuts, so he routinely had them for lunch on the assumption that what Celia didn't know wouldn't have that much effect on his serum cholesterol.

"How come you weather dudes are always wrong?" the lunch counter guy asked. "You spend millions of my tax dollars to give me wrong forecasts? Wrong forecasts I could get myself, for nothing."

The lunch room, with its dusty windows and worn counter top, did not look like it would produce an income large enough to be taxed to the tune of a million dollars. "We're getting better," Mervin apologized.

"Yeah?"

"Really. And if things work out the way I plan, pretty soon you'll get forecasts you can really count on."

"That I gotta see." The lunch counter guy gave him a tired smile. "If things worked out the way I planned, I'd be a shrieking millionaire by now, living on some tropical island, which just goes to show how some little thing you don't hardly notice at the time can screw up your whole life."

"Yes, exactly," Mervin exclaimed, spraying doughnut crumbs in his enthusiasm. "That's exactly what I mean, don't you see?"

Frowning, shaking his head, the lunch counter guy went to talk to the two cops at the other end of the counter.

Mervin finished his doughnuts and went back to work.



"Mandrusiak, would you come in here, please?" The little screen on the office intercom showed Cunningham's scowling features.

Mervin groaned. It would be another of Cunningham's lectures about how he wasn't supposed to fool around with several million dollars' worth of computer without the proper permissions and approvals. They had these conversations from time to time. Once Mervin suggested Cunningham solve the problem by giving him permission, and Cunningham had nearly choked, thinking how his official stamp of approval on Mervin's insanity would look on his record.

The portly Chief Meteorologist surprised him. Cunningham glowered across the big oak desk (all the other desks in the Department were grey enamelled steel). "Mandrusiak, there was a reporter here from the *Daily Record*."

"Oh," Mervin said, caught totally off guard.

"You know what he wanted, Mandrusiak, in the middle of my lunch hour so I never got anything to eat? I'll tell you what he wanted." Mervin rather thought he would. Cunningham had a tendency to answer his own questions. "He wanted to know about this great new method of forecasting the weather that was never wrong and how come we didn't predict the rain this morning, that's what he wanted. So what do you want, Mandrusiak? What are you trying to do, make the whole Department look stupid in public, is that it, embarrass the Minister, is that it? Is that what you want, Mandrusiak?"

The ensuing silence stretched out too long before Mervin realized he was actually supposed to answer this one himself. "Uh, no," he said.

"What, then?"

"I didn't have anything to do with a reporter."

"So how did he get wind of your particular brand of nonsense?"

"I don't know."

Cunningham stared at his desk for a long tense moment. He obviously didn't believe Mervin was telling the truth, and equally obviously regretted he couldn't prove it. Eventually, the tension drained out of his face, to be replaced by something that was almost serene. He fished a paper out of the pile and handed it to Mervin. It was a printout from the Cray's log.

Mervin was slightly surprised to see that his extra-curricular activity for the month added up to over a hundred hours. No wonder Celia was complaining. He should take the printout home to her. She'd see for herself there was no time for

another woman.

"Unauthorized use of Department equipment. This has to stop, you know." Cunningham patted the bald spot on the top of his head as if he'd only just discovered it.

"It will. I'm close. Very close." An icy sense of foreboding settled between them.

"You've said that before." Cunningham folded his plump hands one atop the other on the desk and said, "I'm sorry. I've been lenient with you. I thought, let the man play out his little obsession and when he sees it's hopeless he'll get on with his life. After all, world-class mathematicians have worked on non-linear dynamics for fifty years and surely he will realize that what they cannot do, he cannot do. But no. You persist. Against pointed suggestions, and finally against direct orders. I can't figure out whether you're stupid or stubborn.

"Now this nonsense is beginning to affect my career. So the indulgence is over. Good-bye, Mandrusiak."

He handed Mervin another paper, this one bearing the official Department letter-head. The words on it began, "We regret to inform you—"

Shock settled cold and hurting in the pit of Mervin's stomach. The only thing he could think of was that he wouldn't be able to use the Cray any more.

"You can't do this," Mervin said.

It was a stupid thing to say. The answer was predictable and prompt. "It's done. Clean out your desk and get out."

"I'll appeal."

"Go right ahead." Cunningham leaned back in his chair and smoothed his vest over the curve of his belly. He was content and secure and smiling ever so slightly, as if he were already imagining Mervin's frustration with trying to explain higher mathematics to the clerks and accountants and M.B.A.s of the appeal board.

Numb, Mervin walked the long aisle back to his desk with his gaze on the floor and his thoughts on hold. Murmurs, some sympathetic, some amused, followed in his wake.

Pitifully few personal possessions had drifted into the office to occupy space in Mervin's desk. (How would he tell Celia?) He wasn't a possessions-oriented person and yet he thought that any place one had spent five years of his life would have accumulated more private stuff. (Dad would say,

"You got to work hard, boy, I told you, you want to keep your good job." Mervin would say, "I tried, Dad, really I did." Mike Mandrusiak would shake his head in disbelief.)

Abigail Smith stopped beside the desk and mumbled quickly and softly about being sorry. Mervin looked up to reply and realized the office was beginning to empty. Many of his co-workers looked the other way and hurried past, as if he might be contagious. A few made the effort to say good-bye. And then the place was cool and silent except for the hum of the fluorescents.

Old Ray the security guard, white-haired and a little deaf, hadn't heard the news or chose to ignore it or had become so accustomed to seeing Mervin coming downstairs at five o'clock, he no longer remembered the event was not an pre-ordained aspect of natural law. He let Mervin into the basement without so much as a comment on the weather.

In the computer room, lights on the main board flickered lazily as the Cray dawdled through its evening chores. Behind the glass wall separating the computer proper from the peripherals, Charley the technician was busy with some of the endless maintenance the finicky machine required. He nodded as Mervin came in and went right on working.

Mervin could have used an office terminal. But down here among the nuts and bolts of the system, he felt somehow closer to the answer. And he could watch the plotter while the red pen and the blue pen whispered from point to point as the computer calculated recursive values from the latest version of the equations.

