



SPEC

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Featuring "Just Like Old Times" by ROBERT J. SAWYER



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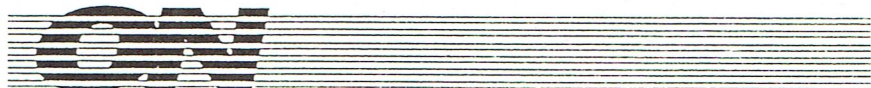


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THIS ISSUE

by Jena Snyder

Random Thoughts . . .

We've had nothing but positive response to our *Over the Edge* issue, which leads me to believe that either

a) we didn't go far enough, or

b) everyone who was shocked is now lying dead in his/her comfy chair, and can't write to complain.

I guess we just have to assume you all thought the *Over the Edge* issue was brilliant, incisive, and shocking, and that it pushed the envelope as far as . . . *Son of Over the Edge?*

En français . . .

Something new we have in the works (no firm dates yet) is a story exchange with both *imagine . . .* and *Solaris*, two top-rated francophone SF magazines. We're hoping to have at least one (maybe more) story a year translated from French into English, and featured on these pages for your enjoyment.

Both readers and writers benefit from this exchange: readers because they get to enjoy a wider variety of stories; and writers because they have a chance for a double sale. I don't think there's an anglophone

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SF writer in Canada who wouldn't jump at the chance to see his/her work in either *imagine* . . . or *Solaris*!

Mea culpa, mea culpa . . .

Apologies to DIRK L. SCHAEFFER, author of "Three Moral Tales" in the *Over the Edge* issue, whose name was incorrectly listed as D.L. Schaeffer. We promise to get it right the next time (and anyone who's read "Three Moral Tales" knows there *will* be a next time!)

The Long Goodbyes . . .

I remember teasing MARIANNE NIELSEN about how tough it must be to pound out an editorial back when she held the unenviable position of "General Figurehead and Sharkbait," but now that I'm the sharkbait, I can see it isn't quite so simple.

Speaking of Marianne, I hope you'll join us in wishing her well in her new job and home at the University of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff. She'll be teaching a tailor-made-for-her course in the Criminology Department, and we're all looking forward to seeing some of her SF stories in our mailbags again.

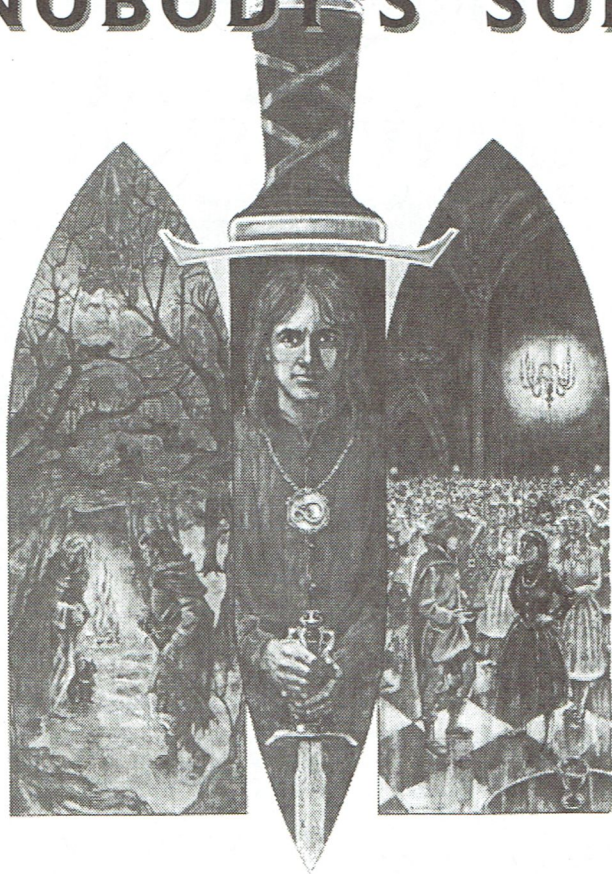
∞

Yet another of our editors, HAZEL SANGSTER, is getting ready for the big move down South, to Duluth, Minnesota. I'll hold back on the speeches now (since we're going to keep her working as long as she's here), but believe me, neither Copper Pig or *ON SPEC* will be the same without Hazel and Marianne.

Look for us at . . .

V-Con in Vancouver from May 28-30, Ad Astra in Toronto from June 4-6 and in Calgary at Conversion X from July 16-18. Cath Jackel, our Administrator, will be manning (womaning?) the *ON SPEC* booth at all three cons, flogging magazines, T-shirts, fridge magnets, and general goodwill. Drop in and say hi! ☺

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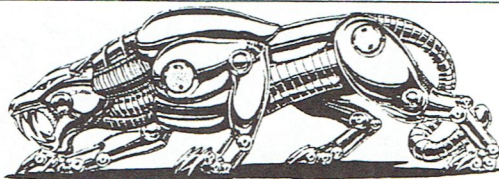
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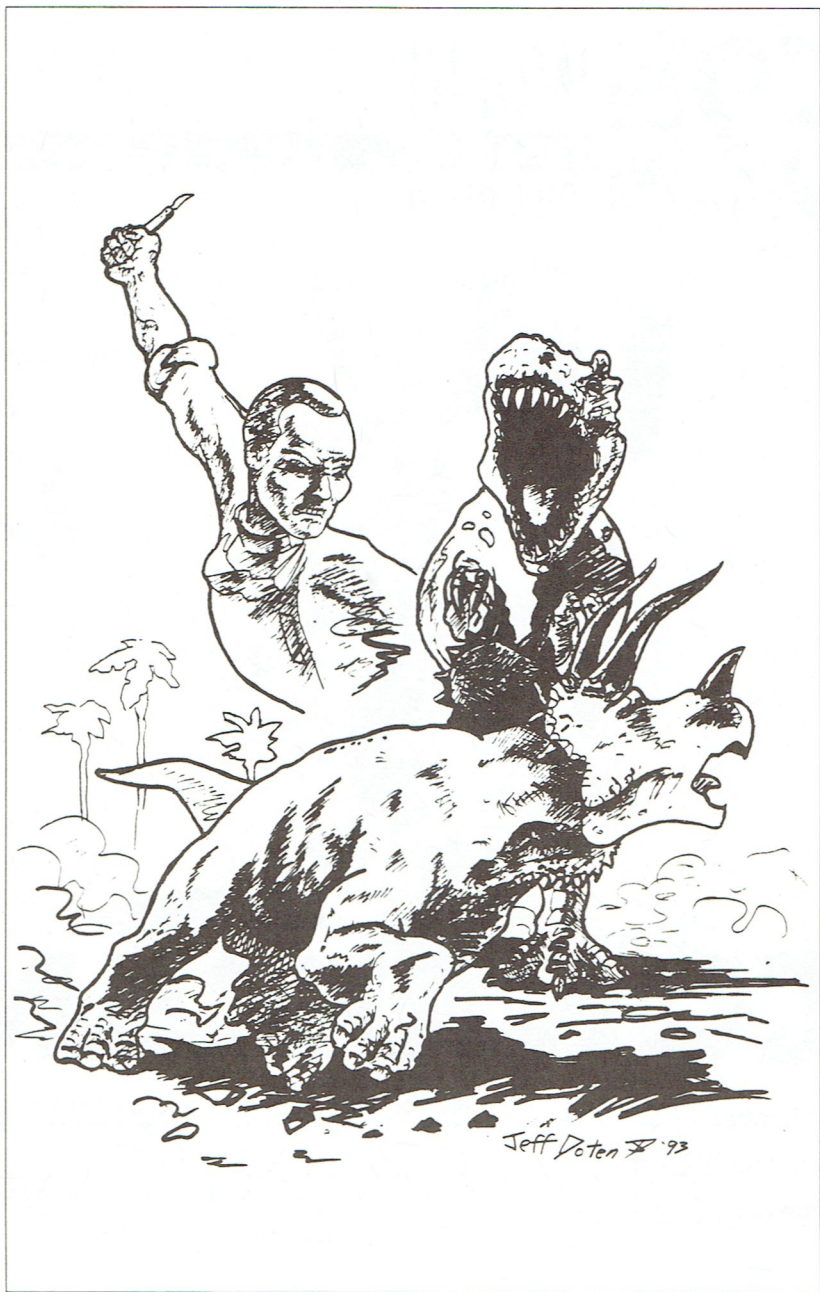
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Just Like Old Times

by Robert J. Sawyer

illustrated by Jeff Doten

The transference went smoothly, like a scalpel slicing into skin. Cohen was simultaneously excited and disappointed. He was thrilled to be here—perhaps the judge was right, perhaps this was indeed where he really belonged. But the gleaming edge was taken off that thrill because it wasn't accompanied by the usual physiological signs of excitement: no sweaty palms, no racing heart, no rapid breathing. Oh, there was a heartbeat, to be sure, thundering in the background, but it wasn't Cohen's.

It was the dinosaur's.

Everything was the dinosaur's: Cohen saw the world now through tyrannosaur eyes.

The colours seemed all wrong. Surely plant leaves must be the same chlorophyll green here in the Mesozoic, but the dinosaur saw them as navy blue. The sky was lavender; the dirt underfoot ash gray.

Old bones had different cones, thought Cohen. Well, he could get used to it. After all, he had no choice. He would finish his life as an observer inside this tyrannosaur's mind. He'd see what the beast saw, hear what it heard, feel what it felt. He wouldn't be able to control its movements, they had said, but he would be able to experience every sensation.

The rex was marching forward.

Cohen hoped blood would still look red.

It wouldn't be the same if it wasn't red.

∞

"And what, Ms. Cohen, did your husband say before he left your house on the night in question?"

"He said he was going out to hunt humans. But I thought he was making a joke."

"No interpretations, please, Ms. Cohen. Just repeat for the court as precisely as you remember it, exactly what your husband said."

"He said, 'I'm going out to hunt humans.'"

"Thank you, Ms. Cohen. That concludes the Crown's case, My Lady."

∞

The needlepoint on the wall of the Honourable Madam Justice Amanda Hoskins' chambers had been made for her by her husband. It was one of her favourite verses from *The Mikado*, and as she was preparing sentencing she would often look up and re-read the words:

*My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To let the punishment fit the crime—
The punishment fit the crime.*

This was a difficult case, a horrible case. Judge Hoskins continued to think.

∞

It wasn't just colours that were wrong. The view from inside the tyrannosaur's skull was different in other ways, too.

The tyrannosaur had only partial stereoscopic vision. There was an area in the centre of Cohen's field of view that showed true depth perception. But because the beast was somewhat wall-eyed, it had a much wider panorama than normal for a human, a kind of saurian Cinemascope covering 270 degrees.

The wide-angle view panned back and forth as the tyrannosaur scanned along the horizon.

Scanning for prey.

Scanning for something to kill.

∞

The Calgary Herald, Thursday, October 16, 2042, hardcopy edition: Serial killer Rudolph Cohen, 43, was sentenced to death yesterday.

Formerly a prominent member of the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dr. Cohen was convicted in August of thirty-seven counts of first-degree murder.

In chilling testimony, Cohen had admitted, without any signs of remorse, to having terrorized each of his victims for hours before slitting their throats with surgical implements.

This is the first time in eighty years that the death penalty has been ordered in this country.

In passing sentence, Madam Justice Amanda Hoskins observed

that Cohen was “the most cold-blooded and brutal killer to have stalked Canada’s prairies since *Tyrannosaurus rex* . . .”

∞

From behind a stand of dawn redwoods about ten metres away, a second tyrannosaur appeared. Cohen suspected tyrannosaurs might be fiercely territorial, since each animal would require huge amounts of meat. He wondered if the beast he was in would attack the other individual.

His dinosaur tilted its head to look at the second rex, which was standing in profile. But as it did so, almost all of the dino’s mental picture dissolved into a white void, as if when concentrating on details the beast’s tiny brain simply lost track of the big picture.

At first Cohen thought his rex was looking at the other dinosaur’s head, but soon the top of the other’s skull, the tip of its muzzle and the back of its powerful neck faded away into snowy nothingness. All that was left was a picture of the throat. Good, thought Cohen. One shearing bite there could kill the animal.

The skin of the other’s throat appeared gray-green and the throat itself was smooth. Maddeningly, Cohen’s rex did not attack. Rather, it simply swivelled its head and looked out at the horizon again.

In a flash of insight, Cohen realized what had happened. Other kids in his neighbourhood had had pet dogs or cats. He’d had lizards

and snakes—cold-blooded carnivores, a fact to which expert psychological witnesses had attached great weight. Some kinds of male lizards had dewlap sacks hanging from their necks. The rex he was in—a male, the Tyrrell palaeontologists had believed—had looked at this other one and seen that she was smooth-throated and therefore a female. Something to be mated with, perhaps, rather than to attack.

Perhaps they would mate soon. Cohen had never orgasmed except during the act of killing. He wondered what it would feel like.

∞

“We spent a billion dollars developing time travel, and now you tell me the system is useless?”

“Well—”

“That is what you’re saying, isn’t it, professor? That chronotransference has no practical applications?”

“Not exactly, Minister. The system *does* work. We can project a human being’s consciousness back in time, superimposing his or her mind overtop of that of someone who lived in the past.”

“With no way to sever the link. *Wonderful.*”

“That’s not true. The link severs automatically.”

“Right. When the historical person you’ve transferred consciousness into dies, the link is broken.”

“Precisely.”

“And then the person from our time whose consciousness you’ve

transferred back dies as well.”

“I admit that’s an unfortunate consequence of linking two brains so closely.”

“So I’m right! This whole damn chronotransference thing is useless.”

“Oh, not at all, Minister. In fact, I think I’ve got the perfect application for it.”

∞

The rex marched along. Although Cohen’s attention had first been arrested by the beast’s vision, he slowly became aware of its other senses, too. He could hear the sounds of the rex’s footfalls, of twigs and vegetation being crushed, of birds or pterosaurs singing, and, underneath it all, the relentless drone of insects. Still, all the sounds were dull and low; the rex’s simple ears were incapable of picking up high-pitched noises, and what sounds they did detect were discerned without richness. Cohen knew the late Cretaceous must have been a symphony of varied tone, but it was as if he was listening to it through earmuffs.

The rex continued along, still searching. Cohen became aware of several more impressions of the world both inside and out, including hot afternoon sun beating down on him and a hungry gnawing in the beast’s belly.

Food.

It was the closest thing to a coherent thought that he’d yet detected from the animal, a mental picture of bolts of meat going down

its gullet.

Food.

∞

The Social Services Preservation Act of 2022: Canada is built upon the principle of the Social Safety Net, a series of entitlements and programs designed to ensure a high standard of living for every citizen. However, ever-increasing life expectancies coupled with constant lowering of the mandatory retirement age have placed an untenable burden on our social-welfare system and, in particular, its cornerstone program of universal health care. With most taxpayers ceasing to work at the age of 45, and with average Canadians living to be 94 (males) or 97 (females), the system is in danger of complete collapse. Accordingly, all social programs will henceforth be available only to those below the age of 60, with one exception: all Canadians, regardless of age, may take advantage, at no charge to themselves, of government-sponsored euthanasia through chronotransference.

∞

There! Up ahead! Something moving! Big, whatever it was: an indistinct outline only intermittently visible behind a small knot of fir trees.

A quadruped of some sort, its back to him/it/them.

Ah, there. Turning now. Peripheral vision dissolving into albino nothingness as the rex concentrated on the head.

Three horns.

Triceratops.

Glorious! Cohen had spent hours as a boy poring over books about dinosaurs, looking for scenes of carnage. No battles were better than those in which *Tyrannosaurus rex* squared off against *Triceratops*, a four-footed Mesozoic tank with a trio of horns projecting from its face and a shield of bone rising from the back of its skull to protect the neck.

And yet, the rex marched on.

No, thought Cohen. Turn, damn you! Turn and attack!

∞

Cohen remembered when it had all begun, that fateful day so many years ago, so many years from now. It should have been a routine operation. The patient had supposedly been prepped properly. Cohen brought his scalpel down toward the abdomen, then, with a steady hand, sliced into the skin. The patient gasped. It had been a *wonderful* sound, a beautiful sound.

Not enough gas. The anaesthetist hurried to make an adjustment.

Cohen knew he had to hear that sound again. He had to.

∞

The tyrannosaur continued forward. Cohen couldn't see its legs, but he could feel them moving. Left, right, up, down.

Attack, you bastard!

Left.

Attack!

Right.

Go after it!

Up.

Go after the *Triceratops*.

Dow—

The beast hesitated, its left leg still in the air, balancing briefly on one foot.

Attack!

Attack!

And then, at last, the rex changed course. The ceratopsian appeared in the three-dimensional central part of the tyrannosaur's field of view, like a target at the end of a gun sight.

∞

"Welcome to the Chronotransference Institute. If I can just see your government benefits card, please? Yup, there's always a last time for everything, heh heh. Now, I'm sure you want an exciting death. The problem is finding somebody interesting who hasn't been used yet. See, we can only ever superimpose one mind onto a given historical personage. All the really obvious ones have been done already, I'm afraid. We still get about a dozen calls a week asking for Jack Kennedy, but he was one of the first to go, so to speak. If I may make a suggestion, though, we've got thousands of Roman legion officers catalogued. Those tend to be very satisfying deaths. How about a nice something from the Gallic Wars?"

∞

The *Triceratops* looked up, its giant head lifting from the wide flat gunnera leaves it had been chewing

on. Now that the rex had focused on the plant-eater, it seemed to commit itself.

The tyrannosaur charged.

The hornface was sideways to the rex. It began to turn, to bring its armoured head to bear.

The horizon bounced wildly as the rex ran. Cohen could hear the thing's heart thundering loudly, rapidly, a barrage of muscular gunfire.

The *Triceratops*, still completing its turn, opened its parrot-like beak, but no sound came out.

Giant strides closed the distance between the two animals. Cohen felt the rex's jaws opening wide, wider still, mandibles popping from their sockets.

The jaws slammed shut on the hornface's back, over the shoulders. Cohen saw two of the rex's own teeth fly into view, knocked out by the impact.

The taste of hot blood, surging out of the wound . . .

The rex pulled back for another bite.

The *Triceratops* finally got its head swung around. It surged forward, the long spear over its left eye piercing into the rex's leg . . .

Pain. Exquisite, beautiful pain.

The rex roared. Cohen heard it twice, once reverberating within the animal's own skull, a second time echoing back from distant hills. A flock of silver-furred pterosaurs took to the air. Cohen saw them fade from view as the dinosaur's simple mind

shut them out of the display. Irrelevant distractions.

The *Triceratops* pulled back, the horn withdrawing from the rex's flesh.

Blood, Cohen was delighted to see, still looked red.

∞

"If Judge Hoskins had ordered the electric chair," said Axworthy, Cohen's lawyer, "we could have fought that on Charter grounds. Cruel and unusual punishment, and all that. But she's authorized full access to the chronotransference euthanasia program for you." Axworthy paused. "She said, bluntly, that she simply wants you dead."

"How thoughtful of her," said Cohen.

Axworthy ignored that. "I'm sure I can get you anything you want," he said. "Who would you like to be transferred into?"

"Not who," said Cohen. "What."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That damned judge said I was the most cold-blooded killer to stalk the Alberta landscape since *Tyrannosaurus rex*." Cohen shook his head. "The idiot. Doesn't she know dinosaurs were warm-blooded? Anyway, that's what I want. I want to be transferred into a *T. rex*."

"You're kidding."

"Kidding is not my forte, John. *Killing* is. I want to know which was better at it, me or the rex."

"I don't even know if they can

do that kind of thing," said Axworthy.

"Find out, damn you. What the hell am I paying you for?"

∞

The rex danced to the side, moving with surprising agility for a creature of its bulk, and once again it brought its terrible jaws down on the ceratopsian's shoulder. The plant-eater was haemorrhaging at an incredible rate, as though a thousand sacrifices had been performed on the altar of its back.

The *Triceratops* tried to lunge forward, but it was weakening quickly. The tyrannosaur, crafty in its own way despite its trifling intellect, simply retreated a dozen giant paces. The hornface took one tentative step toward it, and then another, and, with great and ponderous effort, one more. But then the dinosaurian tank teetered and, eyelids slowly closing, collapsed on its side. Cohen was briefly startled, then thrilled, to hear it fall to the ground with a *splash*—he hadn't realized just how much blood had poured out of the great rent the rex had made in the beast's back.

The tyrannosaur moved in, lifting its left leg up and then smashing it down on the *Triceratops'* belly, the three sharp toe claws tearing open the thing's abdomen, entrails spilling out into the harsh sunlight. Cohen thought the rex would let out a victorious roar, but it didn't. It simply dipped its muzzle into the

body cavity, and methodically began yanking out chunks of flesh.

Cohen was disappointed. The battle of the dinosaurs had been fun, the killing had been well engineered, and there had certainly been enough blood, but there was no *terror*. No sense that the *Triceratops* had been quivering with fear, no begging for mercy. No feeling of power, of control. Just dumb, mindless brutes moving in ways preprogrammed by their genes.

It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

∞

Judge Hoskins looked across the desk in her chambers at the lawyer.

"A *Tyrannosaurus*, Mr. Axworthy? I was speaking figuratively."

"I understand that, My Lady, but it was an appropriate observation, don't you think? I've contacted the Chronotransference people, who say they can do it, if they have a rex specimen to work from. They have to back-propagate from actual physical material in order to get a temporal fix."

Judge Hoskins was as unimpressed by scientific babble as she was by legal jargon. "Make your point, Mr. Axworthy."

"I called the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller and asked them about the *Tyrannosaurus* fossils available worldwide. Turns out there's only a handful of complete skeletons, but they

were able to provide me with an annotated list, giving as much information as they could about the individual probable causes of death." He slid a thin plastic printout sheet across the judge's wide desk.

"Leave this with me, counsel. I'll get back to you."

Axworthy left, and Hoskins scanned the brief list. She then leaned back in her leather chair and began to read the needlepoint on her wall for the thousandth time:

*My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—*

She read that line again, her lips moving slightly as she subvocalized the words: "I shall achieve *in time* . . ."

The judge turned back to the list of tyrannosaur finds. Ah, that one. Yes, that would be perfect. She pushed a button on her phone. "David, see if you can find Mr. Axworthy for me."

∞

There had been a very unusual aspect to the *Triceratops* kill—an aspect that intrigued Cohen. Chronotransference had been performed countless times; it was one of the most popular forms of euthanasia. Sometimes the transferee's original body would give an ongoing commentary about what was going on, as if talking during sleep. It was clear from what they said that transferees couldn't exert any control over the bodies they were transferred into.

Indeed, the physicists had claimed any control was impossible. Chronotransference worked precisely because the transferee could exert no influence, and therefore was simply observing things that had already been observed. Since no new observations were being made, no quantum-mechanical distortions occurred. After all, said the physicists, if one could exert control, one could change the past. And that was impossible.

And yet, when Cohen had willed the rex to alter its course, it eventually had done so.

Could it be that the rex had so little brains that Cohen's thoughts *could* control the beast?

Madness. The ramifications were incredible.

Still . . .

He had to know if it was true. The rex was torpid, flopped on its belly, gorged on ceratopsian meat. It seemed prepared to lie here for a long time to come, enjoying the early evening breeze.

Get up, thought Cohen. *Get up, damn you!*

Nothing. No response.

Get up!

The rex's lower jaw was resting on the ground. Its upper jaw was lifted high, its mouth wide open. Tiny pterosaurs were flitting in and out of the open maw, their long needle-like beaks apparently yanking gobbets of hornface flesh from between the rex's curved teeth.

Get up, thought Cohen again.

Get up!

The rex stirred.

Up!

The tyrannosaur used its tiny forelimbs to keep its torso from sliding forward as it pushed with its powerful legs until it was standing.

Forward, thought Cohen. *Forward!*

The beast's body felt different. Its belly was full to bursting.

Forward!

With ponderous steps, the rex began to march.

It was wonderful. To be in control again! Cohen felt the old thrill of the hunt.

And he knew exactly what he was looking for.

∞

"Judge Hoskins says okay," said Axworthy. "She's authorized for you to be transferred into that new *T. rex* they've got right here in Alberta at the Tyrrell. It's a young adult, they say. Judging by the way the skeleton was found, the rex died falling, probably into a fissure. Both legs and the back were broken, but the skeleton remained almost completely articulated, suggesting that scavengers couldn't get at it. Unfortunately, the chronotransference people say that back-propagating that far into the past they can only plug you in a few hours before the accident occurred. But you'll get your wish: you're going to die as a tyrannosaur. Oh, and here are the books you asked for: a complete library on Cretaceous flora

and fauna. You should have time to get through it all; the chronotransference people will need a couple of weeks to set up."

∞

As the prehistoric evening turned to night, Cohen found what he had been looking for, cowering in some underbrush: large brown eyes, long, drawn-out face, and a lithe body covered in fur that, to the tyrannosaur's eyes, looked blue-brown.

A mammal. But not just any mammal. *Purgatorius*, the very first primate, known from Montana and Alberta from right at the end of the Cretaceous. A little guy, only about ten centimetres long, excluding its ratlike tail. Rare creatures, these days. Only a precious few.

The little furball could run quickly for its size, but a single step by the tyrannosaur equalled more than a hundred of the mammal's. There was no way it could escape.

The rex leaned in close, and Cohen saw the furball's face, the nearest thing there would be to a human face for another sixty million years. The animal's eyes went wide in terror.

Naked, raw fear.

Mammalian fear.

Cohen saw the creature scream.

Heard it scream.

It was beautiful.

The rex moved its gaping jaws in toward the little mammal, drawing in breath with such force that it

sucked the creature into its maw. Normally the rex would swallow its meals whole, but Cohen prevented the beast from doing that. Instead, he simply had it stand still, with the little primate running around, terrified, inside the great cavern of the dinosaur's mouth, banging into the giant teeth and great fleshy walls, and skittering over the massive, dry tongue.

Cohen savoured the terrified squealing. He wallowed in the sensation of the animal, mad with fear, moving inside that living prison.

And at last, with a great, glorious release, Cohen put the animal out of its misery, allowing the rex to swallow it, the furball tickling as it slid down the giant's throat.

It was just like old times.

Just like hunting humans.

And then a wonderful thought occurred to Cohen. Why, if he killed enough of these little screaming balls of fur, they wouldn't have any descendants. There wouldn't ever be any *Homo sapiens*. In a very real sense, Cohen realized he *was* hunting humans—every single human being who would ever exist.

Of course, a few hours wouldn't be enough time to kill many of them. Judge Hoskins no doubt thought it was wonderfully poetic justice, or she wouldn't have allowed the transfer: sending him back to fall into the pit, damned.

Stupid judge. Why, now that he could control the beast, there was no way he was going to let it die young. He'd just—

There it was. The fissure, a long gash in the earth, with a crumbling edge. Damn, it *was* hard to see. The shadows cast by neighbouring trees made a confusing gridwork on the ground that obscured the ragged opening. No wonder the dull-witted rex had missed seeing it until it was too late.

But not this time.

Turn left, thought Cohen.

Left.

His rex obeyed.

He'd avoid this particular area in future, just to be on the safe side. Besides, there was plenty of territory to cover. Fortunately, this was a young rex—a juvenile. There would be decades in which to continue his very special hunt. Cohen was sure that Axworthy knew his stuff: once it became apparent that the link had lasted longer than a few hours, he'd keep any attempt to pull the plug tied up in the courts for years.

Cohen felt the old pressure building in himself, and in the rex. The tyrannosaur marched on.

This was *better* than old times, he thought. Much better.

Hunting all of humanity.

The release would be *wonderful*.

He watched intently for any sign of movement in the underbrush. ∞

superstition chant

by Barry Hammond

I want to snare you, baby, in a Creole corn meal circle
a pidgin paste of words/blood and sperm
thermal language
bar magnets and shit magnets
mucilaginous magic in the image of a mojo hand
a talismanic tar baby for you to get stuck in
I want to write some Voudoun vevers
anchored in a divine rod driven through the center of the earth
from pole to pole
gyroscopic antennae to pull you in
to dust and mark and wet and penetrate and crucify you
give you that CHARGE
of gravity/electromagnetism/the strong and weak nuclear forces
dissect and reduce you to your component parts
until you're both particles and waves
defined only by the acts of observation and declaration
then put you back together
redefine you
as an apostate oracle
which I don't believe in
but invoke all the same
and send you on a pyrrhic mission
an anarchist odyssey/a vagrant voyage
as an agnostic ambassador to the infinite
a color cartographer charting borders of the invisible
in trances of black and white
inarticulate incantations of your own race.



The True and Sad Story of Lena the Scream-Cleaner

by Jason Kapalka

illustrated by Kenneth Scott

Lena worked in the Scream Processing Department for many years before Sam found her. Day in, day out, she scrubbed, rinsed, and wrung dry the assorted shrieks, howls, moans, wails, and sighs that came tumbling down the long chute to her work station. She carefully squeezed the sentiment from each shriek, washed and dried it. The waste emotion, oily-rainbow colored, was carried out of the room in great buckets, to be destroyed or buried deep underground; the screams themselves were sent to another room where they were starched, folded, and eventually circulated back into general usage. Then another batch came howling down the chute, and Lena went back to work.

It had been so long that Lena scarcely remembered how she had come to work for Scream Processing. She had her small blue apartment, and a cat called Whiskey. She liked quiet and quiet music, and sometimes watched movies on TV. She liked to cook pasta dishes and to make pencil sketches, though she ate alone and never showed her drawings to anyone, and she sometimes read books and sometimes cried quietly for no discernible reason, the translucent sobs fluttering away through her window to wing their way

back to Scream Processing, where she would sometimes encounter them the next day, wondering uneasily at the eerie, shivery color of their emotion.

She shopped only at the little all-night store where all the other Scream Processing employees shopped, and she went out only to Scream Processing functions, which were quiet, almost sad affairs.

There would be her fellow scream-cleaners, ragged gray men and women old beyond their years. Surely she did not look that old, that tired! There were the sly-looking Disposal urchins, and the quiet, shadowy men from Acoustics upstairs, who dissected and catalogued scream-components in a quiet shadowy laboratory. There was Supervisor Sheen, a cheerful old man with a shock of yellowish hair, and sometimes she would see visiting executives from the Human Grief Concern, Scream Processing's parent company, and once or twice she'd even caught sight of a shriek-catcher, one of the elite operatives who combed the outside world for lost and misplaced screams.

She'd never really inquired into the deeper workings of the Department, and she still didn't know much concerning its means of distribution and collection. The screams made their way back to the Department, were processed, and were sent back into the world: that was all she needed to know. But once, when she was still new to the job, she'd spo-

ken to Supervisor Sheen at one of the Department functions, and he had told her something of Scream Processing's operations.

"Sentiment—the emotion that charges our screams—is cheap, of course. Not valueless," he smiled, wagging a finger, "but cheap: there will always be more. But our screams, now these, Lena, these are irreplaceable."

Sheen's smile, which was never noticeable till it faded, faded. Lena felt uneasy. "There are only so many screams, Lena," he went on, "and despite our best research they remain finite in number and non-reproducible, though every year a few more wear out or are lost forever. One day the last groan, the last shriek, the last sigh will vanish from the world—and then, ah, then there will be quiet, a quiet unimagined since the beginning of time." He paused, then shook himself from his reverie and chuckled. "Still, don't worry about a lay-off anytime soon."

But now, when she attended a Scream Processing party, she scarcely spoke to anybody, let alone the Supervisor. From time to time a man, perhaps an Acoustics researcher or a fellow cleaner, would nervously ask her if she'd like to go see a film or a play. Irrational panic clogged her throat; eventually she would gasp out an excuse of one sort or another, and the man would invariably seem as relieved as she to be able to drop the subject. She didn't think any of the

Department employees ever went out—ever, in fact, did *anything*, and as she gradually became convinced of this, she realized that a silent pall had fallen over her own life.

Later she supposed she had known that something was wrong even when the man in the yellow sports jacket first approached her on the street outside the Department. But at the time she was able to convince herself otherwise. She'd just come off a terrible shift, having spilled a panful of Class C Startled Squeaks which had fluttered and flurried away into dark corners and nooks, with the result that the workroom had to be shut down for half an hour while they were coaxed out.

"Lena?" the man said. He had a long flexible face that was set in a businesslike scowl. "Can you come with me, please? There are some important details we must discuss."

He gestured towards a white car parked by the curb, and she found herself getting in. She remembered thinking it must have had to do with her accident in the workroom that day, that she was being reprimanded or fired, but even then, really, she must have known that it was all wrong, that she'd never seen this man in Scream Processing before, that this was an event that simply didn't fit the pattern of her existence. But she still got in the car.

He said his name was Lomax as they drove out of the city, past buildings and neighbourhoods that she

hadn't seen for— how many years had it really been? Had she ever seen these places before? He drove out into the country and took a narrow dirt road.

"What is this all about?" she asked.

He looked at her briefly and then back at the road. "Official business."

She gave a nervous laugh. "No, I mean really." By now she knew something was wrong, but strangely she felt no fear, only a hollow tingling excitement.

He didn't even shift his gaze. "You'll see."

He stopped the car at a small acreage. There was a brown and white house. He got out of the car and led her inside without saying anything.

He took her down a long dark hall that ended in a door. Light came out from underneath it.

"Lena . . ." He paused.

"Yes?"

He seemed to be weighing whether he should say something, then deciding against it. He opened the door. "This is Sam," he said. "He wants to talk to you."

The man in the chair was very sick.

His pale head lolled atop a thin neck that seemed too feeble to support it. His eyes were closed and webs of wrinkles creased the sockets. He clutched at the armrests and leaned forward as the door opened, still

without opening his eyes. There was something brittle about him: an almost palpable radiation of pain.

The man in the yellow sports jacket—Lomax—waited for Lena to enter, then closed the door behind her. She stared at the man in the chair. "You don't work for the Department," she said.

There was no reply. Sam in the chair merely inclined his head. She couldn't tell how old he was, but his movements seemed slow and careful, as though he might shatter if he moved too hastily.

"What do you want?"

Nothing.

"Why did you bring me here?"

Sam lifted his head to her. He still hadn't opened his eyes, and she wondered if he was blind. His mouth opened slowly, moistly, and he spoke.

"Lena." His voice seemed to rise from his sunken form like a vapor. "Do you know who I am?"

"I . . . no."

"You must understand this, if you would understand why my friend has brought you here today."

She said nothing.

"I suppose," he said slowly, almost whispering, "you would call me a researcher, a scientist of sorts. My project was pain; my thesis was human grief. I travelled the world, the dark places and the light . . . the bright places too . . . Africa, Kampuchea, China . . . the lost alleys and ghettos of Europe and America . . . the corpse fields . . . the

soundproofed rooms . . . I collected fear and anger and hurt. I hoarded murder-lust and heartbreak; scooped up quantities of smaller pains, paper-cuts, money-worries, wasp-bites. I thought if I saw enough . . . learned enough . . . I could eliminate suffering from the world."

His eyelids trembled. "I was something of an idealist, you see, Lena."

This all seemed mad to her. "It didn't work?"

He seemed surprised. "Why no, Lena, it did work. It worked very well, very, very well indeed. It went so well I even learned some things I hadn't set out to learn." His hands had begun to shake, and now his entire body. "I learned about limits, Lena. Limits are very important."

His hands clenched around the arms of the chair, and suddenly he threw his head back in what Lena first assumed was a grotesque yawn, until she saw the way the skin at the corners of his mouth was stretched so tight it was bleeding, his frame yanked taut across the chair. He was screaming. He was screaming, but there was no sound, none at all.

His body trembled in the grip of it for ten, now twenty seconds. Finally he slumped into the chair, his head sagging over his chest.

"I—" Lena began. Then Sam swung his head up.

He opened his eyes. They were blue and horrible, reflecting a shiny terror Lena could only guess at.

She tried to meet his gaze but it was impossible. She turned away and shuddered.

She could hear him breathing for long moments. At last he spoke again. "So sorry, Lena. It comes and goes. But now you see. Are you all right?"

She glanced back: his eyes were closed. "Yes."

"After the experiment," Sam rasped, "I screamed for seven days. My vocal cords were torn to shreds, but still I kept screaming. After a week I ran out."

"You . . . I don't understand."

Sam grimaced. "Don't you? Isn't that what you do? Your job?"

"No, I, I'm just a cleaner."

"I ran out of screams. I used them all up but I still need more. Limits, Lena. Do you understand now what I want from you?"

She thought she did. But—"Why me?" she asked.

"Do you want me to lie?" Sam said. "You were the only person we could find. The . . . Department, as you call it . . . is not easy to locate. It requires you to understand contradictory metaphors simultaneously . . . like closing one eye while looking out the other, only doing that with both eyes at the same time."

"I don't understand."

"No. What will you do now? I can't threaten you."

"I could lose my job."

"Yes. I could offer you money but that would be pointless. What is

it that you want, Lena? I can offer you nothing."

She closed her eyes. Nothing but the risk of wrecking her own life for the sake of a man who cared nothing for her, who needed her only as a tool. And what did he know about her? She already understood Sam well enough to know he was too proud to offer even his gratitude. He was offering nothing but a choice. Nothing but the one thing she'd given up, so long ago when she'd thought she would never need it again.

"You're very clever," she said finally.

∞

It was easier than she'd thought it would be.

She waited until noon when the other cleaners went on their lunch break, and told them she'd be along as soon as she finished with her last item. It was an F-5b Plangent Outcry, large and slippery: as the last cleaner filed out of the workroom, she slid it into a plastic bag, folded it up as well as she could, muffled it with a thick cloth, and stuffed it into her lunchbag. When she went upstairs to the coffee room, she made a side trip to the coat room and placed it inside her purse.

And that was all.

And later: Sam's assistant Lomax standing beside the white car in his yellow sports jacket, not quite smiling.

The country road, the acreage, the house: and then Lena was in the

room at the end of the hall again, with the stolen scream, wrapped and silenced, in her hand like a gift. She supposed it was.

She began to pluck at the wrapping, glanced doubtfully at Lomax, who was standing off by the side. "Should I—"

He nodded silently.

Sam was shaking as he waited for her. She couldn't read the emotion on his stiff white face. She unfolded the scream, dropped the wrapping to the floor, and stepped towards him. Slowly, carefully, she slipped the scream into his mouth.

There was a moment of perfect silence then, as he opened his mad eyes and gazed up at her. For a second Lena almost thought he smiled.

And then the scream came roaring out of him, seemingly too immense for his frail body to contain. Lomax fell aside in shock. Lena, who had more experience with this sort of thing, was nonetheless appalled: emotion trembled in the air, vibrating itself away through the walls and ceiling, for half a minute after the scream had fled.

Sam's body was awkwardly twisted in his chair, and Lena leaned over him to see if he was still alive.

He lifted his head and smiled. There was no mistake this time. His eyes, for that one moment, were serene and empty of horror. Lena, despite herself, smiled back, and reached to put one of her hands on his.

He stiffened and his eyes closed. Lomax stepped closer and grasped his hand. "Sam?"

Then his mouth snapped open in silence and he opened his eyes again and they were the same as before, or even worse. He would scream on through the night, but Lena's startled cry at that moment would be the only sound.

∞

She embezzled screams for another three months before they caught her. It seemed like the terrors bottled inside Sam had no end. Each night when Lomax drove her out to the house, she thought: perhaps *this* time. Perhaps this will empty all his stolen horrors.

But . . .

It never did.

Lena never found out how they caught her. Ripples spread through Scream Processing's accounts; somewhere they were noted, and action was taken. One afternoon as Lena prepared to leave, with a bag of whimpers hidden in her purse, two slight, well-dressed men casually stepped in front of her. They didn't even bother to search her purse. They took her directly to Supervisor Sheen's office.

Sheen was behind his desk. He wasn't smiling. Lena sat down as the two men left, and sighed.

"How did you find out?"

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not," she said. "What are you going to do?"

Sheen shook his head sadly. "It's not my decision, Lena. Will you tell me why you did it?"

"Don't you know?"

"You mean Samuel Lefoe? Yes, I know about him . . . his condition. Why did you help him? What does he mean to you that you would risk all this?"

She was silent.

"There was no danger on his part. *He* had nothing to lose. But you, Lena . . ."

"He needed help."

"A lot of people need help. Did you think he loved you, Lena?"

She laughed.

"Lena . . ."

"Does it matter, Mr. Sheen? Does it really matter why I did it?" Sheen's authority no longer impressed her.

He slammed his palms down on the desk. "It wouldn't have worked, Lena. It wouldn't have worked if they'd let you keep stealing for another three months, or three years."

She had nothing to say. She just wanted it to be over, she wanted whatever was going to happen to happen and be done with it.

"So what now?" she asked at last.

"You're being promoted. I'm sorry, Lena."

She stared, not understanding.

∞

They did something to her that she couldn't remember. Something was taken. And afterwards they did promote her. They promoted her to

shriek-catcher. If she'd felt distant from the everyday world before, she soon understood just how much humanity had still been allowed to her then.

She never saw her apartment again. She never cooked pasta or watched TV or made pencil sketches or rubbed the stomach of her cat Whiskey again. She neither needed nor was allowed these things anymore. When she saw Sheen or one of her former co-workers, as she still did occasionally, they looked at her with a nervous awe, but she never thought to exploit or alleviate it. She felt neither hatred nor sympathy for them.

She roamed the city by day and night by modes of travel and navigation she could not explain. Here, three feet under the soil of a backyard garden, was an unwanted baby, which had been not quite dead when the parents buried it. She gently extracted the last anguished cry from between the cool lips, stored it in a pressurized vessel.

There, someone down a lost alleyway died in a not quite unimaginable fashion: she found the last howl, too terrified even to wing its way back to the safety of Scream Processing, cowering under a garbage bin, and it too went into one of her containers.

The punishment they'd given her was perfect in its way. She had wanted to reach from her limbo to touch the real world of suffering and

they had obliged her. There was only one place in the world she would never be called to visit, and would never be able to go: a small quiet room in a house on an acreage where no scream, no outcry, no whimper or moan would ever break the silence.