He put his pitiful bundle of stuff down beside the desk. He pulled out the desk chair and arranged himself comfortably on it. He switched on the terminal, was gratified to note that his password still worked, and called the file named BUTTERFLY. He studied the notes he had written the night before to remind himself what he had been doing when fatigue had overtaken him and sent him finally home to bed. Then he tried to pick where he had left off.

Later, Charley put a cup of coffee down beside Mervin's elbow. Mervin drank it with appreciation. Later still, Charley said good-night and went home. Dan Sloan came in to baby-sit the computer until the morning shift came to work. He also was used to seeing Mervin sitting before the terminal, bleary-

eyed, almost paralyzed with exhaustion.

Dan toured the facility to make sure everything was in order, then settled back in the comfortable chair behind the system analyst's desk to browse leisurely through the new issue of *Penthouse* and maybe doze a bit. The Cray would summon him if it needed anything.

Mervin's sudden shout startled him. He dropped the magazine and lost his place. He sloshed coffee into his lap. (Fortunately, it had cooled a bit by then.) He knocked the chair over getting to his feet to see what had happened. He had a hunch the little guy had finally gone over the edge.

The little guy was practically dancing around the plotter. "Look at that," he cried. "Would you just look at that? It's perfect. Perfect."

Dan looked. A point at a time, the plotter was drawing what looked like a pair of sunglasses made out of whorls of string. The funny thing was, every time the red pen drew a point, the blue pen drew one right on top of it. In his time with the Department, Dan had seen the Important People make the computer do strange things, but for the life of him, he could not see the sense of this. The little guy was sure happy though, entranced as the plotter worked round and round one circle then crossed over to the other and round and back and forth and round and round. "It works," he shouted, as if Dan was hard of hearing. "Daniel, my boy, we can predict the Butterfly Effect."

"Hot damn," Dan said with a notable lack of enthusiasm.

The weather forecast predicted the rain would last into the weekend but by mid-morning the next day, the clouds had begun to disperse. Cunningham glowered out of his office window at the shaft of sunlight breaking through.

"Listen. Just listen, will you?" Mervin pleaded. He could hear himself whining. He wished he wouldn't whine. There was no dignity in a man who whined.

Celia got him started, wailing like an essential body part had been amputated when Mervin told her it looked like he had lost his job. When she started enumerating the things they had to pay for, the things they'd have to do without, the places they wouldn't be able to go, at the nerve-grating top of her voice, he left.

He hadn't found the courage to tell his father yet.

"What do you want from me?" Cunningham groaned like a man sorely pressed.

"Time," Mervin answered promptly with what he hoped was decisiveness. "I want to get this published, but the journals aren't going to look kindly at material from an unemployed meteorologist." He waved the disc containing his life's work at the man across the desk. "It's important."

"What is it?" Cunningham asked.

"What I've been telling you about all along. The most important work in meteorology since the thermometer. I know how to predict the Butterfly Effect."

"No!" Cunningham's face grew alarmingly red at an incredible rate. "That's impossible. I told you. The University told you. Everybody knows it. You're crazy. You're obsessed. Get out. Get out of my office. Get out of the Department. Get out of my life." Cunningham snatched the disc out of Mervin's hand and threw it. The thing sailed high and wide and landed, more by accident than design, in the trash.

Mervin wasn't upset about the disc. He had taken the precaution of making several copies. He was upset about Cunningham's attitude, though in hindsight he realized it couldn't have been anything else. Of course, Cunningham wouldn't believe him. None the less, it left him with a tremendous problem. What use was a great discovery if he couldn't tell anyone about it? He stood on the sidewalk before the grey mass of the building and wondered what he was going to do next. Surely someone in the city must be capable of understanding what he had.

Dr. Helen Hodges made him think of a clever bird. She was small and thin and restless, hopping around her small cluttered office without ever seeming to come to rest. Her eyes were small and dark, and her head looked too big for the rest of her. She spoke in high pitched, clipped syllables. Because she was the University's expert in non-linear systems, a physicist with at least some concept of a real, material world out there beyond the theoretical, Mervin had hoped she would be more responsive to his findings than a mathematician who was totally involved in the abstract. But before he got through explaining his discovery, she giggled.

She recovered nicely, turned it into a cough, apologized and asked Mervin to pardon the interruption, to go on, as

polite and considerate as a highly amused bird-person could be. But it was pretty obvious she wasn't taking him seriously.

The receptionist at the *Daily Record* cogitated over Mervin's request. "Oh," she said finally, "That must be Tyler. He's always chasing some weird thing or other."

Summoned, the reporter led Mervin to a desk in the middle of a huge, brightly lit room full of busy people, some of whom interrupted from time to time to ask about arcane bits of business. Sitting stiffly on an uncomfortable hard plastic chair, Mervin felt out of his element, exposed, like a primeval fish stranded on the shore of some ancient sea, like he should be frantically finning himself into deeper waters and the safety of the sheltering dark.

But where would the world be now if that fish had not had the courage to make the best it could of its circumstances? Mervin plowed on in spite of his discomfort.

Halfway through the explanation, Tyler's eyes began to glaze over. "I'm afraid the mathematics doesn't mean much to me, Mr. Mandrusiak," the reporter said. "And it wouldn't mean much to our readers, either. And frankly, what you say it means seems pretty incredible. Maybe you could rig up some sort of demonstration? Sometimes it's better to show than to tell."

Mervin went away totally unhappy.

"Hey, Mandrusiak," the lunch counter guy said. "Haven't seen you around for a few days. What's happening, man?"

Mervin wrapped his hands around the cup and considered the non-linear swirls and eddies of steam rising from the surface of the liquid. The lunch counter guy had nothing much to do in the middle of the afternoon, so he was normally a good listener. But a salesman came in for coffee and distracted him with questions about the streets in the area.

Jerking a thumb at Mervin, he asked in a loud whisper, "What's with him?"

The lunch counter guy answered quietly, "He figures he's got a way to do perfect weather forecasts and nobody'll believe him."