It was too bad. She and Sam would have a lot in common. She understood what the look in his eyes meant now.

And here, in the back of a filthy lean-to on the edge of the slums, was a soiled and tattered sob, which fell to pieces as she tried to lift it, and there was one less in the world.

In the distance there slowly arose a cacophony of yammers, whines, and screeches, the ten thousand

voices of the city calling out in anger and pain and fear, the screams twisting and roiling through the air as they fled homewards, one here and one there falling back to become stranded or trapped. She stopped for a moment and thought about the day Supervisor Sheen had described to her, the day when the last shriek would disappear from the abruptly silent world, and everyone would have all the peace and quiet they'd ever wanted, and more, and she knew that on that day the last laugh, the last gleeful shout, and the last word spoken by human lips would vanish also into the sudden and everlasting calm.

She thought that would be a good day. Slowly, she moved on. ∞

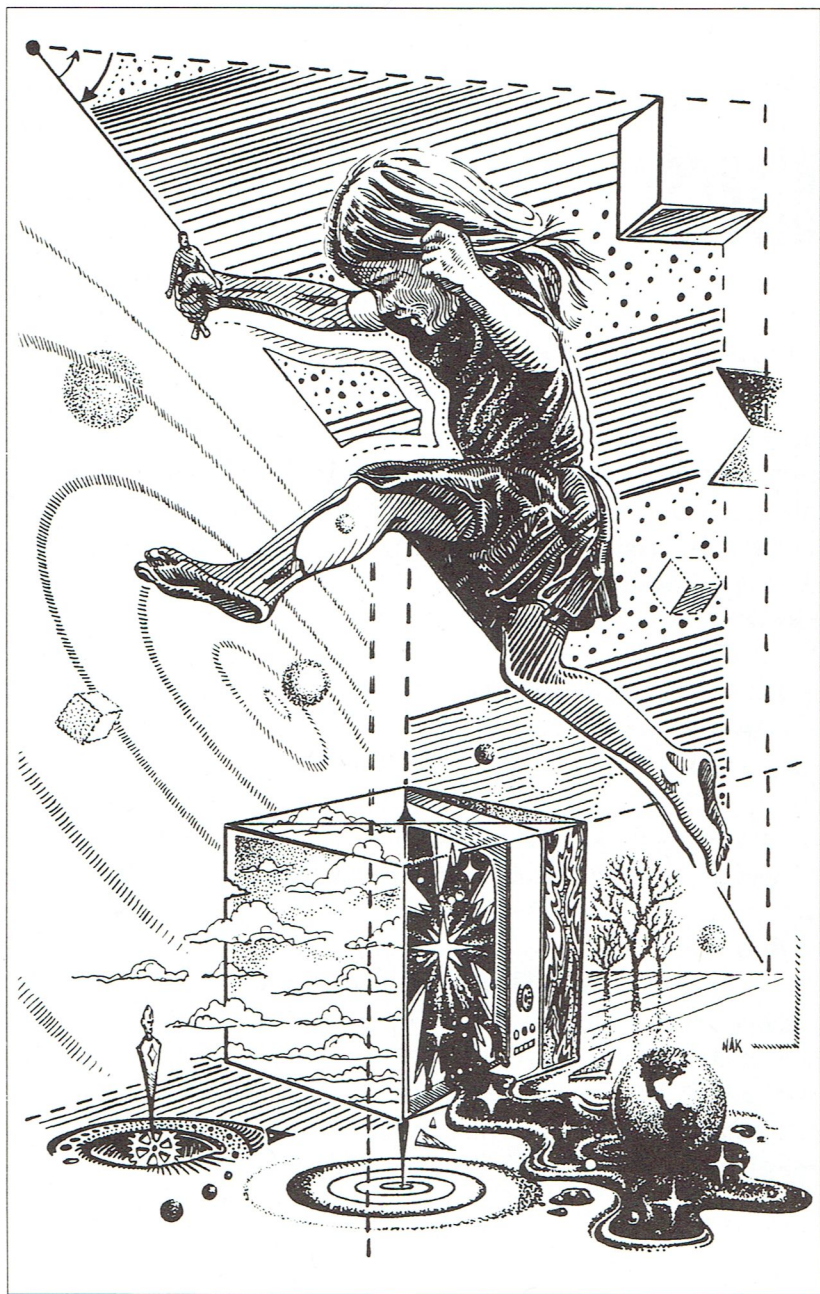


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UNIVERSE

by Barry Hammond

light stutters mysteriously at the window
faint radio transmissions grind and chatter in the next room
and the cat (familiar) tries to prevent me from writing this
marking pen/dragging channels
black trench necking
across the grooved white terrain
near impossible slit scan
our dull senses almost fail to grasp
the inexorable motion
spirals within spirals
outward bound
locked into gigantic invisible clockworks
held together by dark matter we don't understand
cruel
forced to admit
we are a handful of squabbling pimps and muggers
struggling vainly to control a squalid provincial street corner
while all around us
a vast territory
smudged alchemical spumy luminescence
tumbrels roulette on through life towards death.



Angeldrome

by Bill Wren

illustrated by Robert Pasternak

1 The child was happy. She punched the TV.
“... Police spokesperson Amanda McCauley says yesterday’s incident was racially inspired. Police were called out to disperse two hundred young people from local high schools who had gathered for the after-school altercation. According to police, the conflict was between white youths and another group of mixed races calling itself...”

The child punched the TV again. Diana placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her around. “Come on, Robyn,” she said. “Daddy knows you’re watching. He’ll be home soon.”

She would have turned the television off but she knew the child wouldn’t allow it. Robyn would become wild, soundlessly beating the floor, the furniture, herself.

“... Several youths were taken into custody after numerous weapons were seized. Police would not say what those weapons were...”

How would things change if Robyn were to be gone, Diana wondered, staring out the window at the pool. With a shiver, she remembered the story of Eric’s dead brother, Warren.

Nothing would change, she decided. It would only create absence—

another thing to add to the lengthening list of acquisitions.

No, she realized. That wasn't right. We would be adding two things—absence and guilt, a new guilt to be placed beside the other. More things to be dispersed, divided as the cell became two and, later, more. Perhaps. Probably. Life's a tumour that continually grows, she thought. Eric said so.

The child punched the TV again. She was happy.

?

The psychologist was calm; placid, like the surface of the pool after Warren had drowned.

"You've told me what you think everyone else thinks you should do. What do you think you should do?"

Eric hated that question. He had no answer for it. Questions were meant to have answers but this one had none. He hated its unreasonableness. It wouldn't make for a good news story. He frowned as he tried to think of something to say.

The psychologist smiled. There was no rush. There never was.

"Let's ask this question, then. What do you want to do?"

"Run away," Eric said without thinking. He was embarrassed at how quickly it had come out and at how truthful it was.

"Why?"

God, how he hated the interminable questioning. It was what he

loved about Robyn, his happy child. Herself an eternal question, she asked none. She simply was. Happy. Inexplicable.

"Why?"

"Because . . . because . . ."

"Because?"

"There aren't any answers to the questions! You keep asking them—but they have no answers! That's why I want to run! Running's what we do! In circles, endless circles. To things, from things; to them, from them."

"Which brings us to the Angeldrome you spoke of last time, mm? Can you tell me more about it?"

"No . . ."

"Last time you said it was your brother Warren who speaks of the Angeldrome. You were upset when I said that Warren was dead. Tell me about that."

"Warren's dead. Yes . . ."

"How did he die?"

"He walked into the pool."

"Yes. But why?"

"Who knows? No one knew what went on in his head."

"That's right. He had Angelman's Syndrome. That's why he walked into the pool . . ."

"No! That's not why he walked into the pool! That's why *we don't know* why he walked into the pool! There's a difference!"

"That difference is important to you. Do you know why?"

"Is that all you ask? Why, why,

why?"

"I suppose I sound like a broken record. A lot of people get frustrated with the questioning. But if the questions aren't asked they don't get answered. Which is what most people hope for. But you came here because of the problems you and your wife are having. You've implied that you think your daughter Robyn is the biggest problem . . ."

Eric sat up. "No. *We* are *her* problem. Her life revolves around us. If we split, her world comes apart . . ."

"Then why the talk of this Angeldrome? And this business of your brother? You said last week he spoke to you. When I pointed out he was dead, you became upset. Don't you think that is something you should deal with?"

But Warren did speak to him. To Diana too. He spoke of Robyn and the Angeldrome and the Third Law of Thermodynamics. Think of yourself as an engine, Warren had said. Think of the life force as energy. The Third Law states energy is immanent and inexorable in the universe. Every engine is a universe, he added.

Fuck off, Warren.

Don't mind me, his brother had laughed. I'm dead.

}

"Sshhh! Quiet, Robyn.
Quiet . . ."

The child was on the floor having another fit. The happiest of children, often Robyn would explode with ecstasy, shooting about the room like a ricocheting rocket, tumbling to the floor with arms and legs flailing, twitching. Tears would stream down her flushed face, her eyes would widen with glee, and her mouth become a wide and working cavern of silent laughter.

Diana tried to calm her—too much of this was bad. At any moment Robyn could begin to choke, laughing too hard to catch her breath. She might go into seizure—it had happened before.

What was so funny? What was it that made her strange child so happy?

As she reached to subdue Robyn she was assailed by flying limbs. She'd forgotten to remove the child's shoes. Usually, indoors, they let her go barefoot or in socks for moments like this—and the times when Robyn would choose to kick objects for no apparent reason. Now, having forgotten the shoes, the hard little toes and soles slammed like crazy pistons against her upper and lower arms, her breasts, her ribs. She tried to guard her face but the heels of the palms repeatedly found it.

"Oh, please, please Robyn . . ." she begged. If this kept up her face would get bruised and she would be housebound for days. Otherwise, neighbours would say Eric had been beating her. They had said that last

time. They had left leaflets and phone numbers for her.

Eric was on TV and, before Robyn had come, Diana had been too. She and Eric were watched by others. Their tragedy was discussed solemnly.

The others had dull lives. They had no Robyn.

"Robyn! Please . . ." She felt the anger within her stretching like an animal yawning, preparing to rise from its hibernation. Go back to sleep, she ordered it. This isn't the time. He'll be home soon. Then . . .

The anger was her greatest fear. In her dreams it came out, the beast unleashed as her teeth ground fiercely. In those dreams she beat her child, her happy, helpless child.

"Please don't, Robyn . . ." Please don't let the anger out. Soon, he'll be home.

"Let me try."

The voice was behind her. It was always behind her. Soft and reassuring, vague laughter always underlay its comforting modulations. The laughter was like a steady bass line under a melody.

It was Warren again. Warren, who had the queer habit of showing up in moments of crisis. Warren, who had a mysterious ability to connect with Robyn, the unconnected. Warren, who was dead.

Robyn's whirligig limbs slowed then stopped. Her eyes shone like still pools in morning light. The small mouth remained open in a

broad smile. As Warren bent to lift her she had the look of someone transported to a distant realm of bliss.

"She'll be all right," Warren said soothingly. He turned and grinned at Diana. "It's an energy . . . and that damned Third Law."

4

At first, we worked with scripts, Diana thought. Not old plots either but innovative, contemporary stories predicated on the idealism of the inexperienced. Then the old stories slipped in. They didn't intrude overtly but as sub-text. They had been sufficiently camouflaged to be shady, implied, perhaps not there at all.

It was the unforeseen complication that transformed it all into improvisational theatre. Enter Robyn—laughing, punching and staring and silent, for she had no lines.

Everything in my life is improvised now, Diana thought. When she considered it a moment she concluded it always had been. The conceit of a script was merely wishful thinking.

She had begun by studying literature and psychology, loving both. Somehow, she had wound up with a degree in journalism.

How had that happened, she wondered.

But a career in news had been appealing and she pursued it. It was how she had met Eric. Together, they

would relate the world to the world, husbanding their finances, arranging their lives carefully as if each year was a sheet in a date book. They would have two children. They would have maternity leave. They would have day care.

They had Robyn.

Unlike a 7:30 breakfast meeting, Robyn wasn't pencilled into either of their lives. Eric had been making slightly more than Diana; there had been network overtures. It had been decided Diana would be the one to stay home with Robyn and mysterious chromosome that whispered "Angelman Syndrome."

Aloud, neither of them articulated the truth. Diana was overwhelmed by an unexpected, sentimental sense of motherhood and a will-destroying sense of guilt. Eric, for all his well-inflected words and phrases, was simply inept alone with Robyn. For him, fatherhood was posturing. It was not because of vanity; he simply didn't know how to act. He, too, experienced guilt, though for him it was emasculating. Each day he wanted to apologize to the world for rising, dressing, breathing.

Only Robyn was untroubled. She was happy.

They thought. No one really knew what Robyn felt. No one had access to her universe. Until Warren came—Warren, who was dead.

5

"How did you know he was Warren? After all, it's not every day a person comes back from the dead. And it had been a long time."

"He was Warren. I knew. Not right away, but later, when I saw him with Robyn, I knew."

"What do you mean 'not right away'?"

"Well, like you say, it was eighteen years and people don't usually come back after dying. But it wasn't just his being there. It's how he's there. The way he acts. The way he always shows up when we need him, or Robyn needs him—I'm not sure which it is. But it's always when the three of us are interacting, like planets looking for their proper orbits. Or matter trying to organize itself in a pattern but quite able to."

"Interesting imagery . . ."

"It's Warren's. All the ideas are his. He talks that way, though you're never quite sure if he's serious or not. It's like, this life—yours, mine, everyone's—was something he wasn't really interested in. It's an opening act. You watch it because it's there but it's not what you're waiting for."

"And what's Warren waiting for?"

"Robyn, of course. The way that woman was waiting for him just before he went into the pool."

"You think he's going to drown Robyn."

"Oh, they don't drown. Ther-

modynamics, as he'd say. First Law."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. I'm just repeating what Warren says."

"I have a problem tying all this together—Robyn, orbits, these laws . . ."

"It's all about Robyn."

"How?"

"That would be the Second Law."

"The Second Law . . .?"

"The business of entropy. Energy, life as Warren would put it, is leaking out of her (out of all us for that matter). That's what the fits are all about. When you're in the Angeldrome you struggle for organizing principles. It's as if everything was a Chinese box. The universe is actually an infinite number of universes each with its own infinite number within it . . . and so on. The Angeldrome is that mental space where you recognize it and start running. But not running as we know it. Though it's literal it's also metaphorical. Electrons run, you know. Orbits.

"In running, a particular universe tries to maintain its position relative to the others, like a planet in a solar system. Just like you and me and everything else. We're all billions of electrons whizzing about in billions of orbits around millions of centres . . . the Chinese box. Each of these universes tries to maintain its orbit and the ones within it. But all orbits decay—the entropy thing. It's

inevitable, yet despite that inevitability there's a persistent compulsion to fight it. Robyn's fits are her attempts to stay where she is, in her particular orbit. Yet they're also her yearning to get to that other orbit in that other universe, where she needs to be. Where Warren is. Warren is here as a guide for her."

"Where do you and your wife fit into this?"

"I'm not sure. I think it has to do with something Warren said, 'How can the centre hold when there is no centre?' But I can't figure it out. Any thoughts?"

"Well, no. But I do think you may need more help than I can give. I've not been practising long."

6

The first reports were considered nonsense since the data was suspect. It wasn't so much that the data was wrong as it was sparse and vague. The conclusions were seen as unsubstantiated and unnecessarily alarmist. They were considered poor science.

Still, data accumulated and after a time the suspect conclusions became the embarrassed scientific community's conclusions. One of their number was quoted as saying, "The universe has become a cartoon. I don't know what else to say."

The problems with the sun were several, though they all were part of a larger one. Their problem remained

undetermined. The mythic orb was found to be wobbling on its axis. It was like a skilled drunk trying to maintain self-control. Only a discerning eye could detect its unbalanced movement from one side to the other. The variations from the sun's normal position were slight, hard to perceive, and essentially dismissed until the next phase came—solar distention. Again, the changes were minor but this time, small though they were, they were inescapable. The sun was flattening like a beach ball under intense pressure, then elongating along its axis like a clown's balloon. The variations the sun incorporated into its heavenly display were monitored over a period of two years, every few months bringing some new element into the equation. Flares from the surface became increasingly dynamic. It was as if the sun had succumbed to a wild and virulent flatulence. Around the world media broadcasts were disrupted—there was rioting in Japan and New York when the World Series could not be picked up. The American President wasn't able to follow the progress of his defeat in his own state's primaries. The Academy Awards were seen only in Brazil.

The consternated world struggled with other puzzlers, too. Incidents of spontaneous combustion became epidemic. Worse, they received thorough empirical documentation and were not confined to humanity. Parrots burst into flame

for no apparent reason. A *National Geographic* crew making a documentary in Nepal managed to film three snow leopards as they became a tripartite conflagration. Fire departments were exhausted putting out florist shops in shopping malls. The senseless transformation of any matter to fire, and then ash, stumped everyone, scientists and fantasists alike.

The universe was coming undone like a shoelace that loosens slowly. It unknots quietly causing a foot to miss a step. A body then falls with a thud against glass making someone leap into the street at the sound. A car skids to an unsuccessful halt as other cars collide behind . . . and so on.

In Eric and Diana's house their afflicted child had more and more fits of ecstasy, terrifying seizures that left her paralytic for hours. Warren's stays became longer until it seemed he was always there, waiting.

Talk of separation continued between Eric and Diana, at breakfast, dinner, in bed. All their conversations had the quality of nostalgia, as if the husband and wife were speaking not of an impending, possible future but of a possible past, sentimental and not quite real.

1

Eric and Diana were in the kitchen by the window. Outside Robyn sat on the black inner tube

playing an imaginary game. She was on the grass not far from the pool. Warren was somewhere, they weren't sure where. But he was near. They knew that.

Diana spoke.

"It's not us. We're not the problem. And neither is she."

"Of course not," Eric agreed. His thoughts were embroiled in the endless questions, as if he were in thick brush that goes on forever.

Diana was thinking of plays and of how Eric's answers tended not to give another much to work with. Improvisation was difficult with Eric.

"A trial period would be good," she said. The thought of dividing everything was daunting. The energy it would require was simply too much, impossible with the fact of Robyn insinuated in their lives. Separation was better; it was neither here nor there. The division of property could be postponed; the inevitable depression muted.

"Yes," Eric agreed. "I'll move out. Get an apartment."

"Mmm," Diana murmured absent-mindedly.

"I think it would be a mistake, you know."

Diana turned to Warren, who behind her. "We shouldn't separate . . . ?"

"Well, not for the reasons you're thinking of . . ."

"Why?" Eric always felt ill at ease speaking with Warren. It was always difficult to grasp his meaning and

Eric sensed that that was deliberate.

"The centre," his brother said smiling.

"How can it hold?" Eric mimicked. "I know, I know."

"No, you don't."

"I know *I* don't," Diana threw in.

Eric glared at Warren. "Why not just say what you want to say?"

"You assume I mean the centre isn't holding because there is no centre," his dead brother answered. "Couldn't I be asking about how that happens when there is no centre?"

Eric blinked as Diana, finding the play and its improvisations bewildering, turned to look out the window at Robyn.

Like a raconteur at a small gathering, Warren continued, "What if the centre and the object orbiting it are interchangeable? What if they're the same thing, that only perspective makes them seem different?"

Perspective is everything, Eric thought. Anytime he ran into a problem he found himself coping by trying to approach it in a new way. He looked for a different way of seeing it.

He found it disturbing that this time, with the question of Robyn, he hadn't once tried seeing it from another angle. It had never even occurred to him.

"Everything is related," he said to Warren suddenly. "Isn't it?"

Warren didn't answer. He simply remained where he was, watch-

ing Eric and waiting. Diana was looking out the window, her lips slightly parted.

"Everything's related," Eric continued. "One story, many sidebars. True?"

Warren smiled. "I can't answer your questions, Eric. In the end, even if I could, you wouldn't want me to. All I can tell you is it's all the Third Law of Thermodynamics, though it's actually the first law. In its way it's like a concerto by Chopin, numbered backwards. It's all about thermodynamics. Entropy's in there too. The Second Law."

"I should have studied physics at university."

"Or metaphysics."

"Eric? Warren?"

Eric turned to his wife. Her voice was soft and had an odd quality to it.

"It's Robyn," she said.

Eric stepped up to the window beside his wife and looked out at his daughter. Illogically, she hovered a few feet off the ground above the dark inner tube. Her arms were spread and her head was tilted back. Bliss was impressed on her face. Her mouth was open and the small teeth gleamed in the sun as she laughed soundlessly.

It was another ecstatic seizure, only this time she was levitating somehow. On the other side of the pool Warren stood. He was grinning at her warmly. His arms were open as if in welcome. As with everything

else, Eric found it impossible. Warren was a few feet behind him in the kitchen. Turning to confirm it, Eric saw that his brother was gone.

0

They said his brother was sick. But Eric knew he was happy. Warren was always laughing. He rolled around and kicked and his parents called them fits, but Eric saw that Warren was happy. His face was like the people he sometimes saw in cartoons—laughing largely, eyes wide with fun.

It was Eric who found Warren in the back. He had gone out and there, in the pool, the small body floated like a boat in the bathtub.

"I've been waiting," the woman said. "I don't have long."

Eric gave her a puzzled look. He wasn't really afraid. He felt confused and a little irritated by it. It was like he sometimes felt in school when he struggled with a question he couldn't find the answer to. But he wasn't afraid. Very young, he was only puzzled by Warren's passiveness.

"I knew you would be first, the one to find him," the woman said, glancing at the pool. "So I waited to tell you some things, though they won't make much sense to you now. One day they might. If you remember. But maybe not."

The woman looked like his mother did—about the same age, a summer dress like she sometimes

wore, mid-length hair drawn back by barrettes. Blue tinted earrings, small and oval, clung to the lobes of her ears.

"Warren was lucky," she said. "He wasn't anchored like most people are. He could move, and chose to move, from one world to another."

Eric's nose scrunched up as if he'd smelled something bad. But it was just his frowning at what the woman said. He didn't understand her.

Recognizing his confusion, she laughed. "Like I said, I don't expect this to make sense to you now. Maybe not ever. But you might remember, one day."

She bent over and with a fist tapped at the pool's concrete edge.

"It all seems so solid, doesn't it?" She stood back up. "But it's not. Nothing is. It's all moving. Changing. Going from here to there. Warren's gone from here to there."

She looked up to the sky and squinted at the brightness of the sun. "It all changes. Moves. Even the things that seem most eternal."

Eric's eyes met hers as she looked back down and across at him.

"There are so many worlds, Eric. We couldn't count them even if we wanted to. And as one goes out another comes into being. This one's about used up. Maybe it makes more sense to say worn out. Tired. But it will go on, like Warren, here or there. Some like to call it thermodynamics." She smiled. "Whatever that

means."

Strangely, the woman began to fade as the mist does when dawn becomes morning then midday.

"It's nothing to worry about, Eric. It's something to be thankful for."

Eric watched as she dissipated, then, taking a long last look at Warren's body in the pool, he went into the house.

"Warren's gone from here to there," he told his parents, then spent the rest of the day in his room hiding from the sobbing and dark, silent activity of the stricken house.

9

He looked back out the window. Warren stood waiting for Robyn across the pool.

While beside him his wife stared dully, Eric watched as his daughter floated above and across the pool to his dead brother. Warren's arms embraced her as she reached him and Eric heard her let out a wordless squeal of glee.

Beneath his feet Eric felt movement in the floor and he heard a low rumbling that made him think of a sleeping giant waking. He felt the foundation of the house stir and his ears caught the suggestively soft jingle of disturbed lamps and cutlery.

His hands reached out and grabbed the counter as Diana stood beside him oblivious to the queer

vibrations.

Glancing back up he looked out the window again. Warren had put Robyn back on the ground. His daughter seemed lost to a tarantismic madness, flinging arms and legs wildly, squirming in a frenzy and finally slamming her head repeatedly against the tiled edge of the pool.

"Robyn!" he yelled and ran for the door.

As he burst outside he saw his daughter slam her head one last time as Warren beamed above her. Then, seeming to lose whatever sense she had of where she was, she fell to her side and into the pool.

Without thinking, Eric ran and splashed into the shallow end. Moving forward, water holding him back, he saw the surface slowly still where Robyn had fallen, blood from her forehead streaming in thin ribbons through the water.

The pool's floor suddenly dropped and Eric began a stroking motion with his arms. He was hampered by the suit and shoes he still wore. Thought the pool was not overly large, his progress seemed preposterously slow.

Finally getting to where Robyn and fallen, he stopped, treading water, looking for his daughter.

She wasn't there.

He looked wildly about but couldn't see her. He turned to Warren and screamed, "Where is she?" but Warren only smiled back and said, "Thermodynamics—laws one

through three." He shrugged, and mouthed the word, "Angeldrome."

Frantic and furious, Eric dove and searched the pool's bottom but there was no Robyn. Surfacing, he looked at Warren again, began to ask once more where was, but stopped as he saw his dead brother fading like an afterimage caused by an intense light.

"Warren . . . ?" he muttered, but his brother merely shrugged again and then pointed up at the house.

Eric turned and saw Diana stepping out of the door. She looked like a lost child who'd been wandering aimlessly for hours.

Diana was headed for the pool, her steps small and uninspired. Indifferently, she stepped into the chlorine water. As she continued it rose above her angles, her knees, then above her shoulders as she moved into the deep end and broke the water with a breast stroke. Eric became instantly aware of the heavy weight his sodden clothes were on him. Suddenly, he wanted out of the pool. Suddenly, he was enormously tired.

He met his wife in the pool. They wrapped arms around one another and held each other tightly. They both knew Robyn was no more, as Warren was too.

"They're gone," Eric said aloud. "Like escaping heat," he added, surprising himself with the simile.

As one, he and Diana moved to the side of the pool to get out. To-

gether, they felt a final shudder move through the pool and all the earth, everywhere. They saw their house collapse in on itself with a soft exhalation, dust in small, weary puffs rising from it. Eric was surprised it hadn't made more noise, then dismissed the thought. He cared only for getting out of the pool with Diana.

Lying on the tile by the pool's edge, both breathed heavily as they waited to recover from their intense fatigue. When they sat up they saw the small body, face down, floating silently in the pool. Robyn's corpse was exactly where Eric had been searching—obvious and looking like an abandoned water toy. For a moment he thought the body was his brother Warren, then realized he had confused it with memory. Warren had been years ago. This was now.

As he began to cry, Eric wished Warren was there to argue with. He wanted to say, no, you're wrong. He wanted to point at Robyn and say, see? There is the centre. That is the centre that has been here all along. Not the body of my daughter, but this moment with the body of my daughter in it.

"Thermodynamics," Diana said beside him. "That's what he said, wasn't it?"

Eric waved his hands in dismissal.

But Diana was smiling beside him and he was thinking of engines and universes and his dead brother's claims about immanence and inexorability. He wished he understood.

More than that, he wished he had understood Robyn. He wished he had understood, if only for an instant, what her universe was like, what she had felt. In the face of an unfeeling, decaying reality, why had she been happy, blissfully happy, while he and Diana had ceaselessly fought?

The word "Angeldrome" rose up in his thoughts like something buoyant to the surface of a pool. For a moment Eric felt he had some understanding—not intellectually, perhaps, but in his being, in what he was. Angeldrome, he thought. Yes. Where you run; where you're always running—but not away. You run simply to run, to make the engine work, to keep it working, and push the energy through the machine.

And some is lost. Entropy, of course. But never really lost, only transformed, existing forever as another thing, as Robyn and Warren did—elsewhere. Elsewhen.

In a world people like himself could never believe in. ∞

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Calliope's Song

by Colleen Anderson

Hair sings a nebula
to the moon of her face.
Fibril hands serenade
saddened, charred metal.
From her ears float
the Transcom wires—
severed from a life of words.
Black-iced blood
in darker notes spirals
from blued skin.
Squeezed in frozen grasp
she arcs an ellipse.
Calliope sings her death song,
silent harmony to space.



Birth Rite

by Marian L. Hughes
illustrated by Murray Lindsay

I walk towards the Proving Chamber, my birth canal still sore from the son I delivered not ten hours ago. My womb contracts pleasurably, urging me to nurse. Unwanted feelings of love for that tiny scrap of fur I bore threaten to overwhelm me. Of course I will succumb to neither of these driving urges.

I have some pride left. It was bad enough that I, the best female fighter in my age group, should lose my first mating fight and have a male cub bred on me as I lay half conscious in the sand. But, only minutes later, as I licked my wounds by the splintered wall, my older sister, Hiracht, fought her aging challenger, beat him, and got a daughter on herself. Later, during my pregnancy, her sneering remarks and smirking tail were the hardest things I ever had to bear. The shame still crushes me the way it did throughout the long months that I grew this . . . this thing. Again I push down the unseemly love I feel for my son.

My nipples ache; I bite the inside of my jowls to clear my head. Why couldn't we kill all unfit offspring the way our ancestors did? If we did that then I could try to forget my defeat when I buried my love and shame with my cub. I ruthlessly push down the grief at the thought of him lying there lifeless. Better he die than be neutered and used as a slave. An insane hope that my offspring might survive the birth rite as a whole male bubbles up in my mind. I ruthlessly exterminate the idea. Few cubs leave the proving chamber alive. Only the fiercest of cubs, the offspring of a queen, or the cub

of a proven breeder who has already produced five or six daughters ever leaves the proving chamber as a whole male. No, my son will be a slave, and I will have to see him destroyed by the humiliations of his life. I would gamble my next kill that Hiracht is planning to ask the Pack Queen for my offspring as her personal servant so she can flaunt my shame.

Hiracht slips out of a side corridor and joins me. I know it isn't by accident. Her long black and white fur shines with health, and her belly still swells with her daughter. She steps in front of me and preens. I rage at her superior attitude. She is an indifferent fighter at best—was defeated twice and bore two males before she wisely chose an elderly mate so she could get a daughter. He was nothing, really. He only controlled the land and prey around one waterhole. In fact I heard that after his breeding he went back to find a younger male in control of his territory and that he slunk off, and was seen no more. But from the way Hiracht preens, you would think she had gotten her daughter from a pack champion, not from a grey-muzzle who fought only to keep his visiting rights to our breeding stronghold.

Hiracht carries a battered case in her paws, gelding instruments for my cub when he proves unworthy. If only I had borne five daughters before him. If only he had bitten me at birth, showing acceptable ferocity,

instead of nuzzling for my nipple. No wonder some females died on the mating ground. I know that I could never go through this again.

“Good morning, Safideer.”

Hiracht's voice is syrupy with satisfaction and her tail lifts and fluffs as she looks down her black nose at me.

I show my fangs. My claws unsheathe as I look longingly at her belly.

She laughs, her eyes sparkling with malicious pleasure. “It is a burning offense to harm the winner of a daughter,” she says.

Well do I know that. As the carrier of a daughter, her rank is frozen throughout her pregnancy, and none can challenge her. But, as a defeated breeder, I had no such privileges. I had to fight half the pack just to keep my fighting rank. My status in council, however, was lost, maybe forever. I glare at my sister, thinking of exactly how I will humble her after she delivers her daughter.

“I would never harm your daughter,” I growl. “Then, when she doesn't prove, you will have no excuses on your side.” It is a vain hope. Daughters have to be crippled or blind not to be automatically accepted into the pack. But my point hits home anyway.

Hiracht's tail drops so fast it slaps the floor. I smile as I remember that her first two male cubs were gelded. “My second one should have

proved," she whines. "He did growl at me."

"If it was a growl," I say, enjoying my spite, "I couldn't hear it because he was buried so deeply in his sire's fur."

She shows her teeth at me, turns and stalks away. A slave, staggering under a huge pile of half cured pelts, lurches into her. He gasps and shrinks back against the timbered wall. His coat is lustreless and his tail has dragged on the ground so long the underside is bald. Will I have to watch the soft bright-eyed scrap of fur I bred turn into this? The slave's fear offends my nose; I snarl at him. He carefully puts the pelts down and presents his neck and belly. Hiracht gives a hop, casually raking him with a hind claw as she passes him. I spit at him and hurry after my sister.

Until she bred a daughter, it was I who led, but now . . . I push down my anger. I will not shame myself further by snarling over something as insignificant as a male cub. But she won't always be pregnant and then I'll taste her blood.

I try to fluff up my tail. It lifts, but won't fluff. Well, at least it isn't clamped between my legs.

The Proving Chamber, also the Mating Chamber, smells dusty with a faint residue of musk, sweat and blood. The high slit windows under the eaves allow long shafts of sunlight to light up the benches that surround the bowl of fine white sand

where the young of our family are conceived, born, and tested. My nose fills with the scents of my elders and the elders of my mate's dam's pack, all here to see that justice is done. For only the fittest are allowed to leave the chamber as entire citizens and not neutered slaves. We're not primitives who allow weaklings to grow and mate again. We neuter the unfit and arrange to have the best males on hand when the breeding rages descend.

I bow to both Pack Queens. I can feel my tail dragging on the sand. So what? No one will expect anything else of the defeated mother of a cub. I turn to face the male who caused all this. Marda sprawls in the lowest depression in the white sand, his glossy black body curled protectively around the firstborn of my womb. Marda is magnificent. His tail lifts and fluffs even as he lies at his ease. He is big, well muscled, and the lord of *two dozen* watering holes and all their game. He looks me over as if I were still his possession. Echoes of my mating passion stir my blood. I had been so sure. A daughter by him would have been destined for unguessed-at greatness.

My eyes drop to my cub: my bright-eyed scrap of fur. He lies in Marda's arms: a tiny fluffy ball of fur with the black and white markings of my family, and the short square muzzle of my mate. His green eyes are open, but unfocused as he snuggles up to his sire, lifting his tiny

head so he can be licked under his chin. It is the ultimate gesture of confidence among our people, but also the submission we require of slaves. My stomach curdles. I have never offered *my* neck to anyone. But I have teeth marks on it just the same, bites from my breeding with his sire.

With the confidence of a champion, Marda squirms more comfortably on the sand. His tail stretches along the sand, but the tip rises sideways in the air, and fluffs, reminding all of his power. When he catches my eye, he leans away from his son for a moment and casually licks his sheath, reminding me of the excitement of the fight and its humiliating conclusion. My nose twitches as I try to avoid his male musk. My heart beats faster.

He watches me boldly, his long tongue continually grooming the son I bore him. Marda's black fur gleams with health and his manner is confident despite the overpowering presence of senior females. He looks me over, letting his eyes settle deliberately at the base of my tail.

I stare pointedly at his scars, his muzzle criss-crossed with white fur that has grown into his wounds since our breeding fight and his ear which hangs in two folds. At the same time, I resist the urge to run my fingerpads along the bump on my own forelimb where the break has set poorly or look at the ridge of scar tissue on one leg where proud flesh and not hair grows. And yet . . . and

yet I feel drawn to him. I am not in estrus, but I still feel drawn to his power and wonder what it would be like to mount him and . . .

The door thuds behind me and the bar drops into place.

Now.

I walk forward.

Marda's claws are carefully sheathed as he nudges his little one with a massive paw. He gives it one last lick of reassurance, and then backs away.

With a sheathed finger-pad I prod the cub's soft white belly fur.

He blinks. Intelligent green eyes look curiously past me, trying to focus. He sniffs my fur. I unsheathe my claw and give him a little jab. Ears back, he nips the claw and rolls over, gleefully battling it with all four paws. I hear Hiracht snigger. Shame flattens my fur in spite of all my will. Now they'll think I'm soft too. My nipples ache; I want him. I could nurse him right now. But then both of our lives would be ruined. I bite the insides of my mouth, hoping the pain will keep my nipples from leaking. If they leak, I'll die of humiliation.

I take a deep breath. Marda's ears slant tightly against his head and his teeth show in a soundless snarl. I slash the cub across his tiny rump, slicing it open to the first layer of muscle.

He wails a thin baby-call for help and looks to his father. Marda watches, not even breathing. His tongue flicks. But he does not lean

forward to lick his son's wound. Instead a deep male challenge issues from his throat. It is the challenge of one hunting male to another. I blink in astonishment. What is going on? Uncertainly the cub wobbles away from his sire.

I can smell the lack of interest in the crowd. I turn to look at my Pack Queen. Her yellow eyes are dull. She adjusts the soft cloth that wraps her half-bald body. She has not spoken directly to me since my breeding. Yet before, I was her "young councillor." Marda's Queen idly inspects a carving on the door posts. She is younger than my leader and her belly is swollen with young. She must be a formidable fighter to be Queen while still a breeder. Of all the witnesses, only Hiracht leans forward watching intently. When she catches my eye, she strokes her geld cutters.

I turn back to the cub. Why does my future have to rest with such an insignificant scrap of fur? *Why do I so desperately want to pick him up and nurse him?* I take a deep breath and try to fluff my tail, try to think, try to figure out some way to make him prove himself so that I will not become a fringe breeder, barred, maybe forever, from the councils that rule. If he does not prove, I know that the old queen will "encourage" me to become an artisan, like Hiracht, the family gelder. My fighting prowess might win me high rank, but power only goes to proven breeders.

The cub has stopped wailing and watches me warily. I lean forward and slash again. He ducks under my claw and bites my finger-pad. Tiny milk teeth dig in. Impossibly small claws try to sink into my callouses. I shake him free and toss him viciously across the room. Maybe I can accidentally kill him and spare myself the shame of seeing him every day. Involuntarily I cringe when he lands with a solid thump on the wood at the end of the platform.

I've thrown him too far—right out of the sand and into the bleachers. His high-pitched squeals muffle as he scuttles under the gown of my Queen, moving fast for his one day in the world. I jump from the sand to the plank floor in front of the bench, trying to catch him. But my Queen is in the way, and I am forbidden by law to touch or fight with her. She coughs in rage and whips her tail out from behind her. At the end, clinging by his teeth, is my spawn. She lashes her tail back and forth. His little body shakes and he loses his grip with his foreclaws, but his tiny fangs are locked together.

I bare my teeth in fierce hope.

Finally the old one grabs her tail and roughly pries him off, holding him by the scruff of the neck while one of her sisters examines the bite.

"I swear I haven't been bitten like that since my last mating fight." She blinks the tears of age from her eyes and leans forward to peer at him. He snarls and struggles to bite her scarred nose.

"Your tail is nearly bitten through, Old One," says her sister.

My neck arches as a body-weight of shame starts to slide off my shoulders. I really look at my cub for the first time. He is big for his first day in the world, and his shoulders hint at great strength to come.

"Nonsense," my queen says, "no cub can bite through an adult's tail!" She swirls her tail in front of her eyes to examine the damage. The cub twists in her paws and jerks free. He falls with a thud on the plank floor, gathers his stubby legs under him, then pounces on the nearest foot, teeth gleaming.

My sister kicks him at me. He spits two tufts of fur upwards as he tumbles across the floor and onto the sand, growling and snarling.

"He nearly did bite through," my old Queen cackles and points. "And he got you too."

Hiracht's tail clamps between her legs as she shuffles her feet together, trying to hide the damage. I can see no bite, but her shuffling smears the wooden plank floor with blood.

I feel my tail beginning to fluff. My tongue lolls for the first time in months. I stand straighter and feel cramped muscles stretch and release.

The old Queen points a long claw at me. "Why do you not feed your son, young councillor?" She turns to Marda's Queen who by rights should have been the one to accept the cub. "If you do not claim him, our pack will raise him even

after his weaning."

Marda's Queen bares her teeth and growls, "Never. He's ours!"

My sister, Hiracht, actually loses control and hisses.

I leap on my little ball of poison and bear him to my nipples, howling with fierce pride. He may only be a son, but he proved himself better than any daughter I have ever seen birthed. He bites deeply and the red blood begins to flow. My womb contracts with sensual pleasure. My arms wrap themselves naturally and protectively around him. I feel complete for the first time in my life.

Marda's Pack Queen snarls for attention. Her ears are flat with anger. "Our pack finds the cub worthy to grow up potent. We wait for his weaning so Marda can bring him home."

My queen nods. "We agree with your judgement and we also recognize Marda as a proven sire with all the rights of visitation in our breeding stronghold."

Marda approaches. I tense, remembering the power in his forepaws. But he only begins to lick my son's wounds as my cub suckles within my arms. My feeling of completeness shifts and I suddenly feel that we three could take on the world. My back prickles with pleasurable tension as I feel the ends of our fur brush. I can feel every hair in my fur separate and stand proudly alone, and I know that I must look gloriously dominant.

My Pack Queen rises. The two

leaders bow stiffly to each other and then leave. As Hiracht sidles out, the older females cough with laughter at the red smears she leaves on the floor, and smile admiringly at the furry body noisily sucking blood through my arterial nipple. The sun shafts through the high windows and warms my fur.

A long tongue caresses my neck.

I back off snarling; I remember the speed of his claws. But Marda's claws are in and his teeth are covered.

"I only honour the mother of my proven son," he says mildly.

His voice jerks me out of my strange feeling of wholesome completeness. He gave me a fine son, but he is still my enemy. He nearly cost me my whole future.

Marda grumbles contentedly in his throat. He looks even bigger than when we mated. I resolve that next mating I will be more prudent. I will challenge someone I know I can beat; I can't afford another son. My little beast has drained one nipple and is crawling toward another, digging tiny claws and occasionally teeth into my belly for purchase. "He'll be a great fighter, that one," Marda rumbles.

I can only snarl in agreement. Few cubs of one day can negotiate their dam's belly like that—few daughters either.

Marda's tail fluffs wide and twitches slightly at the end. "Yes, I would like another son like that one."

I hear a grinding snarl coming from my throat. "No." My lips pull

back from my teeth. "I'm through with you." Reluctantly I mentally review the older males, those with more than one waterhole, but not more than five.

"But think of the daughter we could make."