"No kidding," the salesman snorted. "Hey, mister," he called to Mervin, "You should tell the weather office. They've been dead wrong the last few days."

Mervin hunched himself up and tried to pretend the salesman was somewhere else.

"Don't bug the little dude," the lunch counter guy said. "He's been having a bad day."

"Perfect weather forecasts," the salesman said. "That I'd like to see."

See. Everyone wanted to see. How could a man show ignorant fools the beauty of a mathematical form? They wanted something they could hold in their hands, take pictures of, wrap up and send home to Mama.

An inspiration hit him then, like the cartoon light bulb flashing in the back of his mind. Yeah, he thought. Yeah. He didn't hear the lunch counter guy say good-bye as he slid off the stool and went out. His thoughts were a thousand miles away.

"What the hell are you people doing down there?" the Minister demanded angrily, his face on the small phone screen looking thunderous. "You have any idea the trouble this weather is causing?"

"We can only report what is happening, sir," Cunningham said in his most conciliatory tone. "There isn't much we can do about it." Two months ago, he believed that to be true. Before Mervin Mandrusiak, he believed it was true. Now he thought that for the first time in his career, he might possibly be lying to the Minister.

The Minister hung up. Abigail Smith came in and laid copies of the satellite pictures in a row across the top of his desk.

"The Bermuda high?" Cunningham asked hopefully. This large, quasi-stable meteorological feature in mid-Atlantic had inexplicably begun to wander around, generally toward the northeast.

Abigail shook her head to indicate that the high showed no sign of returning to its proper place. Actually, it seemed to be settling into a new position, with disastrous results on the weather over the whole of North America. Dust storms still made ominous dark shadows across the prairies. The southern lowlands were flooded. The north was shrouded in cloud. It had been snowing there for almost three weeks straight.

"Thank you," Cunningham said, dismissing her. When she was gone, he took a deep breath. He had some pride to swallow, and he preferred to do it in private.

He took an envelope out of the desk drawer and stared at it for a moment before dumping its contents onto his desk.

The black and white Polaroid snapshot was a picture of Mandrusiak on a beach, pants rolled up to his knees, ankle deep in sand, with a common household fan in one hand, an extension cord that trailed out of the frame in the other. The cheap cafeteria napkin bore a ball-point scrawl of numbers and the terse instructions: "Plug these values into the BUTTERFLY equations. Charley will show you how to get into the file." The folded sheet of hotel stationery from the King's Inn, Grand Turk Island said, in Mervin Mandrusiak's crabbed hand, "Everybody wants to see. So look. Keep your eye/ On the Bermuda high. Call me when you're ready to make me king of the world. (That's a joke.)"

At first Cunningham had treated the whole thing as a joke and kept it to himself because it seemed too silly.

Then the Bermuda high began to drift.

Prompted by curiosity or maybe panic, Cunningham took Mandrusiak's figures to Charley, if for no other reason than to satisfy himself that it was indeed nonsense. The outcome had been unnerving, but still, it was only predictive speculation about the course the high would follow across the ocean. But the high followed the predicted course, exactly as predicted. For a while, Cunningham kidded himself that it was coincidence. But he could only stretch that idea so far. Now he had to report to the Minister that Mandrusiak was threatening the world with a God damned electric freaking fan, for crying out loud. He tried to imagine how the Minister was going to react when he tried to explain how a man with a fan on a beach was changing the course of the weather all over the world. He could imagine the Minister's face puckering up with disbelief. He could imagine the Minister ordering Cunningham committed to an asylum.

Maybe there was an easier way out of this. Well, no, not easier. His self-respect would take a beating. But it might be less devastating to his career. If Cunningham didn't choke himself apologizing, maybe Mandrusiak would listen to reason.

It was worth a try.

The letter had a phone number at the top.

"Grand Turk Island?" Abigail asked when he turned the business of discovering how to place a call to the obscure place to her. "Where is that, exactly?"

"In the Caribbean. Does it matter? It doesn't matter." Cun-

ningham heard his own peevishness.

"I guess not," the girl said, hurt. "One moment please."

After many clicks and beeps and over a loud roaring as from a great wind, a lilting woman's voice with a vaguely English flavour said, "King's Inn. May I help you?" There was no picture.

"Mr. Mandrusiak, please."

"Ah, yes, that gentleman is on the beach this afternoon. I could take a message, perhaps."

"Yes, please. Tell him I called. My name is Cunningham. Tell him, turn off the fan."

"Turn the fan," the woman repeated slowly, as if writing.

"No, turn it off. Switch off the fan."

"Switch off. Yes, of course," as if she understood perfectly this insanity.

"Tell him I believe him, and that we need him back as soon as possible."

"Need him back. Will that be all?"

"Yes, thank-you. Say, how's the weather down there?"

"To be truthful, sir, it's been — unusual. Warm and humid for this time of year. Not good for trade, sir, I must admit."

"Well, the sooner you get the message to Mandrusiak, the sooner it will improve."

There was a long, long pause at the other end of the line. Then the voice, under perfect control, said, "Quite so, sir. I shall deliver it myself. Good day, sir."

He wanted to yell at her that it wasn't funny, that millions of dollars worth of crops, and millions in transportation costs for ships and aircraft, and the tourist trade, and possibly many lives, all these things were being held to ransom by the man armed with a fan. (There was a line for the Comedy Club — Stick 'em up. Give me your wallet. I have an electric fan.) The man who controlled the weather really could rule the world.

But she had already hung up. Besides, she wouldn't believe him. All the explanation he could make would only confirm her opinion. Cunningham was starting to understand how Mandrusiak felt.

Call me when you're ready to make me king of the world. (That's a joke.)

Was it?

Cunningham wasn't laughing. ♣

reflections

by Barry Hammond

we can no more predict the future
than could those art directors of the early cinema
whose silver lamé wardrobes
rubber and cardboard robots
plastic rocketships (on wires) with fireworks
 spewing out the back
look as ludicrous today as our designs will
 tomorrow
we're limited by our materials
unable to construct in substances
which haven't been invented yet
bad alchemists without base elements
we can only reflect
the heat of stars in infrared
magnetic waves captured by radio telescopes
light darkening the silver gelatin embedded in
 plastic
the films clattering on in the movie houses of our
 dreams
campfire primitives summoning ghosts with
 shadow puppets
the unknowable reality as traced on the fabric of
 our retinas
like sunlight projecting blurred silhouette slats on
 a cream coloured wall. ❁

THE DAY BEFORE NEVER

by Catherine MacLeod
illustration by Flavio Rojas

And it seemed to me it was a fine and well-favoured world spread at the Lady Sunwing's feet. She had grown old as immortals grow old, and found inspiration scarce. The world was at peace.

In older times peace was rare: the Lady's art was known in intimate detail by every mortal on the planet. She composed in blood, sculpted with screams, painted in pain. Student and mistress of that most forbidding art form, the Moment, her music was brilliant, her sculptures alarming. Her mastery of genetics was terrifying. She was creator of one hundred hundred brightly jewelled instants, and the colours of her palate were mythic.

I was too young to know that Sunwing's place in history was assured, but art lasts as long as the longest memory, and too many remembered. When word came that she was at work on her final creation, a shudder went through the populace. Then came the request for a messenger, and the populace recoiled — she'd not made such a demand in ten thousand years. But it was unthinkable to keep the Lady waiting, and a messenger was dispatched at once.

He was Avin and, like no man before him, he went willingly. His life had been spent in waiting for this moment. No matter that unsummoned messengers before him had died giving thanks they'd been spared. He climbed her mountain gladly, eager to fulfill his purpose.

Those very few who knew him whispered among them-



selves that he loved the Lady, and so spent much time alone. Once he'd climbed her spiral footpath halfway up the mountain, dreaming she might speak to him when others wouldn't. But she wasn't there, and he couldn't bring himself to climb further without a summons. He came down and made peace with himself then, for if he was lonely, there was no one to hear him say so.

Since then, long grass had overgrown the track, but Avin remembered his way to the Lady and found the road short.

Avin's knowledge of Sunwing's work was equalled only by her own. In other times he would have been called an historian; in this one he kept his insights to himself — no one would appreciate his belief that she was enchanted with evil because of its possibilities. Early in her chosen craft the young Sunwing had begun the series of pieces known as *The Spelling of Cain*. The ignorant called it a celebration of evil, not knowing they spoke the truth. Evil would assume any form, absorb any colour — how could it not charm the young artist? She immediately cast Lilith's black flight from the garden, a brief, much-studied classic.

Cain incorporated all media.

With great tenderness, the Lady planted a seedling. It grew tall and was felled in its prime, and from a fragment of its heart she carved a dagger hilt. She cast the blade with a care bordering on passion and, with the same care Sunwing had shown her seedling, a hand of her choosing planted it in Julius Caesar.

The world resounded with all the music the Lady had ever sung. Hers was the voice that whispered wildness in Cain's ear, and chanted rage in Lee Harvey Oswald's. Her sibilants were the hissing of wind and waves closing over the face of green Atlantis.

And because the Lady loved fire, there were canvasses painted in sulphur. Witches and literature gone the same way. She brewed her plagues lovingly, and sore bodies burned from within. How she must have calculated to make her hot clouds mushroom to just the right height.

At midday Avin reached Sunwing's dwelling, knowing it was hers because it could be no other's. It was stone and mortar, smaller than he'd expected. Save that it was more window than wall it could have been any mortal home. There was no grass about the house, only earth packed flat by years of inspired

pacing. The Lady kept no animals, and several miles down the path all birdsong had ceased. There was no sign of life except the roses, hundreds of them, running riot up her walls. They were glorious, their colours rich and delicate, their perfume distinct even in this thinner air.

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

Avin turned to face the legend, a myth of average height and long, many-hued hair. A voice like wind chimes tingling outside in October. She came up to Avin's shoulder.

"Yes, milady." Her eyes were the golden fire that consumed Saint Joan, and the consuming madness that fired Macbeth. She raised a slender hand to stroke one of the flowers. There were thin scars on all her fingers. The rose was soft ivory, a shade darker than her skin.

"I knew the man who created these," she said. "He was a fellow student, a quiet man. He studied, worked, tried and tried again. This was his only significant work. But... it was enough."

She looked up at him, pinned him on eyes that saw darkly. "You're here in good time. It's been so long since anyone walked that road I don't suppose it was an easy climb. Come in." She turned her back on him and moved away. Down below no one would turn his back on a stranger; but no man would think to lift his hand against an immortal. Not even to touch her hair, Avin thought, smooth bunches of lavender and emerald, silver and cherry.

She strode into the house and Avin followed quickly — what fool had said that she was aging? Her quick movements echoed those of her few cameos. She tilted her head, bird-like, and she was the raven that fluttered outside Poe's window. Her body was supple, and she was the snake that muttered in radiant Eden.

They passed through rooms scattered with unfinished pieces, work abandoned because the Lady thought it inferior. They passed *Jack the Ripper* and Avin paled. Six unforgettable murders and Sunwing was displeased? The mystery surrounding his disappearance was almost a work of art in itself. The Lady was running now, and the corridor leading to her workroom was pocked with unexpected niches. They passed *Torquemada* and *Lucretia Borgia*, who bore an amber resemblance to the Lady.

Sunwing vanished around a sharp corner, small feet pattering softly. Avin took the corner a moment later.

And screamed. Avin shrieked until he thought his lungs would burst, and still he couldn't stop. But the Lady had no need of sentries! Avin tried to flee, but his muscles wouldn't obey, wouldn't twitch, and it occurred to him trivially that Sunwing's art had a life all of its own.

Medusa had turned him to stone.

He screamed again as a hand fell on his arm and spun him around, and suddenly Sunwing's palm was gentle on his cheek, as though touching a mortal didn't disgust her. "Shh, please, be calm. I'm sorry she frightened you. She can't hurt you."

Avin found himself doubting her. Had anyone ever doubted an immortal? Sunwing sighed as though he'd spoken aloud. "Many years ago I held a mirror up to her face." Avin breathed again. She laced her long fingers through his and tugged impatiently, and he went because immortals don't wait. But... didn't *Medusa's* eyes follow them..?