The image strikes me. Ah, such a daughter! The audacity! The ferocity! For the first time since I bred, I feel myself start a preening stretch. Hiracht would eat her tail in sheer envy. But, no. No, I can't take the risk. His musk attracts me even though I am months from a mating frenzy. I imagine the romp that leads up to the final frenzy and feel my fur quiver in its roots. But no. Not now. I cannot afford another son, even one like this. But I will taste Marda's blood again. Maybe a handful of years from now—when I am established. I hear an anticipatory growl coming from my throat.

Marda watches as I stop my stretch almost before it begins. "What if I give you a neck oath that our matings will be good fights, but that you will win two daughters in a row? Will you then give me a neck oath for a fourth breeding—and a son?"

I fall down on all fours in astonishment. "You'd deliberately lose a fight? That's unheard of. It's against the code!"

"So is deliberately breeding with males you can beat. Your sisters are winning many daughters, but what are they doing to the strength of the pack? Now, because I fought you so

well, no other female will risk challenging me." He begins to extend his neck. "You are my last chance to have more sons, but I am your only chance to breed a ruling family."

"I don't need *you* to breed a ruling family."

"Do you want a daughter bred from a weak, or worse, a stupid fighter?"

I turn my tail on him and look at the rough bleachers where our people have witnessed our fitness for so many generations. It galls me to have to admit that a male could be right. But I became "the young councillor" because I face truth as fearlessly as I fight. I turn back to this remarkable male. "I'll promise you a fourth breeding fight, but I'll grant you no son. This one will have to satisfy your family needs."

His fur flattens as his laugh coughs out of him.

Even without the heat of mating I feel excitement stir in my womb. I can almost taste his bloody, sweaty fur as he lies stretched beneath me, giving me a daughter. My breath comes faster. And what a daughter—not only vicious, she will be that of course, but also smart, like her parents. I push down the knowledge that we could be killed for this arrangement. Neither of us is in any position to inform on the other.

"I *will* breed you again," I tell Marda, then cautiously edge towards him to give the first neck oath of my life. My nose twitches with excite-

ment as I see him begin the same stretch that will allow each of us to kill the other. My fur prickles. I force myself to extend my nose, and expose my neck—my jugular—my life's blood to his powerful teeth.

His teeth close on my neck. My teeth close on his. I nip him delicately, and flick up a droplet of blood. Its taste fills my mind with memories, emotions, and breeding hunger. In spite of my resolve, my tongue flicks out again for another moment of sentient memory. I feel his do the same. Under his deep rich coat I can feel his powerful heart beating steadily. Under my paw, I feel the potency of his muscular body.

Ah, with daughters bred by this male, the "young councillor" would soon be Councillor, and who knows, the Pack Queen *is* old . . . Even though my neck is now totally vulnerable, I can feel my tail lift and fluff wide. The end, I know, must be quivering with expectation; for after my daughters there will be a fourth breeding. What a romp we will have. A romp made all the more exciting by the anticipation of a truly spectacular fight at the end. I breathe in his scent and find that his breath is mingling with mine.

My cub finishes my second nipple and yowls for more. We both release and turn to lick our offspring. As we do, our tongues meet and join in our task. ∞

Congratulations to All the Aurora Winners

Best Long-Form Work in English

SF or fantasy in published novel or fiction collection, released in 1991 or 1992:

Passion Play by Sean Stewart (Beach Holme)

Best Long-Form Work in French

SF or fantasy in published novel or fiction collection, released in 1992:

Chroniques du Pays des Mères, Élisabeth Vonarburg

Best Short-Form Work in English

SF or fantasy novella, novelette, or short story published in 1992:

"The Toy Mill" by David Nickle & Karl Schroeder (*Tesseracts*⁴)

Best Short-Form Work in French

SF or fantasy novella, novelette, or short story published in 1992:

<<Base de négociation>>, Jean Dion (*Solaris 101*)

Best Other Work in English (1992)

SF or fantasy activity in English not encompassed by the previous categories (critical writing, media presentations, anthologies, magazines, poetry, translator):

*Tesseracts*⁴, Lorna Toolis & Michael Skeet, editors (Beach Holme)

Best Other Work in French (1992)

SF/fantasy activity in French not encompassed by the previous categories:

Solaris, Jöel Champetier, réd. (*Les Compagnons à temps perdu*)

Artistic Achievement

Work or body of work produced during 1992:

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk for art direction of *ON SPEC*, illustrations, cover

Fan Achievement (Fanzine)

Canadian fanzine or fannish newsletter relating to SF and fantasy fandom, published at least once in 1992:

Under the Ozone Hole, edited by Karl Johanson & John Herbert

Fan Achievement (Organizational)

Canadian convention or club activities during 1992:

Adam Charlesworth, Noncon 15

Fan Achievement (Other)

Canadian fan activity in 1992 not encompassed by the previous categories:

Louise Hypher, SF² show

Watch for features on Aurora Winners in upcoming issues of *ON SPEC*!



Changeling Child

by Alison Baird

illustrated by Catherine Luce

"F aerie! *Changeling-child!*"

Aliena turned her head aside. Once she would have answered back, thrown a word or a stone at her accusers. But long weary years of experience had taught her that this would only make them worse.

The village lads spat and sneered, made the sign against the evil eye at her, then went on their way.

Aliena adjusted the basket's handle on her shoulder and moved on. The summer evening was mild, the sky still full of light. Against the blaze of gold and red she saw the dark silhouettes of the mounds, like low hills only more symmetrical in shape, the work not of nature but of ancient hands. The place where They lived.

The faeries . . . They had ruled all this land once, long ago; before the coming of men had driven them into the mounds, into the dark places of the dead where They now held Their hidden courts. The villagers feared the mounds, would not go near them after sundown. But Aliena was not afraid. She was of the faeries; had not the villagers themselves told her so, many a time? She had danced upon the mounds at midsummer, and once on a night of mist and magic she had seen the faeries Themselves, formless forms of fiery light that arose from the earth and rode in strange splendour upon the air.

She had seen Them, and They had done her no harm—because she was one of Them.

She set down her load by the roadside pool and looked down at her reflection. Her hair was long and tangled and red as the sunset clouds. Red, where her parents' hair had been dark . . . ah, she was a changeling, right enough! She smiled a bitter smile and walked on, into the dusky woods where the little tumbledown cottage lay. The night-whispers of the restive trees held no terrors for her. Let them come, sprites, spriggans, banshees and all! They were her kith and kin, and no crueller than human-folk . . .

All at once Aliena froze. A twig had snapped loudly, near at hand. Heavy footfalls approached. She whirled, saw several peasants come striding through the trees laden with bundles of kindling. Usually they did not come so far into the forest: these men must be brave indeed, or uncommonly reckless. At the sight of Aliena they stopped; one held up one of his sticks, like a cudgel. "It's she! The wild one—her that keeps company with the faeries—"

"Aye," she retorted as they moved to surround her, "and the curse of the faeries be upon you, if you don't let me by!"

They laughed: they were young men, strong and hot-blooded and fearless. "She's hated by everyone," one murmured, gazing at Aliena. "No one will care what we do to

her—"

She backed away as they advanced, turned to take flight; but one of them slipped behind her and seized her arms in a crushing grip. She writhed in growing fear and fury.

"Stop!"

They whirled, one and all, at the sound of the commanding voice. Aliena's captor released her, but she did not run. She stood, staring. There on the path stood a man, clad in a long white robe that seemed to gleam through the dusk. She had not heard him approach: it was as though he had appeared out of the air, like a spirit.

"Let that woman be," ordered the man. As he came forward she saw that his pale hair was tonsured at the crown: he was a priest. Pale though his hair was, almost white, he was not an old man: his features were youthful and handsome. They were stern now as he faced the young men.

"She's evil," one argued. "She's had dealings with the faeries."

"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her," quoted the priest calmly. "Let her alone, I say. She's done you no wrong."

They moved off sullenly and the priest took her by the arm. "Did they hurt you?"

"No." Aliena pulled her arm away. She hated to owe a favour to anyone, let alone a priest. "I took no harm. And—" she added defiantly,

as she turned to go, "what they said was true. I *am* a changeling, I'm not one of your flock, priest."

She snatched up her basket and stalked away, but she was very aware of his eyes, watching her as she left.

∞

Later that night, safe in her small cottage like an animal gone to earth in its lair, Aliena found herself thinking about the priest. He must be Father Gabriel, old Father Alfred's successor. She propped her chin on her hand, remembering.

After her parents had died when she was only fifteen, the village had drawn away from her, would have nothing to do with her. Her mother and father had disregarded everyone's advice and lived too close to the mounds, and when their daughter was born with hair red as fire, the villagers had shaken their heads. No young man would wed her: she was plainly of the faerie folk and her blood was tainted. Aliena lived on her own in the cottage her father had built, gathering what food she could in the forest, avoiding the village. She would not go to mass on Sundays, for the old priest scowled at her so; but the people said she stayed away because she knew that she was damned.

"What is wrong with the faeries?" she'd demanded once of Father Alfred, challenging him.

"The faeries are unholy," he had replied stiffly. "They are the weak-willed angels who sided with Satan

in the great war, and for that they are condemned to wander in the earth, fit neither for heaven nor for hell."

"I'll take the earth over your mouldy old heaven, any day," she had replied, with a toss of her red mane, and had run away.

But now Father Alfred was dead—gone to his heaven, she thought with a disdainful sniff. She turned her thoughts to his replacement. What a waste it was, to make a celibate cleric of such a comely man! She shrugged. Well, no man would ever wed with *her* anyway, and this one was no concern of hers: she'd never darken the church door, and so would likely never see him again.

In this, however, she was quite wrong. To her surprise, he actually paid her a call; she spied him coming up the path to her door and fled to the forest, but she lingered, peering through the bracken like some wild thing as he walked slowly away. He seemed so different from Father Alfred: he was more beautiful, certainly, but also he appeared to be gentler in his ways. But still she clung fiercely to her old hatred.

He did not return to the cottage, but it was not the last she saw of him. He was often in the woods—not gathering food or kindling, to her puzzlement, but simply wandering about, pausing now and then to examine some object or other—a bird's nest, a toadstool, the fallen feather of a grouse—with great in-

terest. Sometime he would just sit still on a stone or a fallen trunk, staring ahead of him. It was, Aliena thought, peculiar behaviour for a priest.

She stalked him sometimes, using her huntress' skills, spying on him but never letting him see her. But one day her curiosity got the better of her and she approached him where he was sitting alone by a stream. "What are you doing here?" she demanded—as though the wood were hers and he had been caught trespassing.

She expected him to be startled, but he answered as though he'd known all along that she was there. "I came here to be at peace—to be alone with myself and God. This place is good for the soul."

"I have no soul," she told him, mockingly.

He looked long at her. "All things have souls," he told her. "All things come from God and are a reflection of His glory: people, animals, the very trees."

"But not faeries," she returned.

"Who told you that?"

"The one who was priest here before you."

"And you believed him?"

"I am a faerie," she said. "I have danced on the mystic mounds. I have seen the faeries arise from the earth on midsummer's eve when the air was filled with magic. Why else would I be permitted these things unless I were one of Them—a

changeling?"

"You know what the faeries are?" asked the priest.

"They are the angels who were cast out of heaven."

"Were they cast out? Or did they forsake it?"

"If they did," Aliena declared boldly, "I wouldn't blame them. The earth is best: I would leave heaven for it. You see for yourself how very beautiful it is."

He nodded. "I feel closer to heaven here, sometimes, than in the church. Men, after all, raised up the church, whereas here—" waving his hand at trees and stream, "—God's hand shows forth."

Perversely, she found herself arguing. "But it is cruel, too! I have seen the animals kill each other for meat. I have had to kill for food, myself. And I have seen lightning strike a great oak and burn it all to a cinder. Do you find this place pretty, priest? I have been here in the winter when the leaves are gone and the stream is hard as stone and death is everywhere. The earth is cruel."

"That is why there must be a heaven," Father Gabriel said. "It would not seem so cruel to us if our souls did not recall another place."

She said nothing.

"Heaven and hell," he mused. "Each can be found here—each strives for mastery here in the forest, and even more in the world of men. Men can make heaven or hell here

on earth." He fell silent, his thoughts turning elsewhere, and presently she slipped away.

But she could not stay away from him for long. He intrigued her. As the summer slowly ripened into autumn, a friendship of sorts grew between them. They met often, and spoke long. She even went to his cottage in the village, daring the disapproval of the village folk. The cottage was nearly as small as her own and filled with books, from which he would read to her; he also taught her the shapes that spelt her name. In addition to the books, there were all the things he had brought back from the woods: birds' eggshells and feathers, seed-pods, acorns—all seemed to fascinate him, and he listened with interest when she told him what she knew about the forest, about the ways of birds and beasts and green growing things.

"You say your God is forgiving," she said to him once, speaking suddenly. "If he is, then why hasn't he forgiven the faeries?"

"Perhaps he has," Father Gabriel suggested. "Perhaps the other angels would be happy to have their lost kin return to them." He looked at her as he said this, but she could not meet the clear blueness of his eyes and looked away.

The villagers meanwhile had begun to notice Aliena's comings and goings and complained to the priest. "Why do you consort with that child of the devils?" they demanded.

"There is nothing of the devil about her," he said.

"She has faerie blood. She has no soul. How can you minister to one who has no soul?"

"All God's creatures have souls. The faeries are God's children too."

A shocked silence greeted this remark. And it began to be told among the villagers that the new priest was a heretic.

The harvest that year was poor, owing to drought; so low was the yield that the people began to murmur of a curse. "It is the act of God. He is punishing us for suffering a faerie to dwell in our midst."

"She should be burned," some said, "as witches and heretics are."

One evening, as Aliena was returning home with her own meagre gleanings, she was set upon by a group of village men. She kicked and screamed with rage, but could not free herself. They bound her and bore her, cursing, into the village.

There in the central green a great heap of twigs and branches, dried with drought, had been raised. In the midst of it rose a tall wooden post. People were gathered around—women, children—many of them holding sputtering torches.

A deadly fear seized Aliena: she struggled desperately, but to no avail. He captors secured her to the post, heaping the dead wood high around her. She stared at all the faces, ruddy and fiendish in the leaping light of the torches, and could not face the

hatred in their eyes. The flames of the torches drew nearer, nearer; the acrid smoke was in her nostrils now. The people laughed and pointed their fingers at her. "Die, changeling-child!"

And then there was a flurry in the crowd, a jostling confusion as Father Gabriel pushed his way through. In the next instant he had leaped onto the wood around the stake, putting his arms around the helpless woman.

"Well?" he called out into the sudden silence. "Why do you not set your flames to the kindling? Go on with what you were doing."

The people muttered. "But we cannot burn you, Father!"

"And why not?" bellowed one of the men who had captured Aliena. "Is he not a heretic?" And before anyone could stop him he had thrown down his torch upon the wood.

It blazed up immediately, the flames roaring up into the night. Cries of dismay and alarm arose from the mob and they surged back, away from the fire.

And then it was that they saw Father Gabriel walk forward calmly, with Aliena in his arms. The flames did not burn them—did not seem to touch them—as the priest descended from the pyre, holding the unconscious woman. He passed through the crowd, and it parted for him as the flames had done.

At the door of his cottage he

turned and spoke to them.

"It is your own darkness that you fear," he said.

∞

Aliena started, rousing. In the dark, she did not know where she was at first; then she recognized the priest's little cottage, realized she was lying upon his bed. Father Gabriel stood by the window, his perfect profile outlined against the sky. The moonlight shone upon his pale hair. At the sound she made in rising he turned, looked at her.

"You saved me," she said.

He nodded. "You are safe now. They will never harm you again. They say that I am a saint—" his lips curved slightly "—and that you are under my protection."

"I will not stay here," she said. "I will go away."

"To the faeries?" he asked.

"No," she answered after a pause. "They meant me to live among men, that is plain. There must be a reason for it. Perhaps when many faeries have dwelt among mortals, and mortals have dwelt among the faeries, we will come to know one another better, and not be so afraid . . . I will go to another village, where my name is not known, and live among the people there."

He looked away. "I too am leaving. My duty here is done."

She felt a pang at that. "Where will you go?"

"Back to where I came from."

He smiled at her. "We will meet again, though. Now try and sleep."

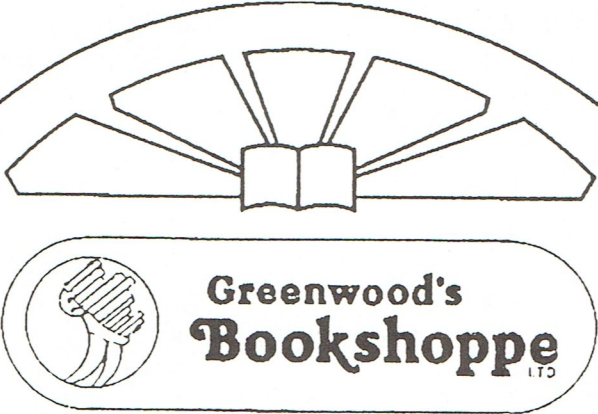
She lay down, closed her eyes.

∞

In the morning he was gone—for good, she knew. The books and the wild things from the forest were still there, but she sensed, sadly, that he would never return for them. The

door was ajar, letting in the morning sun. In the long rays something gleamed upon the earthen floor, like a shard of light; she stooped to pick it up.

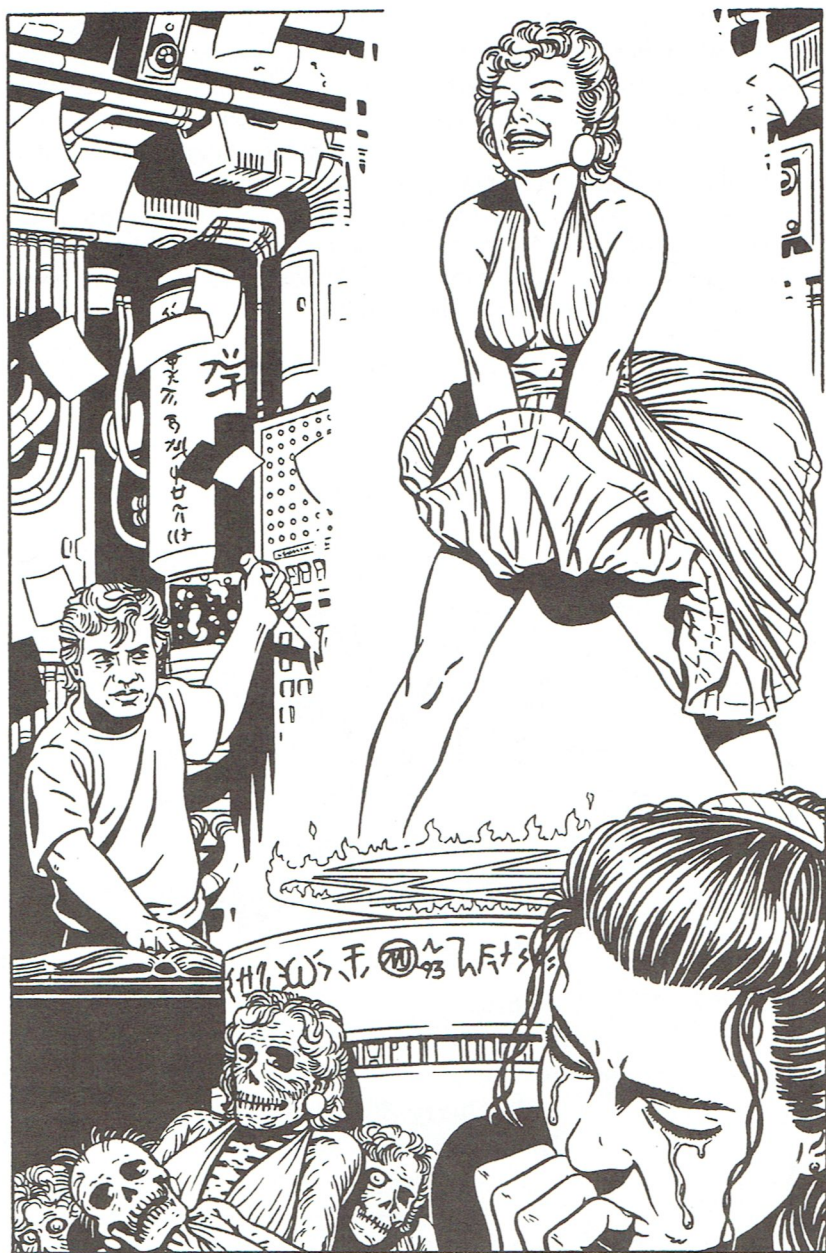
It was a great feather, a plume of pure and shining silver. A feather such as no bird had ever let fall . . . ∞



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The Marilyn Machine

by Bruce Barber

illustrated by Mike Jackson

Phyllis Berenger is a sad and angry woman. It is midnight, and she is sitting in the kitchen of her suburban home drinking coffee. And crying.

Phyllis believes that her husband is going to leave her tonight, for a reason as old as marriage itself—to take up with another woman, one younger and more beautiful. Moreover, she believes that Harvey Berenger is planning to run away with a long-dead actress; with Norma Jean Baker—Marilyn Monroe.