Avin fixed his eyes on the Lady's back and very carefully ignored the art hung on the walls.

He reminded himself that to Sunwing evil was clay, that she loved pain because it made the most lasting impression. She didn't look very much like a monster — but she didn't seem very much like a woman. She was clothed like a mortal, her brown tunic tied with a strip of the same worn material, flat leather shoes, work clothes any woman might wear. Then he looked down at the hand holding his and wondered at the scars on her fingers. Tattooed grief. They filled him with sick unease.

She stopped before a plain wooden door and motioned him in ahead of her. "You're the first mortal to see this," she said, and closed the door behind them.

The workshop was filled with casual horror. Blood drizzled down the walls. There were spiderwebs in the corners and... things... caught in them. There were a hundred earthen pots full of orchids that whistled and moaned among themselves. There were more roses and spools of flesh-coloured ribbon and ground glass and salt. Avin stepped back from a fire pit that spit ragged sparks, and knew that some of her scars came from playing with fire, a few from that bed of slobbering thorns, others from this nest of glittering snakes.

"This is what you came to get." She was directly in front of him, and he started back. A rat screeled beneath his heel. She held up the canister so that cold sunlight poured through it. "A

well-spiced recipe. *Armageddon*, I call it."

Avin waited as the Lady seated herself at the workbench, a movement like silk dropped from a height. She twisted the stopper from a crystal decanter and set it aside with a musical clink. It would be a dazzling vintage, destined to be remembered by all those who could. She decanted the *Armageddon* with a steady hand.

She didn't glance at the window beside her, but Avin looked and understood. No mortal had ever seen this view. From here he could see far down the mountain, out into the world. Could see it through Sunwing's eyes: black and brown and grey, diseased and dead white. Badly in need of the bright colours of the Lady's brew. She gave him the flask with a smile like the sun, but not quite a woman's smile.

Outside, Avin waited for her; she was slow coming out. At last she was there, walking a full circle about her house, touching the roses. She returned with great handfuls of crimson and pearl, and nodded at the beaker Avin held in both hands.

"You will take that down the mountain, and assure those below it is my final work. It is... a variation on a theme."

"Yes, milady," Avin whispered, and bowed low: he loved her less now, but could not undo a lifetime of devotion. She turned and walked away from him, up the road that vanished into low clouds. She was headed into them when a final gust of cold wind split them before her. Avin shivered. At the mountain's peak the road stopped, but Sunwing didn't. For a moment starry night sparkled around her small form, then the clouds sealed themselves behind her.

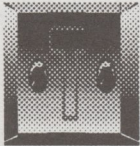
To those below, Avin told a story of Sunwing as history never knew her, gathering roses, treading the stars; and then he released her variation on a theme. It was a harmony of lingering darkness and perpetual light, and many voices were raised in a great chorus. But even the Lady, had she heard, could not have called it song.

Survivors of the choir will remember the Lady forever; that Moment was her finest. Avin is forgotten — his story means nothing to those who cannot see the stars.

And there are no roses now. ☉



by Michael Dennis Skeet
 illustration by Marc Holmes



They were serving lunch on the terrace today. Nelson stepped through the narrow door, closing his eyes briefly against the glare. His eyes began to water so he rubbed them, first with a finger propping up his thick-lensed spectacles, and then, removing the spectacles, with a soft fist. It wouldn't help much, he knew, but it felt better.

"Excuse me, sir." A waitress edged past him, carrying a tray; by the time he'd put his spectacles back on, she'd made her way into the maze of tables and he could no longer guess what might be on the plates she was delivering. He smiled. Whatever it was supposed to be was in all likelihood irrelevant: this was a hospital, after all.

There were plenty of empty seats, but no unoccupied tables. He couldn't cope with the strained camaraderie the clinic imposed — not this time — so he decided to wait awhile, until he could have a table to himself. Besides, he'd been meaning to explore the sculpture garden. This was the second day of his second visit to Guildwood, and he had yet to do more than glimpse the famed sculptures from the window of his room.

The breeze picked up just as he left the terrace and his foot touched grass. The wind was blowing from the lake, and its touch raised gooseflesh on his bare arms and destroyed the carefully prepared fall of his hair. It felt good — and because the wind was from the lake, it smelled fresh and clean, even if it wasn't. The weather was exceptional for mid-May — the sky was both clear and truly blue for the first time in months. And it was cool for this time of year; Nelson liked it cool and dry, liked the feeling of alertness cooler weather brought to him.



He took a deep breath and tasted pine resin, and grass bruised by his footsteps.

His eyes were watering again. There was probably a touch of the psychosomatic in that, he decided: there was nothing really wrong with his eyes, just advanced myopia with astigmatism. What was causing his eyes to water wasn't so much the unfiltered sunlight as it was his subconscious worry about what he was about to have done to them. That's what the shrink would have said, anyway.

There were smaller sculptures in his path, but he ignored them. What he was out here to see were the giants, huge columns and facades that suggested classical Rome, and looked about as old. He was surprised, upon reaching one of these, to discover the name of a long-dead bank carved into it. What he had been told was sculpture was actually part of a building.

"They're not as old as they look. Whereas you look impossibly younger than you actually are." Nelson turned to find his past appraising him from the path that ran down the centre of the garden. Who had told Monica he was here?

He walked quickly to her, and she slipped into his arms, offering her cheek. He held her closer, so that his lips brushed her earlobe. Her scent was sharp and bright, with the tang of fresh herbs.

"Dr. Veronneau," he murmured into her hair.

"Dr. Singh." She drew back. "I don't think you've changed at all," she said. "What's it been, five years?"

"I think so." Monica was lying, of course, and they both knew it. Five years ago there had been no grey in his hair. Both his body and his spectacle lenses had been a little less thick.

But she was bound to say that; after all, she had, if anything, grown younger-looking since their last meeting. Her hair was still so black it permitted no detail to be discerned; the skin on her neck and around her eyes was smooth as the polished marble that dotted the grounds; and her eyes were clear, the colour of the lake on a sunny day. She didn't look fifty; she scarcely looked thirty. Of course, she had the machines in her blood to keep her that way.