Phyllis is *not* crazy.

Sounds drift up from the basement of her home: hammering and banging, chanting and cursing, humming and crackling. It is Harvey, putting the finishing touches on the device which has cost him three years of his life, most of his friends, and all of his money.

Harvey *is* crazy.

But he is also a genius, a genius who is preparing to set in motion the machine which will conjure up for him the dream of a lifetime, his heart's desire.

In ten minutes, he will activate the Norma Jeenerator . . .

It began five years earlier when an infamous Book of Blackest Magic—called “fiction” even by those who knew better—was issued in cheap paperback format. The mass publication of the ancient magical grimoire made it possible for the average man-in-the-street to gain greater insight into the Necromantic Arts. The spells were incomplete, the dark theosophies almost incomprehensible, but certain gifted (or cursed) individuals, among them Harvey Berenger, were able to use the book as a springboard into the hazy world of do-it-yourself occultism.

Part of Harvey’s genius lay in a talent for tinkering with things mechanical and electronic, but his abilities were not well-honed nor practical—his inventions never had any commercial value, and at least two-thirds of them didn’t work properly to begin with. (His automatic posterior-scratcher is not to be mentioned, nor believed.)

A psychiatrist would call him “gifted and erratic”; his mother-in-law would call him “useless and ridiculous”; his wife would call him “hopelessly and horribly in love.”

With Norma Jean Baker—
Marilyn Monroe.

In this, perhaps, Harvey was not really so crazy; Marilyn made the world weep when the firmament itself collapsed around her fragile, golden star. Harvey, like many others, discovered her at the same time

he discovered the difference between boys and girls, and came to the conclusion that she had more “difference” than all of the rest of woman-kind put together. He also decided that someday she would be his.

Absurd, yes, but not too different from the fantasies of thousands of other boys (and men) all over the world. But, even then, Harvey’s imaginings began to show quirks. For example, he collected every photo and drawing of her he could find for his vast collection, and inevitably, some were nudes; on these Harvey would paint clothing in watercolours, maintaining that it just wasn’t decent or respectful to violate her privacy by leering at such pictures.

Perhaps even more significant was the fact that whenever his young flesh called out to him in pubescent hunger, it was never *her* image that flashed onto the sweaty screen of his libido’s secret cinema—others were for *that* purpose, not Marilyn.

Harvey’s love was pure.

When she died, he went visibly mad for a time, and spent two years confined where he could not attempt to follow her into oblivion. When the outward evidence of his insanity faded he was released into a cold world bereft of Norma Jean. He got a secure job in a small repair shop; he married Phyllis Newton, a small, dark-haired woman who worshipped him; and he got steadily crazier in the place that love lodges. But, he had grown crafty while in the asy-

lum, carefully keeping his obsession to himself.

So well had he learned the ways of guerilla madness that it took Phyllis three years to discover what it was he potted away at in the cellar, night after night. He said that it was a hobby and that it wouldn't interest her; timid soul that she was, she left it at that.

She watched without comment while a constant flow of shipping crates, film projectors, recording devices, glass tubing, and dozens of other unfamiliar objects came in through the back door and disappeared into the basement. She watched without protest as their hard-earned bank balance dwindled and their tenuous social contacts dissolved. This "hobby," whatever it was, seemed to keep Harvey happy, and—raised pre-Germaine Greer as she had been—that was enough for her.

Then, one day he came home from town carrying a small, paperbound book; he was thumbing its pages as he came in, and mumbling. Phyllis could see him trembling with barely suppressed excitement. Soon, the parcels which arrived at the door took on a different nature—strange shapes of brass and ebony, packets of reeking herbs, and cages with live (often exotic) occupants. Harvey began to spend his days as well as his nights locked underground with his "hobby."

For the first time, Phyllis seri-

ously worried about her husband's activities and his well-being. His eyes were now always wide and glazed, his conversation rambling and disjointed. Even the very air in the house seemed changed: heavy, oppressive, charged with some sort of odd electricity, and tinged with the scents of ozone and garlic.

At last, curiosity won out over obedience; one afternoon while Harvey was away she did that which was forbidden above all else:

She went down into the basement.

A wave of *something* had washed over her as she descended the dim stairwell; if pressed to describe it, she might have said that it was "evil," but there was also another energy meshed and trapped in the sultry matrix of sensation which lived in her husband's cellar. She had felt a trace of innocence, a whisper of soft laughter, and a hint (or a warning) of Chanel No.5.

The generator of these impressions seemed to occupy every inch of available floor and wall space, and some of the ceiling as well. Phyllis had been unable to make head nor tail of it, but sensed that Harvey's twisted intelligence had created a thing full of wonder . . . and terror.

Coils of electrical wiring were fused to candles of dark wax; plastic tubing conveyed glowing liquids into small, wrought-iron cauldrons; ancient hieroglyphs had been carved into shining metal; and a giant black-

board was covered with an electromystic hodgepodge of runes and equations.

Dominating the room was a pentagram, carefully painted onto the cement floor in something red; around it was a circle of glowing platinum bars; inside it shimmered what could only be a holographic projection, a blurred replica . . .

Of Norma Jean Baker—

Marilyn Monroe.

Phyllis's head swam under the onslaught of the technomantic radiations which surrounded the image, and her legs were unsteady, but she had forced herself to walk among the icons and the busbars, until she reached a small desk tucked into a dark corner.

Two items were familiar among the piles of charts and graphs and yellowed scrolls: the black book which had so excited Harvey, and his diary.

That day, she did the other thing which was forbidden—she picked up the diary and read Harvey's most private thoughts.

After reading and carefully replacing the journal, Phyllis locked herself in her room with a bottle of gin and drank herself into a pain-free stupor.

Harvey didn't even notice.

∞

The third hour of the third day of the third month is only minutes away. Phyllis is awake, her fists clenched tightly as she waits for

breathy, girlish laughter to replace the faint and guttural blasphemings of her husband. She is telling herself that not one of his gadgets has been successful, that this one will be no exception, that there will be no famous blonde temptress ascending the stairs, with Harvey trailing wide-eyed in her swaying wake.

And so she waits . . .

∞

In the basement, Harvey is racing frantically around, calibrating dials, flicking switches, decanting elixirs, and sweating heavily in anticipation. At last he has done everything humanly possible (and several things only *inhumanly* possible). There is nothing left for him to do but wait the remaining five minutes as the power builds up and the stars arrange themselves in the heavens; then it will be possible for him to summon into new being the only star he cares about, the golden girl who will restore meaning to his empty life.

The seconds tick by, measured by microchips and sand. Now the process is entering its first phase: the hazy hologram of Marilyn—lips pursed, skirt swirling—slowly gels into greater articulation, gaining more detail, becoming more real . . . and more inviting.

Suddenly, it is time. Harvey grips the rubber handle of the master-switch and begins to chant aloud. At precisely 3 a.m., he intones the final word, and pulls the lever.

Blue-green arcs sizzle, potions bubble, flaring colours explode within the confines of the pentagram—and it happens: the laser-generated image moves.

Actually, as Harvey well knows, the hologram itself is not animated; *there is now a living figure inside it*. Through the rippling double-exposure he sees a second blonde-haloed head, another pair of swelling breasts . . .

He wipes sweat from his forehead, then twists a rheostat to damp the hologram. It wavers, fades, disappears, and in its place is:

Jayne Mansfield.

He curses at this incorrect goddess-apparition. What use does he have for this cheap imitation? He does not even bother attempting to puzzle out where his calculations have erred—the universal balance of forces will exist for but another forty-five minutes. If he has not achieved Marilyn by then he must wait sixty-six years for the next set of favourable conditions. He flicks a toggle to cancel Mansfield's voluptuous presence.

Instead of disappearing, the ample body folds into a sleek heap at his feet. Harvey kneels, grabbing the soft wrist—the skin is warm; she had been alive, briefly. Part of the experiment is working. One of the clocks catches his eye—he is running out of time.

He wrestles the heavy body away from the materialization zone, rea-

soning that he can dispose of it later. After all, no one will be looking for it.

He bustles around the basement again, checking instruments, remixing infusions, setting dials, then reactivates the hologram. He crosses his fingers, whispers a perverse prayer to a god whose name may not be spoken, then pulls the switch again. In seconds, another blonde beauty illuminates the cellar.

He gnashes his teeth in rage as he recognizes Jean Harlow.

His dream is receding with each falling grain of sand, each flash of a digital counter. Harlow is unceremoniously de-energized and dumped on top of Mansfield, then Harvey hastily makes even more adjustments to his contrary idolmaker. He is soon sweating more heavily as he adds Carole Lombard to the pile of tangled flesh and yellow curls . . .

∞

Upstairs, Phyllis can stand the tension no longer. She rises from the table, trembling and afraid of what she will see if she opens the door to the cellar, but the fear is secondary to her need to know if her husband has succeeded in his mad enterprise; if he will be leaving their home forever tonight, a suitcase in one hand, a blonde bombshell in the other.

The door sticks slightly, creaks as she pulls it open, then strange bursts of light play over her drawn features, unholy odours hang in her nostrils. She sees Harvey's back,

outlined in a nimbus of soft amber, his hands clenched around the master-switch, and she hears him mumbling in a language she has no wish to understand.

Her gaze travels left and she gasps loudly: there is a jumble of nakedness, of bosoms, of thighs, of heads—one, two, three, four, five . . .

She also sees what Harvey has not yet noticed: the twice-dead corpses are decomposing rapidly, returning as quickly as possible to the state from which they have been so unnaturally recalled. The smile on her face is not pleasant as Phyllis realizes that soon the dead faces will be unrecognizable. Meanwhile, Harvey has thrown the switch again, but she does not wait for the results.

Closing the door behind her, she goes directly to the phone. The call is brief, tear-filled, and convincingly hysterical.

The police arrive quickly.

∞

The two months following Harvey's incarceration passed quickly for Phyllis. The police had found her husband crying, ranting and completely incoherent, except for his constant repetition of "I almost had her!" The six female skeletons puzzled the investigators, as did their rapid decay, and now only photographs of them remain. But there was

plenty of other evidence to prove that Harvey Berenger was incurably insane and should be put away again, perhaps for life.

Experts assured her that the bizarre machine was non-functional in every way, and harmless, as were the reams of charts and graphs. Perhaps they might have made more sense out of it had they possessed Harvey's diary, but Phyllis saw to it that they did not. She has studied the book, and the machine, during the past two months. Done some calculating. Made some adjustments. She believes she can now make it work to her own benefit. She, however, has resolved that if it does not precisely fulfil the specifications with which she has re-programmed it, she will be satisfied with whatever her first attempt yields.

∞

It is 3 a.m.

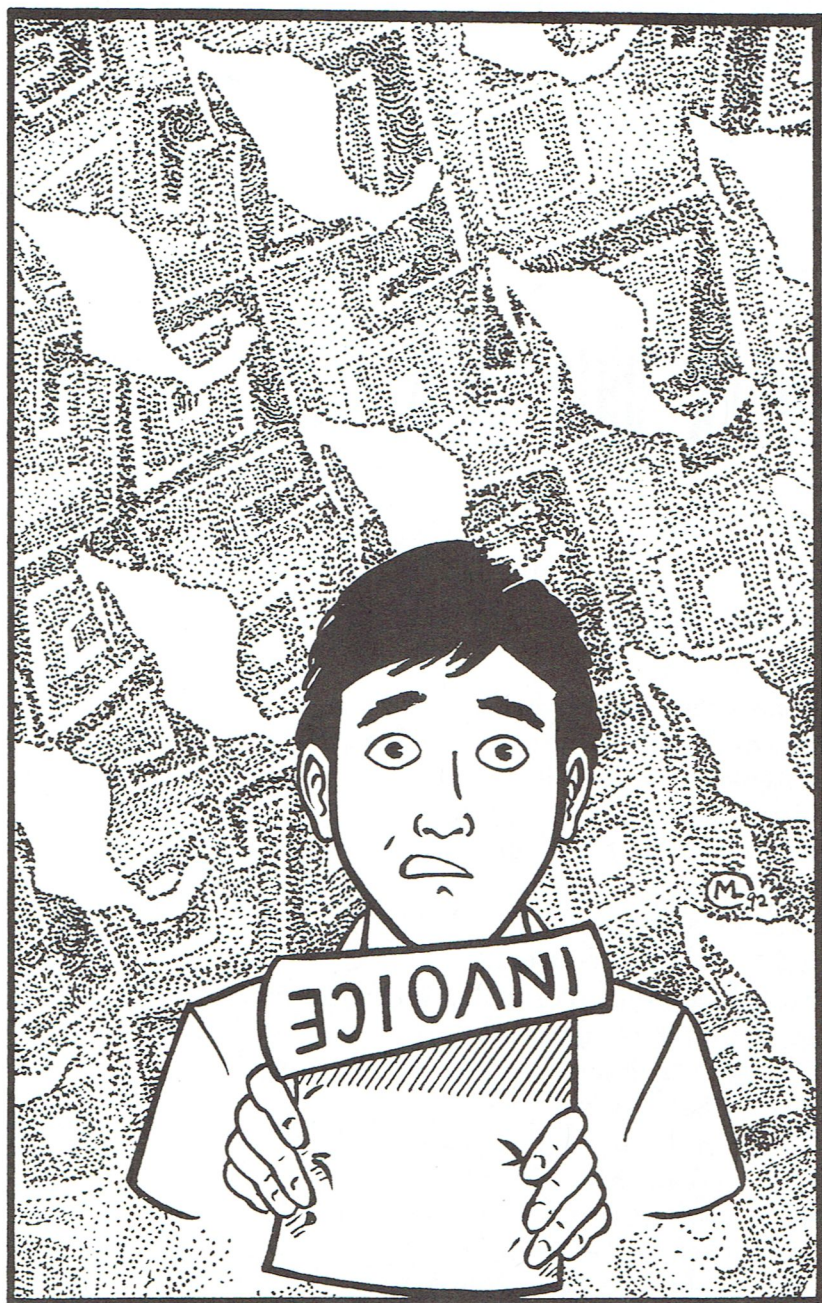
The new cathode tubes hum; the candles flicker; the pentagram glows with fresh paint; the grey shades of the re-shaped hologram ripple in sombre, rough-hewn solemnity. Phyllis is a calm and smiling woman as she takes one final peek into her hand-mirror, inspecting her make-up and new hairstyle.

Then, she places a delicate gloved hand on the master switch, and energizes the Humphrey Bogatron . . . ∞

black hole (b.h.)

by Barry Hammond

poetry is like these black holes
the writer, who (perhaps) used to be a star
collapsing in on himself
becoming even denser
until all matter around him
is pulled in by his gravity
and all we see
is the absolute event horizon
a surface constructed entirely of words and theories
beyond which no light escapes
before it: illumination of a very short wavelength
x-rays: which pass through barriers
to show us the truth in our bones
and just above this surface
an argument between virtual and real concepts
which keeps the horizon intact
and so hides the naked singularity
behind it.



Mexican Fiesta

by Nicholas de Kruyff
illustrated by Murray Lindsay

I opened the front door. Two men holding a roll of carpeting stood ankle deep in snow.

"Ehh . . . where do you want it?" asked a tubby middle-aged man. He had olive skin, a pencil-thin mustache, and a thick Mediterranean accent that jiggled fleshy jowls as he spoke. His companion, a twenty year-old youth, had close-cropped hair topped with a wavy swath that spilled over into his eyes. Fine hairs were sprinkled over his chin, but his cheeks and neck were bare. Both men had coal-black eyes.

"Want what?" I asked.

"The carpeting," said the older man, trying to peep behind me into the hallway.

"What carpeting? I didn't order any carpeting."

"Sure you did. I talked with you a few days ago about coming over to install it."

"I've never seen you before."

"What? Ehh . . ." he protested. "Don't start joking with me now." Dropping the carpet he turned to the young man. "Otto, you were in the shop that day. You saw me talking with this fella."

"I don't know," replied Otto, eyelids heavy, eyeballs glazed.

"You don't know what?"

"I don't know nothing."

"You don't know nothing?"

"Look," I interrupted, "I'm sorry. I don't know either of you, and I never ordered any carpet. I only took possession of the house two weeks ago."

"So," said the older man, reaching into his back pocket. "I suppose you don't know this either?"

He handed me a yellow folded paper. Opening it revealed my signature on an order for 70 square yards of sculptured berber carpet in a pattern called Mexican Fiesta.

"I . . ." I stammered.

"That's your signature, right?"

"Yes, but . . . I can't explain this."

"Nothing to explain," he said, pushing past me into the hall and removing his Greek sailor's cap. Otto dropped his end of the carpet and followed.

"I think you said it was to go in the basement."

"There is no basement."

"Oh." He nodded. "Must be up here."

I pursued him into the living room. A 12" TV, front-loading VCR and milk crate were the only furnishings.

"Look," I protested, trying to wrestle his attention from the baseboard's meanderings. "Look, I can't explain this signature, or my address on this invoice, but I didn't order any carpet, I can assure you. I just bought this house, I don't have any

money to buy carpeting right now."

"What are you talking about?" he said, not taking his eyes from his work. "You already paid."

"What?"

"Yeah. When you came in. Whole shot: installation, carpet, underpad . . ."

"You mean I don't owe you anything?"

"Nope, nothing."

I looked down at the mud-stained, builder's grade carpet.

"Yes, all right. Go ahead. In here and up the stairs . . . If there's enough."

"Sure, sure, plenty," he said, not even glancing at the stairs. "Otto!"

"Yeah, Tony?" Otto was staring out the back window into the yard, leaning on the sill with tanned, well-defined arms.

"Get the tool box from the van," commanded Tony. "We gotta rip this shit up first, then lay the new underpad." The last half of his statement was muffled as he pulled a Moosehead Lager sweatshirt over his head, exposing a white undershirt stretched by his belly.

"Hey, Tony," Otto called inquisitively, still staring out the window.

"Yeah?"

"It's snowing outside."

"Oh," said Tony, cutting into the worn pile with a carpet knife. "Why is it snowing?"

"I don't know," Otto said, crossing to the door.

"You don't know why it's snowing?"

"No sir," he said, and exited.

"He don't know."

Tony, crouching on his knees, sliced a neat line in the carpet while his buttocks jutted out of his low slung jeans. Leaning heavily on the banister, I started to climb the stairs.

"Oh, you still here. Listen, could I get a cup of coffee?"

∞

Hours passed like years as I sat confined in my bedroom, swamped by guilt. The sounds of hammering, stapling, and Tony and Otto's banter coming up through the floorboards fed my shame and self-reproach. Images of my mother lectured me on how some poor, unfortunate family in West Africa were now deprived of their sculptured berber carpet. I had seen numerous news programmes where lucky individuals received goods accidentally from incompetent retailers and were legally entitled to them, but that didn't help. Mom ranted on.

"Hey mister, we're going. It's finished."

I hurriedly stretched unused limbs and ran downstairs.

When I got to the living room, Mexican Fiesta assaulted me. Specks of turquoise, chili pepper red and Aztec beige danced and clashed in an azure sea. More disturbing were the little maps of Mexico sculpted into the carpet by various recessed loops of berber. Wall to wall, Mexi-

can Fiesta shouted its presence.

"Good job, eh?" Tony said, fishing for a compliment. "Bet you can't even tell where the seams are. Oh yes, she is a little tough to work with, a little stiff, but it's good carpet. Will last for a long time—if you take care of her." He surveyed the carpet. "Nice colour."

"I hate it."

Tony snorted. "Well, eh . . . you'll grow to like it." He thrust a pen and the invoice at me. "You gotta sign for the work." Afterimages of tiny Mexicos danced on the surface of my eyes as I signed on the line he pointed to. Directly above was the date of purchase.

"This says that I bought this six-and-a-half years from now."

Tony glanced upwards, scratching the stubble on his throat.

"Ehh . . . yeah, that's about right," he concluded.

"What are you talking about? That's impossible."

"No, that's good service. Our company now offers an 'Anytime, Anyplace' feature. For a little more, we will travel through time to any point in your life to install your carpet. You wanted it put in before you moved here so you wouldn't have to put up with the piece of shit you bought with the place."

"And I chose Mexican Fiesta?!"

"Like I said, you'll grow to love it. Sorry, we gotta go—it's Friday night for us." He handed me a copy of the bill, and started trudging

through the snow. Otto followed, swinging his tanned arms.

"Hey, just a minute," I called after them as they loaded tool boxes into an oddly curved van. "The installation date on this invoice says you were supposed to install it on the fifth, two weeks ago."

"Well, eh . . . yeah. We got confused with the map and the address, so we're a little late." The doors sealed themselves and the van silently rolled away from the curb and down the street. It vanished around the corner. ∞

CALLING ALL COMPUTER ARTISTS!

ON SPEC Art Director, Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk, would like to find computer artists to illustrate stories for the upcoming HARD SF special issue. Send samples (not originals) of your work (hard copy, not disks) to Lynne at:

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OCT 8-10

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Ask Mr. Science compiled by Al Betz

Q: Ms. JR of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Why can't a person tickle him/herself?