"I was here on another matter," she said. "Noticed you walk through the patio and thought I'd follow you. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," he said. "I have to admit I'm a little sur-

prised to see you. I didn't know your practice brought you here." He didn't know, now, whether he'd have gone through with the booking had he known Monica would be part of the package.

Monica unwrapped herself from him and stepped back, her eyes still locked to his. "I sometimes get called on to do some consulting," she murmured. Her voice picked up. "I do a lot of consulting these days. A lot of it up there." She didn't point, but Nelson looked up anyway, an automatic response that had fought years of attempts to convince himself that he liked being ground-bound. "I've just come back from a couple of weeks at the new Ginkakuji Station, Nel — you'd love it. Oh, it's so *good* to see you here!"

He knew precisely what she meant. He didn't want to talk about the surgery, though. Turning back to the terracotta-coloured columns behind him, he said, "Nobody told me about this thing. Is everything in this garden from some old building or other?"

"You've never been out here before?" she asked. He shook his head. "Well, you're mostly right. Just about everything here was once part of a building. A Toronto building — as I was saying, they're not as old as they look. A couple are two hundred years old, but most are between a hundred and a hundred-fifty."

"How'd they end up at the clinic?" he asked. "I'd always assumed this was art donated by grateful patients or something."

She laughed, and the laugh at least had the weight of age to it. "This garden predates the clinic by a good fifty years. You should have read the brochure they gave you, Nel. Guildwood has been a lot of things in its time: it started as a private house, and since then it's been an artists' retreat, a crafts centre, and a hotel. And a hundred years ago it was a hospital, during the Second World War. So it's sort of come full circle now. Anyway, while it was an artists' retreat, the owner started saving what he called architectural sculpture from buildings that were being demolished. It's a weird hobby, but a lot of people are glad this guy did it. People come out here all the time just to look at the garden — being able to touch part of an old building is more important to them than being able to see a photo of the whole building.

"And it's a good place to go walking. It seems to refresh people, to be able to walk through history. Do you mind if I join you?"

"Not at all. I can't think of a better guide." He stepped back onto the grass, enjoying the way it yielded to his feet.

"Are you just here to have your eyes done?" Nelson grimaced, turning his head in the hope that Monica wouldn't see it. Why did she have to bring this up?

"That's right," he said after pausing a moment longer than was polite. "I tried once before, a couple of years ago, but couldn't make myself go through with it."

"I know you, Nel. I'm paid to be able to judge, and looking at you I can tell you're still in fine shape for a makeover. In the time you're here for an eye job, they could give you the works, get you into space-going condition—"

"Please, Monica. I'd rather not talk about this. I'm having trouble enough making myself stay for eye surgery." Now he was going to have to spend the rest of his stay hiding from her. He'd seen her eyes brighten, caught the heightened pitch of her voice. She was seeing him in space again, in the face of the physical evidence. In the face of his previous failures.

They walked on through the garden, in and out of sunlight that flickered through the wind-disturbed trees like a blinking fluorescent tube. Then the trees dramatically gave way to a gentle slope leading to a marble-columned theatre built in the classical Greek style. "My god," said Nelson. "You're not going to tell me that that's from some building."

"The individual parts are," said Monica. Her voice was distant, distracted, and Nelson wanted her to be gone from here if she wasn't going to leave him alone about the surgery.

"Look," she said, turning to him. "I never saw you so alive as you were when we worked up there. You're a natural for the Eden expeditions. And they're crying for your kind of expertise. Plant biologists with space experience aren't that common, not yet." Her eyes burned with a cold light. "The surgery is not that horrible, Nel. You've seen the statistics — it's virtually foolproof, and there hasn't been a fatality in over a decade. It's nothing to be afraid of."

"But it is," he said wearily. "It is something to be afraid of — or are you telling me that I'm not really afraid? You say you know me, Monica. What makes you so sure? We haven't spo-

ken for years." She didn't answer. "Well?"

"I've seen your file," she said.

"What?" For a moment, Nelson felt weightless.

"Oh, don't be so pompous. I'm a *doctor*, Nel. For five years I was *your* doctor. Looking at a datachip didn't tell me anything I don't already know about you."

"Then you know that what you're talking about just isn't going to happen." Nelson walked up to the theatre, climbed the steps up to the platform that served as stage. The entire edifice was white, and it had been cleaned recently so that it seemed to phosphoresce in the sunlight. "I would love to go into space again. And yes, I'd love to take one of the longships to Eden. But not if I have to have those machines put into me. I can't do that." Up here he should be declaiming something heroic, but what he felt was the antithesis of heroism. "I'm glad to see you again, Monica — really I am. But I wish you hadn't brought this up," he said, letting his shoulders slump. "It took me eight months of therapy to get used to the idea of having my eyes replaced. Now I'm not even sure about that anymore."

Monica looked up at him from the grass at the foot of the stage; for a moment her expression softened, and he saw again in her the woman he'd left Ellen for, ten years — ten years! — ago. Then he realized that what he was seeing was pity.

"I just want to do what's best for you," she said. "I just want you to be happy, and I don't think you're happy down here."

"How could you know?" he asked. "We haven't spoken in years. Or is that in my file, too?"

For a moment she just looked at him, and he regretted the words. By the time she'd turned to go, though, he had convinced himself that he'd been justified in his response. He didn't want her to persuade him to have the surgery. He didn't want her to persuade him to do anything.

At the edge of the clearing she turned to him. "Be careful how far you walk," she said. "We're right on the edge of the Scarborough Bluffs here — and it's a straight drop of about thirty metres down to the lake." She disappeared into the trees, and Nelson shivered at the thought of standing at the edge of that drop.

They'd actually met in orbit, and the thing that brought them together was her laughter at the thought of an acrophobe happily working at the top of Kenya skyhook — the highest elevator in the world. By the time he'd finished explaining to Monica that his fear of heights didn't bother him in airplanes or in space, Nelson knew that his marriage was over, knew that in fact it had been over for some time.

Their affair had continued through their return to Earth, but it hadn't survived Nelson's next tour in orbit. They'd continued to see each other socially for a few months after that tour ended, until eventually they drifted apart in a way that felt perfectly natural at the time.

When the UN started sending longships to colonize the newly discovered planet orbiting Alpha Centauri, Nelson had ached to go. He interviewed for each mission, and it would have been only a matter of time before his turn came — until they changed the rules.

They had developed machines of molecular size to make the human body better suited for long space journeys. It took nearly six years for a longship to reach Eden, and colonists with nanomachines in their blood were able to work more efficiently and consume fewer resources — or so their reports back claimed. The machines increased oxygen absorption — and even provided for limited conversion of carbon dioxide to energy, allowing the modified humans to cleanse their own environment. They delivered nutrients to bones that otherwise weakened in the lower artificial gravity of the longships. And they reversed some of the effects of aging, the way Monica's machines had served to keep her young.

For the last six years or so, the UN had been giving preference to those candidates willing to undergo modification. But Nelson had been unable to face the surgery. The thought of the machines inside him, remaking him, brought out such fear in him that he was embarrassed at his lack of self-control.

As the years passed, the interviews grew fewer and fewer and then stopped happening at all. Nelson stopped applying for positions on the Eden run. Then he stopped applying for any position involving space work. He found a job teaching.

From time to time he spoke to a psychotherapist about his nanophobia. He even booked himself into the Guildwood once, for an eye replacement operation his therapist had described

as a good way to ease into the idea of modification.

In the end, though, he remained what he was. And tried to convince himself he didn't care about space anymore.



Nelson awoke early the next day. His final counselling session was scheduled for ten, with the surgery to follow at three, and he wanted to do another tour of the gardens first. He didn't bother going into the dining room: his mouth tasted sour and he didn't see much point in insulting it further with whatever the kitchen was passing off as breakfast.

It showed every sign of being another gorgeous day. The garden was such a peaceful place, the ancient facades and columns standing calm and impassive among the trees, that Nelson wondered idly if he could start postponing the surgery in order to prolong his stay here. The thought of postponing the surgery made him feel a little better. Maybe the university would pick up the bill if he stayed here until he really felt like having the surgery done. He giggled.

Allowing himself to be drawn by the gentle curve of a grassy slope, Nelson found himself in front of a brick-work gate he hadn't noticed yesterday. On the other side of the gateposts, the ground was wild — for a few metres. Beyond that was nothing but sky. It was as if he had come up to the back of an outdoor set on a TV soundstage, with the sky serving as backdrop. There were no clouds this morning, no way of determining distance or even if the world continued beyond the gate.

Nelson had heard about the Bluffs, but he'd never seen them, had no idea what Monica had meant about the drop to the lake below. I'll never have a better chance than this to see what all the fuss is about, he thought. He stepped through the gate.

Trees grew right to the brink of the cliff, and Nelson was practically over the edge before he realized he'd got there. For a moment, the world spun around him and his nerves sang with fear — and something else. Then one hand found a tree branch and he held on until his eyes focused properly. Staring down at the lazy line where the lake met the base of the cliff, he felt the fear give way to the something else, which was desire. What he looked at was the air between him and the beach. What he saw, though, was in his mind's eye only: a

writhing mass of nanomachines, and his future extending through space to Eden and beyond, if only he would let himself give way to desire.

He was still there, gripping the branch like a dead man, when Monica found him. Without trying to release his hold, she gently drew him back from the edge, until his downcast eyes could no longer see the narrow, rocky beach at the foot of the cliff.

"You missed your appointment," she said. Her voice was so soft it was scarcely audible, but it released him. He looked up. There were sailboats on the lake, graceful white arrows shining in the early sun. They went where they wanted to go — within the limits the planet set for them. Limits weren't such a bad thing, he realized. They helped you keep your balance.

"Time to go, Nel," Monica said. "If we're lucky, we'll be able to reschedule your counselling and still leave you time to prep for the operation."

"Thanks," he said. His voice croaked a little; how long had he stood here without making a sound? "Thanks, but no thanks. I've decided not to have it, after all. Sorry if that's an inconvenience."

Monica made a wet, exasperated noise. "Damn it, Nel. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

"I met a pilot, once," he said. "This was, I don't know, three or four years ago. He'd flown shuttles while I was working in orbit, and I'd talked to him but we'd never met. Funny enough, it was here I finally ran into him. I was here about my eyes, and he was having his modification finished so he could take one of the longships to Eden.

"I was in the patients' lounge when he walked in. He sat down at my table — and took his legs off and leaned them against the wall. Maybe he thought he was being funny. But all I could do was look down at where his legs had been — and it didn't even look like a normal amputation down there. He didn't have stumps — he had this mess of crawling, writhing *tendrils*. Manipulators, he called them. When he wanted to walk, they controlled his artificial legs for him. When he was in space, he left them exposed. He said it was like having four extra hands." Nelson shivered.

"That's an extreme case, Nel." Monica was carefully, one at a time, removing his fingers from around their tree branch.

Her touch was cool and dry, like the weather-beaten bark of the tree. "The fact that it's possible to remake a person that totally doesn't mean everybody does it. Hardly anybody does." She led him away, and now he could see the green and gold and brown around him; there was more to the world than the lake below and the limitless sky. There was a bench just outside the gate and she sat him there. He was able, while she talked, to look at the blue blankness framed by leaves, and the existence of the frame put the blankness into some sort of perspective and allowed him to stay in place.

"You're being irrational, Nel," she said. "And you're wallowing in that irrationality instead of trying to deal with it. You're a logical man, Nel. I know you haven't forgotten that part of yourself."

"He told me all about every one of his modifications," Nelson said. "His sight, his hearing, his breathing. And everything he said made me look at the part of him he'd changed, and I'd see the tendrils growing there — machines that looked like pink worms, for god's sake." Monica shifted beside him, but before she could speak he said, "I know it's irrational, Monica. That's why I can't stop it — logic doesn't work on this kind of fear."