A: Autogenous tickling is possible, but cannot be done directly with the fingers. The competition between the fingers and the site being stimulated for brain decoding "circuitry" prevents the full intensity of the tickling sensation from being realized. Use of an implement such as a long feather solves the problem, since the mechanical advantage provided by the length of the feather shaft reduces dramatically the input to the brain of sensations from the fingers.

Q: Ms. LP of Calgary, AB, asks:

A friend of mine says he is "going down South." Is this correct?

A: It is not correct if your friend lives in the Northern Hemisphere. This colloquial expression is based on a total misunderstanding of the shape of the Earth. Our home planet is not a sphere; it is an oblate spheroid, bigger in diameter through the equator than it is through the poles. Therefore, gravitationally speaking, and ignoring temporary geological features such as mountains and valleys, one must "go up South," or "down North."

Q: Mr. SGH of New Westminster, BC, asks:

Is there a Mrs. Science?

A: No, there has never been a Mrs. Science. Mr. Science wishes to test his own views of the basic workings of the universe without being influenced by superior female logic in these matters.

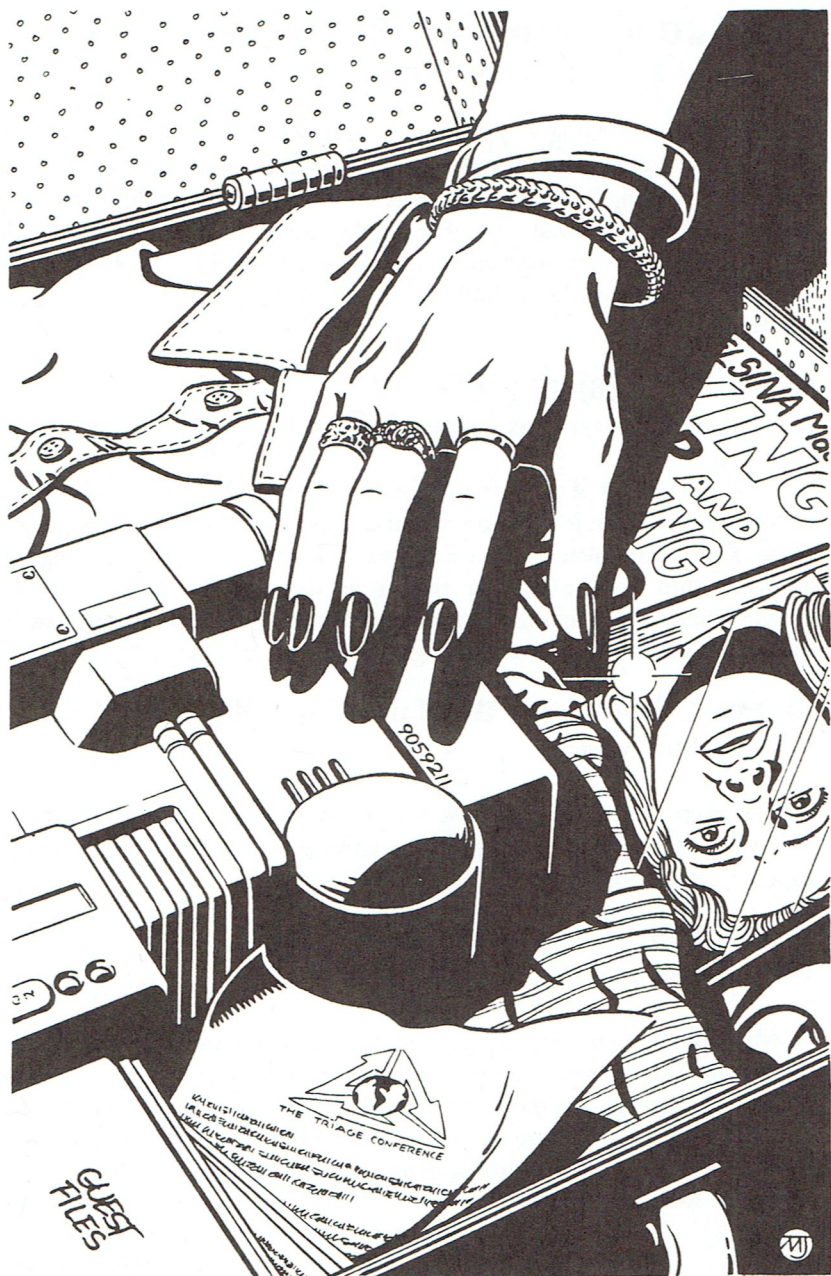
Q: Ms. WM of Vancouver, BC asks:

What is a worm hole?

A: Mr. Science is puzzled by the recent concept of using a worm hole to travel from one part of the universe to another. The largest worm hole known is that produced by the ten-meter long Australian earthworm. Although the hole made by this creature may be several hundred meters long, it is only about five feet centimetres in diameter and irregular in its path. This could hardly be useful for transportation!

∞

Send your scientific questions to Ask Mr. Science c/o *ON SPEC*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.



The Triage Conference

by Hugh A.D. Spencer
illustrated by Mike Jackson

Hindemeth laughed, spitting out bits of half-chewed sausage. “Oh, that one, definitely,” he said, pointing his fork at a thin woman at the far end of the restaurant.

I turned to better study the subject in question. She was pale, very thin with heavy glasses. I noticed a slight tremor in her hands as she picked up the menu.

“Absolute genetic disaster,” chuckled Hindemeth. “See how frail? No strength, no endurance.”

She had no breasts, and when she swallowed I could see a tiny lump of coffee moving down a rail-thin neck.

“Certainly there’s no reproductive potential.” Hindemeth returned his attention to his overflowing plate of eggs and sausage.

I also turned away. Then I saw Hindemeth masticating his breakfast and wished that I hadn’t.

"A loser in Nature's sweepstakes," the biologist said moistly. "Clearly someone we shouldn't waste resources on . . . not when she's already so impoverished by her own genotype."

Lee, the liberal American sociologist, wasn't going to let the last remark get by unchallenged. "That's crude biological determinism!" Lee bristled over his bowl of yogurt and granola. "It's impossible to calculate any individual's value to society in the absence of a full sociometric analysis."

Hindemeth grimaced at the sound of social science jargon; this caused him to leak tomato sauce on his beard.

"Sociometric analysis?" I asked Lee.

Lee responded with an earnest expression. "We'd have to run a series of questionnaires and interviews with all the people the subject knows and works with, then we'd apply a systematic set of performance criteria . . ."

The thin woman was quietly sipping her coffee. No one else was at her table.

" . . . and after making an objective analysis of the subject's overall contributive potential we would determine whether she should be allowed to live."

I nodded. "Thank you for clearing that up."

Lee dug his spoon into his

granola with a sharp crunching sound. "What Dr. Hindemeth suggests is mere social Darwinism."

"Nothing *mere* about it," grumbled the biologist. "Fine scientific tradition."

Vlamstead, the Finnish psychologist, was now studying the woman. "Even so," he said carefully, "one can deduce much through simple objective observation."

The woman's hand trembled slightly as she lifted the coffee cup to her lips.

"Even from this distance," Vlamstead said. "I can tell that she suffers from a definite schizotaxic physiology."

I looked questioningly at the psychologist.

He made a condescending smile. "Her body chemistry is significantly prone to mental illness. Most certainly a psychotic, even in the absence of dysfunctional social environment."

I looked back over my shoulder. What an unfortunate woman was sitting at that table.

"There's another one!" whispered Hindemeth with delight.

A waiter walked past. He had small eyes and a dull look on his face.

"Another one of our genetically deprived!" cried the biologist.

Lee leaned toward me. "What's on for this morning?"

CONFERENCE AGENDA

DAY ONE:

9:00 - 10:30 A.M.

Bickford Elm Room

The Social Impact of Monetarism:

"The Invisible Hand as Evolutionary Factor"

Dr. M. Watts and D.C. Bircher—Freeman Institute

Studio Room

Reducing Randomnicity:

"A Statistical Analysis of Eenie-Meenie-Minie-Moe and other Selector Games"

S.Q. Delaney, PhD, DMS—Department of Statistics, MIT

10:30 - 11:00 A.M.

Lobby

Coffee and Danish pastries.

11:00 A.M. - 12:30 P.M.

Catella Room

Race and IQ Revisited:

"Re-instating the Jensen Hypothesis: a Model for Realistic Social Policy"

Prof. William O.F. Smuggs—Department of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario

Room B

Creative Crisis Initiation:

"Knowing When to Pull the Plug on the Lifeboat"

Nathan S. Newman, MA, CCA—Harvard Business School

12:30 - 2:00 P.M.

Lodge Restaurant

Buffet Lunch

2:00 - 3:30 P.M.

Bickford Elm Room

Accepting the Uberman:

"The Slave State: Regrettable Necessity or Future Opportunity?"

Prof. J.S. Sterling-Porneil—Department of Philosophy, Baen University

Catella Room

Selection Criteria for Orbital Communities:

"Application Models from Country Clubs and Luxury Condomiums"

Dr. L.Q. Poffit—NASA; John Rodman, Executive Secretary—Eastern Regional L-5 Society; Louise Soules—Urban Planning Department, City of Los Angeles

3:30 - 4:00 P.M.

Lobby

Wine and Cheese

4:00 - 5:30 P.M.

Bickford Elm Room

A Malthusian Overview:

"Historic Theories of Overpopulation and Resource Depletion"

Dr. H. Harrison—Department of Social History, Oxford University

Catella Room

The Euthanasia Pavilion at Expo 2004:

"One Architect's Vision and a Proposal for a New Century of World's Fairs"

Karl Yenton, Principal and Partner—Yenton, Yein and Crispin, Architects

5:30 - 6:30 P.M.

Break

6:30 - 9:00 P.M.

Banquet Hall

Opening Dinner

Keynote Speaker:

Karl Jurgeon, President—Nevada Club

Topic: Downsizing the Human Race: An Assertive Approach to Environmental Protection

9:00 P.M. - 12:30 A.M.

Studio Room

Feature Film Double Feature:

The Fountainhead starring Gary Cooper

Conan the Barbarian starring Arnold Schwarzenegger

Drinks Available at Cash Bar

∞

The monetarists were convinced that they were great fun. They had hooked up an overhead onto a com-

puter and were projecting animated bulky cartoon diagrams.

"The joy of monetarism," said Watts, the tweedy economist, "is that it allows your central banking system to act like some vast evolutionary force." Watts entered a set of codes into the keyboard. "So like that giant meteor that wiped out the ungainly and inefficient dinosaurs..."

On the screen we saw what looked like a giant turd hurtling through space. It approached a spastically spinning sphere and then impacted onto a two-dimensional graphic of a cityscape. The word "KAPOW!" flashed across the screen; the older buildings were wiped out. Only the leaner, crueller structures remained.

"... we can make all manner of obsolete species of business disappear from the surface of the Earth." Watts' associate chuckled. "Forever freeing us of these parasites on the economic ecosystem."

Another cartoon graphic appeared on the screen. This time it was a giant spray can confronting a swarm of insects. The bugs were caricatures of variety store owners, feminist day care operators and assorted ethnic small business people.

The words "INTEREST RATES!&*##&!" leaped into a word balloon, and cartoon toxic spray ejected from the can... and all the fiscal pests were gone.

Again everybody laughed.

∞

Dinner. The speaker was something of a disappointment. I had been hoping for some ecological doom-saying. But all we got were complaints about the impact of the labour movement on the National Parks system. Most of Jurgeon's hints about union-bashing were pretty old hat.

All of a sudden Jelsina MacPhee swooped to my side. Her teeth, twice as many as a normal human being's, sparkled and arranged themselves into an enormous smile.

"I just want you to know," she said, "that you're doing an absolutely *fantastic* job with the conference arrangements."

"Thank you," I replied.

With another swoop, Jelsina landed on the seat beside me. The swiftness of her movements caused her hair to sway crazily.

"So are you running the show by yourself?" she asked. I was briefly blinded by the reflection of the lights from her assemblage of gold and silver bracelets.

"Pretty much," I said. "It's been quite a challenge. Some of these academics can become very nervous when they're out of their native habitats."

"It's nice to see you finally getting some responsibility." Jelsina parked her chin on an opened palm. "I'm a little surprised you managed to get so many to come."

I shrugged. "The theme was irresistible."

Jelsina responded with one of

her familiar shark-like smiles. "That's for sure, honey!" She unleashed a multi-ringed hand which clasped itself on my upper arm. "But I do hope you might find a *little* time to share with me..." Maybe it was more than twice as many teeth. "... to catch up."

I was still able to translate Jelsina-speak. What she was really saying was: sleep with me tonight or I'll make the rest of your week absolute hell.

*

"Ladies and gentlemen . . .

Being with Jelsina—I'm not sure I ever thought of it as making love—was much the same as I remembered.

She would begin the foreplay with great enthusiasm and theatricality. But then the fact that I was almost fifteen years her junior would make her crazy and she'd become possessed with the spirit of passive aggression.

An angry fist in the middle of my bed.

And just like always, when I moved to get up, she'd beg me to stay. And to hit her.

. . . there will be a minor change to this morning's program . . .

"It's natural aggression!" she'd plead. "Simple animal dominance! Why can't you expression passions!?"

God, broken psychobabble record.

This was, however, my cue: "So call me a pervert. I won't beat you

up.”

One. Two. Three. Here it comes:

“You asshole!” she screamed. Then she slapped me, lunged and bit one of my nipples. She drew blood. Again.

Then she grabbed my hair and pulled herself on top of me. And so we fucked . . . somewhat in the manner of human beings.

When Jelsina got angry enough she didn’t need to be beaten up. We used to have some incredible fights in bed. It had been a stressful relationship.

Afterward I got up to the bathroom to wash off the various smells and stains, leaving Jelsina out of sight for a moment. Very stupid thing to do.

“So what’s your real job, these days, asshole?” she asked lazily.

. . . Jelsina MacPhee, best-selling author of Getting Everything That’s Yours and Moving Up and Feeling Good. . .

I ran a cold wet sponge over my wounded chest and genitals. Maybe I was a little cleaner now.

“Oh, I’m still in administration,” I said.

“But nobody sees you anymore,” her voice whined through the bathroom door. “I thought I was going to have the pleasure of being inflamed with jealousy, seeing you with one of my best friends. Wondering if she screwed better than me.”

Did Jelsina have any friends? I wondered. Where the hell were my

pants? “I’m in a different field now,” I said. “I’ve moved over to scientific projects.”

“Oooh! Sounds very impress—” There was a sudden silence. Then quietly: “What the hell?”

I pushed open the bathroom door and there she stood, her small naked body dimly illuminated by the light of the mechanism. Shit. She’d gotten into my luggage. Probably looking for drugs.

Jelsina looked at me with a confused expression. “What the hell is that thing?”

. . . has been called away on an urgent personal matter and will be unable to address the Conference. . .

I reached out and took Jelsina’s head in both hands. I was a little rough and this made her smile. Then I gave her head a sharp twist. She made a tiny squeak. The people at Security said that your opponent would feel no pain. Just a sudden pressure. And surprise.

Handling the radioactive elements hadn’t affected my strength yet.

. . . therefore the revised agenda for the morning will be as follows. . .

It had taken over three hours of driving before I found a place to put poor Jelsina.

. . . Professor Smuggs of the University of Western Ontario has graciously agreed to discuss his study in progress on dance, sexual prowess and SAT scores. . .”

CONFERENCE AGENDA

DAY TWO:

9:00 - 10:30 A.M.

Studio Room

AIDS and Homosexuality:

"A Socio-Biological Perspective on Redundant Extinction Factors"

Dr. Paul Hindemeth, Biology Department—
University of Southern California

Bickford Elm Room

Who to Invite to the Party at the End of the World:

"Appreciating the Etiquette of Ayn Rand"

Prof. Laureen Fell—
Department of Dramatic Studies,
University of Victoria

10:30 - 11:00 A.M.

Lobby

Coffee

11:00 A.M. - 12:30 P.M.

Bickford Elm Room

"Sleepy Tag":

Methods of Teaching Triage Concepts to Preschoolers

Molly Tivy—Department of Kinesthetics & Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo; Dr. R. Stephenson—Recreation Department, Simon Fraser University

Room B

Television as Social Engineering Tool:

"Mass Persuasion as an Essential Force in Contemporary Political Process"

Murray Benyon—Principle, Saskett & Saskett Marketing Associates; Marvin Potter—Head of Programming, National Broadcasting Association

12:30 - 2:00 P.M.

Lodge Restaurant

Sit-Down Lunch

2:00 - 3:30 P.M.

Catella Room

3rd Reich Race Policies as a Model for Medicare Reform

Bob Speer, Policy Advisor—
Alberta Popular Party

Studio Room

Christ, Calvin and Capitalism:
"The Inherent Scarcity of Spiritual Salvation"

Rev. Roger Roberts—Atlantic Regional Theological College

3:00 - 4:00 P.M.

Lobby

Wine and Cheese

4:00 - 5:30 P.M.

Cafeteria

Early buffet dinner

6:00 - 8:00 P.M.

Sight-seeing tour of Toronto. Delegates are requested to meet the bus at the front lobby.

8:30 - 10:00 P.M.**Toronto Symphony Concert:**

Highlights from Wagner

Also Sprach Zarathustra -

Richard Strauss

For those who wish to dine in their rooms this evening, the in-house cable system will be featuring *Triumph of the Will* on Channel 3 throughout the evening.

Please Note:

Tomorrow morning there will be a three-hour break in the proceedings. Delegates are invited to relax and enjoy the sights and amenities of this fine Guild Inn.

∞

"Endurance tests," said Potter, looking out over the lake. "Only the strongest and the meanest survive."

Of course, I thought. When do the weak and the polite get to survive? "What kind of endurance tests?" was what I actually said.

Potter grinned with glee. "Well, for instance, one time they made the contestants drink about three gallons of water. The first ones to get up to pee were the losers."

"I see," I said thoughtfully. "I suppose that is some kind of adaptive trait."

"But it was *fantastic* television!" whispered Potter. "Watching those people agonizing for hours, strugg-

ling to keep their legs crossed."

"Unique to broadcasting," I agreed.

Potter continued: "When they get to higher levels they get to run electricity through their palms of their hands and feet, to see how much pain they can handle."

"Sounds like the kind of thing they used to do to prisoners of war," I replied. From the far edge of the sculpture garden I could see the parking lot. It looked like the Inn had brought in extra catering staff for the conference. Too bad, I sighed.

Potter, the TV programmer with an \$1,800 windbreaker, followed me along the trail. He was excited about what he'd seen on a recent Asian buying trip.

"But it's an incredible concept!" Potter cried. "Ground breaking stuff in North America! They start with over a million contestants and by the end of the season they narrow it down to a half-dozen! The ones who make it to the finals are almost inhuman! Like robots!"

Potter produced "adventure sports" programs. His latest project was a show where female weightlifters swung clubs at each other while roller skating around open pits of burning oil.

"So what's the prize?" I asked Potter.

He looked confused. "What?"

"What do you get if you win the last round?"

Potter scowled and wiped his nose. "You know, I can't remember,"

he said. "I guess . . ." he hesitated. "I guess the prize is you get to survive."

I turned back toward the Inn and saw a small grey-haired figure sitting beneath a stone arch.

"Excuse me," I said and left Potter at the lakeside trail.

Dr. Roberts saw me coming. "Good morning, young man!" he cried out to the morning air. He smiled and patted the marble surface next to him. "Please, sit down."

I returned the smile and obeyed.

"You were right to get away from that one," Dr. Roberts peered over his glasses in Potter's direction. "Simply dreadful specimen."

"Well . . ." I hesitated. "He does work in television." I tried to sound charitable.

It didn't matter. "Television, another beastly invention!" spat Dr. Roberts. "Although I suppose it does have its uses, keeping the masses under a modicum of control."

With some effort I maintained a look of respect.

Dr. Roberts nodded his head. "And even I enjoy the occasional vitascope amusement. I particularly enjoyed that cinema drama the other evening."

"*Triumph of the Will* is a documentary, isn't it, doctor?" I couldn't resist pointing out the error.

Dr. Roberts scowled and shook his head. "No, no! Not that one! The film about the muscular chap with the huge sword."

"*Conan the Barbarian*?" I suppressed a giggle. It is always cruelly

funny when a learned man develops an enthusiasm for something truly stupid.

"Yes, that one!" Dr. Roberts said earnestly. "Magnificent breed of human. Strength of body, strength of will, purity of essence. The Nietzschean ideal in action!"

This morning was turning out to be even odder than I had expected. I just smiled and said, "I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

Now Dr. Roberts was pointing at Potter's receding form. "Not like that toad! Did you notice the swarthy skin? The unnatural curl to the hair? Simply grotesque. Undoubtedly the result of mixed parentage."

I said nothing, hoping that my silence might bring the conversation to a speedier conclusion.

But Dr. Roberts would not stop: "There are so few of us left. I can only trace half a dozen true bloodlines. If this goes on, there won't be one racially pure person left on Earth!" He was interrupted by a brief coughing fit which he ended by ejecting a wad of phlegm onto the base of the stone arch.