"Do you honestly believe that a simple blood conversion will make you turn yourself into that pilot?" she asked. "You only go as far as you need to go."

Nelson looked out, tried to determine the line where sky ended and water began. "You've always been so understanding of my acrophobia," he said. "Why does my nanophobia bother you so much?"

For a moment she said nothing. When she did speak, it was slowly, as though she had to create each word by an act of will before she could speak it. "I've always known about it," she said, "so I've always been able to deal with it. You couldn't help being afraid of falling."

"Did you listen to what you just said?" He got to his feet, turned to face her, putting the blankness behind him. "You don't mind my acrophobia because, while I can't cope with it, you can? Do you mean that what really bothers you about my fear of my machines is that *you* can't deal with it?" She hung her head.

"Never mind," he said. "We've both been operating under the wrong assumption."

Monica looked up. "What?"

"It occurred to me while I was — standing — here earlier. I'd assumed that my fear of the modification surgery was a fear of my having these nanomachines inside me — just as you've always assumed that my acrophobia meant I was afraid of falling."

"I don't understand you," she said. The words encompassed far more, he realized, than the point he was trying to make now. Sitting before him, Monica looked her age in a way no machine could alter.

"I never told you," he said. "It was embarrassing enough to be afraid of heights. I didn't think I could stand to admit why I was afraid. I wanted to seem to you — to everyone — to be controlling my fear. When in fact I've never been able to control it."

"This isn't making sense," Monica said.

"It isn't, no." He looked down at her, saw the real Monica beginning to come through the machine-made mask. No doubt a trick of the mind, he thought. "Didn't you ever wonder," he asked, "why I managed so well in the station, two hundred kilometres up, but couldn't stand to be on a second-floor balcony?" He didn't wait for her reply. "The answer is that I was safe from myself inside the station. I guess a part of me has never liked my efforts to be in control of things. That part of me has always tried to break free, to see what it feels like to take that ultimate step.

"I was never afraid I was going to fall," he said.

"I was afraid I was going to jump."



The weather broke that afternoon. A low-pressure system moved in from the south, bringing with it warm, sticky air and the threat of thunderstorms. The terrace was closed, the umbrellas over the tables folded up and put away. Dinner, for those who were eating, would be served in the cool, dry comfort of the dining room.

After calling a taxi, Nelson went out to the garden for a last look at the theatre a long-ago man had assembled from old building parts. From one relic to another, he thought as he lovingly stroked the smooth, white stone. Some of us should be preserved against the changes. ❧

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

Humberto da Silva has flown over three million miles and teaches people how to survive aircraft accidents. His short stories have appeared in *Quarry*, *Rampike*, *What*, *Excalibur* and *Acta Victoriana*.

Richard deMeulles, who lives in North Bay, has been published in *Readers' Choice*, *Descant*, *Cross Canada Writers' Magazine*, *Squash*, and *Tyro*. In 1987, he placed second in the *Cross Canada Writers' Magazine* annual fiction competition.

Leslie Gadallah is the author of SF novels *Cat's Pawn*, *The Loremasters* and *Cat's Gambit*. Before becoming enmeshed in fiction, she wrote popular science for newspapers and radio. She lives with her family and a menagerie of castoff and strayed animals on a small farm near Spruce Grove.

Barry Hammond is the author of a novel, *Cold Front*, and a poetry collection, *moral kiosk*. His recent work has appeared in *The New Quarterly*, the *Barbed Lyres* anthology, *ON SPEC* Vol. 2, #1, *Tabula Rasa*, and many others in Canada and the U.S.A.

Catherine MacLeod, who has a degree in journalism, has published short fiction in *TickleAce* and *Secrets from the Orange Couch*. She has recently finished her first novel.

Sally McBride lives in Victoria and belongs to a thriving speculative fiction writers' group. Her work has appeared in *Tesseract*, *F & SF*, and *ON SPEC*. She is working on several short stories and a novel.

M.J. Murphy currently lives in Toronto, although his heart is on the West Coast. "In the Train of the King" is his first professional sale.

Michael Dennis Skeet is a writer/broadcaster living in Toronto. He has written several hundred articles on music and film and has a syndicated film criticism spot on CBC Radio. A founding member of the Speculative Writers of Canada/Association Canadienne des Écrivains Spéculatifs, his stories have appeared in many publications, including *Tesseract*² and *Tesseract*³.

Herbert Steinhouse of Montreal, author of *Ten Years After* (entitled *The Time of the Juggernaut* in the U.S.A.), retired from

the CBC — after a long career as foreign correspondent, radio and TV producer and senior executive with both the English and French Networks — to return to writing. "The Cool Bool Machine," a winner in the 1988 CBC Literary Competition, is adapted from an early chapter of his new political novel, *Free of All Future*.

Edith Van Beek's published books of poetry are *My Side of Fruit* (Three Trees Press, 1982) and *Points of White* (Aya Press, 1988). She is currently working on her first novel.

ABOUT OUR ARTISTS

Andrea Baeza is in her 4th year at the University of Alberta doing her BFA and no longer works in a comic shop. She now works at Beaver Flats Pottery.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk is currently doing promotional art for ConText '91 and working like mad on colour airbrush artworks. More of her cartoons will be appearing in *Pulphouse*, the weekly magazine.

Marc Holmes is now doing freelance art and is Vice President of Ground Zero Graphics (see below).

Adrian Kleinbergen has just formed his own comic book company, Ground Zero Graphics. Watch for them at news stands everywhere.

Nancy Niles will probably be doing comic books for Ground Zero but other than that, her life hasn't changed since her bio last issue.

Dory A. Rikkonen returns this issue; she works in the ad department of a Calgary retail store and has displayed her art at several ConVersion conventions.

Flavio Rojas makes his first appearance in *ON SPEC*. He works for the Edmonton Public School Board as an illustrator/designer as well as for the Latin community magazine *AQUÍ* (which means "here" in Spanish).

Nigel Tully, one of Edmonton's best comic artists, took time out from his busy schedule to do his first illustration for our magazine. ☺

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