"So much riff-raff and filth out there, mongrels, hybrids and mutations! Crowding our best traditions off the face of the planet." Roberts touched my arm with his cracked dry hand. "People like us are degraded by that human pollution."

Again, I said nothing.

Dr. Roberts interpreted this as agreement. He nodded his head slowly. "Yes, they ought to be crossed

off. Gotten rid of." He let go of my arm and closed his eyes. "We'd *all* be better off without them."

I stood up. It was an effort not to grab Dr. Roberts by the ears and give him the same treatment as poor Jelsina.

"Excuse me," I said tightly. "I must attend to some arrangements."

As I left the sculpture garden I could hear Dr. Roberts call out, "Bless you, my boy! This is a *splendid* conference!"

∞

8:00 - Closing Remarks: TBA

∞

I clicked the switch and the first slide jumped on the screen.

"I'm not sure if any of you were off aware of this, but we had full attendance at this conference." I paused to inspect the sea of heads before me. "But owing to the extraordinary importance of this gathering, that should be no surprise."

There was a low murmur of informed agreement among the delegates.

I moved on to the next slide: a picture of the conference invitations and agendas.

"However, I must now confess that all of you have been the victims of a carefully-planned deception."

A wave of tension rolled across the audience. The learned do not like to be deceived.

"The responsibility is mine." I

tried to sound unconcerned. "It was necessary."

They stopped. I had invoked the kind of logic this group could respond to.

I just kept on smiling. "Each one of you was informed by me, a responsible person, that the human race was about to suffer some planetary crisis . . ."

A big voice sounded from the back of the room. Maybe it was Hindemeth. "Does that mean there is no crisis?" He sounded disappointed.

"Please, a little patience." I paused. "What none of you knew was that I took the liberty of tailoring the specific nature of each 'catastrophe' to suit your particular interests and enthusiasms."

I rapidly clicked through a series of slide illustrations: comets destroying whole continents, earthquakes sending cities into the sea, nuclear explosions, race riots, and general environmental decay.

"Some of you," I said in a cheerful voice, "thought this conference might end with some announcement of a mass food shortage, or a new sexual plague, the total collapse of the world economy, or some other unpleasant turn of events."

The delegates weren't looking at the slides any more. They were staring at me.

"Actually, I have no idea if *any* of these will *ever* come to pass." I raised my forefinger. "But if you

think about it, you will realize that all of my little fictional scenarios are unified by one assumption: that the best way forward is *triage*. That we have to have some systematic way of ridding ourselves of a lot of extra people."

I laughed. "Of course your criteria for what segments of society we should dispose of vary widely according to your tremendous prejudices. Some of you think we should kill all the poor, or the stupid, the badly dressed, people with the wrong shade of skin, the old, the young, or simply people you *really just cannot understand* . . ."

I put the last slide up on the screen. It was a close-up of the trigger mechanism in my briefcase. If Jelsina had been a little more patient, she could have seen it along with everyone else.

" . . . but the end result is always the same. If we can just get cross off those 'blank' people, things will be a much, *much* better!"

Somebody jumped to his feet. I recognized him as a physicist from the University of Chicago who was working on a new method of covertly sterilizing people through irradiated powdered milk.

I pulled out a revolver and shot him through the back. The bullet hit with quite an impact and the scientist crashed into a table of wine,

cheese and cold cuts.

The delegates looked at the dead man with wide-eyed surprise. Then they just sat there. Academics often react to unexpected stimuli with paralysis and disbelief.

I lifted my briefcase up onto the lectern and cleared my throat. Once again I had their attention.

"Now I have developed my own theory. And to explore this theory we need to consider a few points . . ." I opened the briefcase and removed the mechanism.

" . . . the first point is that I may not be as responsible a person as you might have believed."

I pressed the timer.

"The second point is that triage is a *very* tricky concept; it can be applied in a number of ways."

I looked at the readout on the neutron grenade. Ten seconds. There was an undeniably pleasing aspect to the weapon. In less than a century, the greenery would grow back. People could return to enjoy the sculpture garden.

Possibly better people.

Five seconds.

"And the last point," I said, "is that triage may be the problem and not the solution."

Zero seconds.

Something about a contradiction came to mind. ☸



Letters to the Editors

Whatever planet you're on, *ON SPEC* wants to hear from you. Address your letters, comments, concerns, suggestions, to: Letters to the Editors, *ON SPEC*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.

∞

Dear *ON SPEC* Collective:

Keep up the fine work—I enjoy every part, every page, and revel in the diversity of talent presented. I like the bios of your artists—perhaps in the future you might feature biographies of Canadian SF writers/artists—one per issue. Enclosed is \$35 for a 2 year subscription plus an additional donation of \$30 to help the cause.

—Jack Hughes

—

Editor's note: Thanks for both the praise and the support! I always intend to cut the artist bios because they're so darn long, but they're so entertaining, I end up just leaving 'em in.

—Jena Snyder, Production Editor

∞

Dear *ON SPEC* Editors:

Having been a reader and a fan of *ON SPEC* since its conception and since I am also renewing my subscription, I feel I should let you know how I feel you are doing.

(continued on page 89)

I have seen your magazine improve and present some very fine Canadian fiction. I have read of your success and awards. It is quite obvious you have learned much along the way. I wonder then how Mr. Science finds its way into your pages. I find this to be a real insult to my intelligence and totally lacking in humour, rather juvenile. I also find your book excerpts too long. I would rather have this shortened to two or three pages and the extra space used for another short story. I feel I could gain enough appreciation of a book with a short excerpt plus a brief synopsis if it was felt necessary.

Good idea to go quarterly. Keep the fine stories and poetry coming and keep the Canadian content high; we have some fine talent in this country.

I hope you can drag Tim Hammell away from Calgary long enough to keep him contributing.

—*T.R. Groves, Trenton, ON*



Editor's note: As we said in the Humour issue editorial, "One person's Spider Robinson is another person's Salman Rushdie." Humour is a personal thing and "Ask Mr. Science" is no exception: you either find it funny, or you don't. We do, and so did the many voters who gave Mr. Science his Aurora Award.

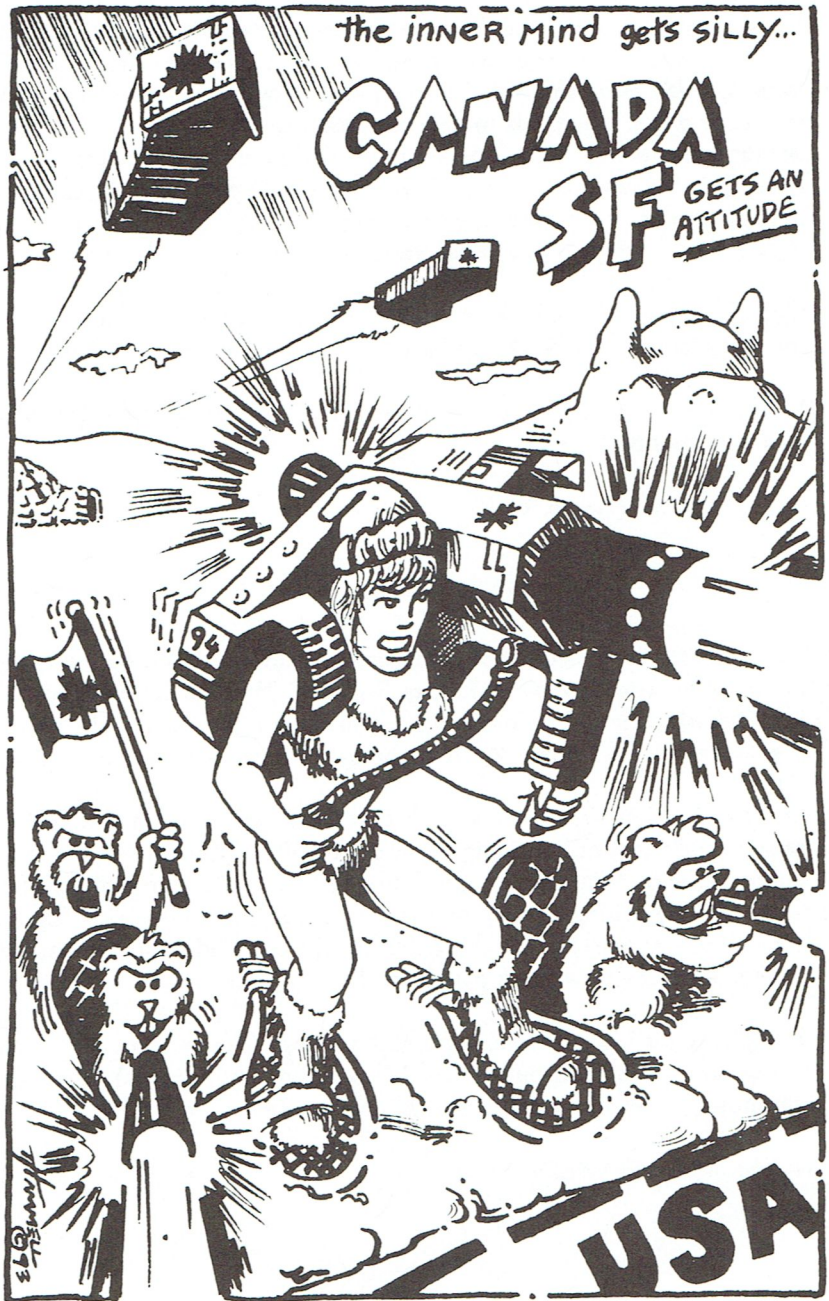
As far as novel excerpts go—we feel it would be unfair to an author to run what would amount to a snippet of an 80,000+ word novel, and try to condense the rest into a paragraph or two. We believe most readers will relish the prospect of getting an early look at an upcoming new novel. Who knows—the excerpt just might be the thing that convinces a reader to go out and buy the book instead of walking past it in the bookstore.

You'll be pleased to know, however, that we hope to increase our page count in the near future, and publish at least one more story per issue as well as continuing to feature a novel excerpt once a year.

—*Jena Snyder, Production Editor*

the inner mind gets silly...

CANADA SF GETS AN ATTITUDE



CONS — CANADIAN CONVENTION CALENDAR

When contacting conventions for more information, include a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for their reply. Abbreviation code: GoH = Guest of Honour, TM = Toastmaster, MC = Master of Ceremonies.

• MAY 14-16 – CANCON 93

Delta Ottawa, Ottawa. GoHs: Karen Wehrstein, Shirley Meier, Robert Sawyer, Greg Ioannou. FanGoH: Bink. Memb: \$30 at the door. Info: Box 105, 220 Woodridge Cres, Nepean ON, K2B 8G1. Phone (613) 726-9097 before 10 pm EST, ask for Judith.

• MAY 21-23 – KEYCON 10

Marlborough Inn, Winnipeg. GoHs: Roger Zelazny, Fred Saberhagen, Poul Anderson. Art GoH: Bob Eglington. Memb: \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 3178, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4E6.

• MAY 28-30 – V-CON 20

Totem Residence, UBC, Vancouver. GoH: Charles de Lint, ArtGoH: Rob Alexander, TM: Michael Coney. Memb: \$35 now and at the door. Info: P.O. Box 48478, Bentall Centre, Vancouver BC, V7X 1A2.

• MAY 29-30 – MIGSCON XIV

Holiday Inn, Hamilton. Historical gaming. Info: Apt 8, 142 Caroline St. S., Hamilton ON, L8P 3K9.

• JUNE 4-6 – AD ASTRA 13

Sheraton East, Toronto. GoHs: Frederick Pohl, Dave Duncan. ArtGoH: Robin Wood. Memb: \$26 to May 15, \$32 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 7276, Station A, Toronto ON, M5W 1X9.

• JULY 3-4 – MONTREAL SCIENCE FICTION FESTIVAL

Pointe-Claire Holiday Inn, Pointe-Claire. GoHs: Robin Curtis, John Levene, Tony Todd. MC: Larry Stewart. FanGoH: Scott Aldred. Memb: \$35 to June 1, \$40 at the door. Info: C. Chartier, PO Box 311 Stn B, Montreal PQ, H3B 3J7.

• JULY 16-18 – CONVERSION X

Marlborough Inn, Calgary. GoHs: L. Sprague

and Catherine de Camp, Dave Duncan. TM: Ed Bryant. ArtGoH: Ken Macklin. Memb: \$35 to June 30, \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 1088, Station M, Calgary AB, T2P 2K9.

• JULY 17-19 – RHINOCON 3 Cancelled

• JULY 23-25 – TORONTO TREK 7

Regal Constellation Hotel, Toronto. GoHs: George Takai, Barbara Hambly. Info: Suite 0116, Box 187, 65 Front St West, Toronto ON, M5J 1E6.

• JULY 24-25 – VULCON 1

Info: V.A.S.T. NCC-1701, General Delivery, Vulcan AB, T0L 2B0.

• JULY 30 - AUG 2 – CANGAMES 93

Gaming. Info: PO Box 3358, Stn D, Ottawa ON, K1P 6H8.

• AUG 14-15 – WILFCON IX

Kitchener. Info: 69 Donald St, Unit 6, Kitchener ON, N2B 3G6.

• OCT 2 – SPRUCECON 93

Spruceland Elementary School, Prince George. Star Trek. Info: c/o USS Endeavour, 1509 Edmonton St, Prince George BC V2M 1X5.

1994

SEPT 1-5 – CONADIAN (Worldcon)

Winnipeg Convention Centre, Winnipeg. GoH: Anne McCaffrey, Art GoH: George Barr, TM: Barry Longyear, FanGoH: Robert Runté. Memb: C\$95 / US\$85 to Sept 31, 1993. Info: PO Box 2430, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4A7.

We'd like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send details of your event at least 5 months in advance (to Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6), and we'll run it free of charge.

The bulk of the information in this column is courtesy of ConTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter, available from 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

How to Order Back Issues of *ON SPEC*

There's a whole universe of great fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and artwork waiting for you in *ON SPEC*—use the order form on page 96 and send your cheque or money order to: *ON SPEC*, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB Canada T6E 5G6.

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- Vol. 3, No. 3 (#8) Winter/91. *Theme: Humour*
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- Vol. 4, No. 1 (#9) Spring/92
Hugh Spencer, Alice Major, Steve Stanton, David Nickle, Inge Israel, J. Nelson, Susan MacGregor, & Karl Schroeder. Cover: Tim Hammell.
- Vol. 4, No. 2 (#10) Fall/92
Wesley Herbert, Michael Teasdale, Lyn McConchie, Sally McBride, Bruce Taylor, M.A.C. Farrant, Donna Farley, Amber Hayward, Lorina J. Stephens, Alice Major. Guest Editorial: Lorna Toolis & Michael Skeet. Art Features: Martin Springett, Tim Hammell. Cover: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.
- Vol. 4, No. 3 (#11) Winter/92
J.R. Martel, Cheryl Merkel, Preston Hapon, Jason Kapalka, Linda Smith, Catherine Girczyc, Robert Baillie, Sean Stewart (excerpt from *Nobody's Son*), Tim Hammell. Cover: Marc Holmes.
- Vol. 5, No. 1 (#12) Spring/93. *Theme: Over the Edge*
Erik Jon Spigel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaife, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.



OUR CONTRIBUTORS

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS

COLLEEN ANDERSON (*Calliope's Song*) of Vancouver has had over fifty poems published. An attendee of the Clarion Workshop and recipient of the 1988 Shari Meakin Scholarship, she writes poetry, short stories, and is working on her second novel.

ALISON BAIRD (*Changeling Child*), a graduate of the University of Toronto, recently had a novel accepted for publication. "Changeling Child" is her first published work of short fiction.

BRUCE BARBER (*The Marilyn Machine*) has fiction upcoming in the Toronto literary quarterly, *Descant*, and has just completed an SF novel. He is currently working on a murder mystery concerning the Stratford Shakespearian Festival for *Mercury Press*.

AL BETZ (*Ask Mr. Science*) of Vancouver is the Social Secretary for Mr. Science.

NICHOLAS DE KRUYFF (*Mexican Fiesta*) writes and acts in Toronto, where he lives with his girlfriend, two dogs, a cat, and some garish carpet.

BARRY HAMMOND (*superstition chant, universe, black hole*) of Edmonton has a novel, *Cold Front* (New American Library, 1982); short fiction (*Horizons SF*); and a poetry collection, *moral kiosk* (Underpass Press, 1986), to his credit. Recent work appears in *Senary, sub-Terrain, The Plaza* (Japan), *Other Voices, Prairie Journal Poetry #2, Barbed Lyres, Sure* (the Charles Bukowski newsletter), and *The New Quarterly*. New work is forthcoming in *Beyond Bad Times* and *Impetus*.

MARIAN HUGHES (*Birth Rite*), a teacher in a adult high school and a member of the Ink Blots writer's group of Southern Ontario, spends her spare time riding her horse, or editing *Initiation* — a novel which Baen Books is seriously considering. This is her first professional fiction sale.

JASON KAPALKA (*Lena the Scream-Cleaner*) eats, sleeps and writes in Edmonton, Alberta.

ROBERT J. SAWYER (*Just Like Old Times*) is the author of the SF novels *Far-Seer, Fossil Hunter*, and the Aurora Award-winning *Golden Fleece*. He is Canadian Regional Director of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and lives in Thornhill, Ontario.

HUGH A.D. SPENCER (*The Triage Conference*) of Toronto was nominated for an Aurora for "Why I Hunt Flying Saucers" (*ON SPEC* Humour Issue). Recent projects include concept development work for the Canada Pavilion at EXPO '93 Korea and acting as co-curator for an upcoming exhibition on Canadian Science Fiction for the National Library.

BILL WREN (*Angeldrome*) is extraordinarily thin (a genetic inheritance, not anorexia), and has had stories with fantastic elements published in *blue buffalo* and *Secrets from the Orange Couch*.

ABOUT OUR ARTISTS

ROB ALEXANDER (*Cover*) of Seattle is a freelance illustrator. Recent works include the cover for *Deathscape* (Berkeley), as well as illustrations for *Amazing Stories Magazine*, and *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*.

TIM HAMMELL (*The Inner Mind*) is a Calgary artist who will be a guest speaker on airbrushing at the National Photographer's convention in Quebec this August.

JEFF DOTEN (*Just Like Old Times*) of Calgary has illustrated for the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, been published in the *Burroughs Bulletin*, and has done cover work for the Alberta Palaeontology Society.

MURRAY LINDSAY (*Mexican Fiesta, Birth Rite*) of Calgary is doing some fine art printing for possible show and is currently whomping a mess of new buttons for ConVersion X.

CATHERINE LUCE (*Changeling Child*), an Edmonton freelance illustrator/designer, handles advertising and brochure work, but her first love is to illustrate a good story.

MIKE JACKSON (*The Triage Conference, The Marilyn Machine*) of Vancouver has illustrated for *ON SPEC* and *Challenge* magazines, and has done supplements for the Star Wars, Cyberpunk, Battletech, and Shadowrun games.

ROBERT PASTERNAK (*Angeldrome*) of Winnipeg is currently working on CD packages for Canadian musicians. He has an *Amazing Stories* cover out this spring, and has done colour illustrations for *Aboriginal SF*, *Interzone*, and an SF magazine from Russia called *Mega*.

KENNETH SCOTT (*Lena the Scream-Cleaner*) of Calgary recently won an Honourable Mention in the Ron L. Hubbard Illustrators of the Future Contest, an international competition which receives over a thousand entries per quarter.

GENERAL INFORMATION

ON SPEC is seeking original science fiction, fantasy, horror, ghost or fairy stories, magic realism, etc. Strong preference is given to submissions by Canadians. Send your short stories (max. 6000 words), short short stories (under 1000 words) or poetry (max. 100 lines) to the *ON SPEC* address below.

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Please send SASE for complete guidelines before submitting.

Deadlines are May 31/93 (for Winter/93), August 31/93 (Theme: "HARD SF," Spring/94), November 30/93 (for Summer/94), and February 28/94 (for Fall/94).

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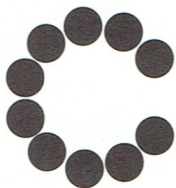
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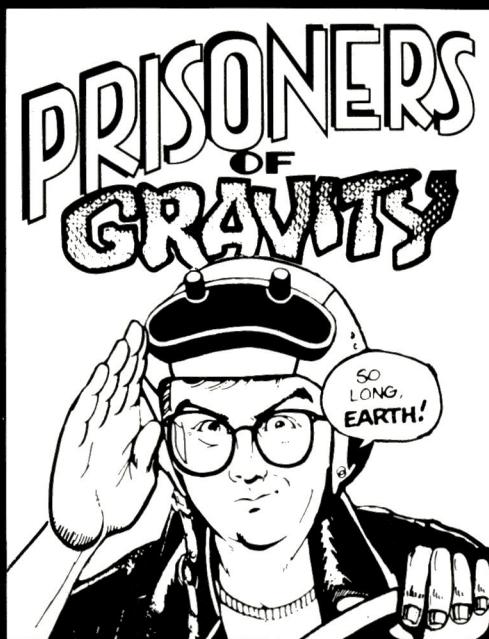
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