

On·SPEC

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing

SUMMER 1995

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New
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ON·SPEC

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ON this Issue

Jena Snyder,
ON SPEC Production Editor

For all of us here at ON SPEC, the **AURORA AWARDS** are first and foremost in our minds (see the full list of winners on page 7). **ON SPEC** won in the Best Work in English (Other) category, and our whirling dervish of an Administrator, the incomparable **CATH JACKEL**, won the Aurora for Fan Achievement (Organization). Any of you who saw Cath in action at Can•Con in Ottawa this May will agree that she did a phenomenal job (in an incredibly-short time space) organizing all the ON SPEC-related events. I'd like to offer thunderous editorial applause. Congratulations, Cath!

And congratulations as well to **TIM HAMMELL**, who won the Aurora for Artistic Achievement. Our former Art Director has been collecting a shelf full of awards these days: at the Alberta Professional Photographers Association annual convention held in March, 1995, Tim was awarded "Best in Class - Airbrush" for "Wild, Wild West" (AKA "Ride 'em Dino boy!" the Fall 1994 ON SPEC cover). He was also the recipient of the "Best in Class - Print Enhancement" award, and was a nominee for "Specialist of the Year." Congratulations, Tim!

On April 25 in Longueuil, *The Grand Prix de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois* was awarded to **JOËL CHAMPETIER**, who received not only a handsome trophy but a check for \$2500. The Grand Prix is awarded for the entirety of a writer's output (within the SF/F genres) during the past year. Joël won for two stories («*Ésclaves du sable*»/"Slaves of the sand" and «*Visite au comptoir dénébolien*»/"A visit to the Denebolan Counter") and two novels (*Le Secret des Sylvaneaux / The Sylvaneaux's Secret* and *La Mémoire du lac / The Memory of the Lake*). Other nominees were Daniel Sernine and Jean-Louis Trudel.

We'd like you all to join us in welcoming our **NEW ART DIRECTORS, JANE STARR** and **JIM BEVERIDGE** (see Lynne Taylor-Fahnestalk's farewell, page 94). They're ready, they're willing, and they're able to take on the challenge of steering ON SPEC into new hitherto unexplored artistic galaxies. Welcome!

Bringing on new Art Directors of course means we have to bid **FAREWELL** to the lovely and talented **LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK**, who has handled our art direction admirably for the past three years. Lynne's not going far—just to her studio,

where she'll be creating wonderful new worlds with her airbrush. Look for one or two on upcoming covers of *ON SPEC*!

Speaking of *ON SPEC* covers leads me to our brand-new baby, *ON SPEC: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS*, an anthology of the best of our first half-decade of publication, with cover by Steve Fahnestalk and Lynne Taylor-Fahnestalk. The anthology should be available at bookstores everywhere; if you don't find it, ask for it. And if that fails, see the back cover on details to order.

More congratulations! Our first **Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize** goes to **WILLIAM SOUTHEY**. His well-crafted and moving story, "Gone to Earth and Ashes," his first fiction sale, appeared in our Winter 1994 issue. It also garnered a great review in the March 27, 1995 *Toronto Globe & Mail*:

...the story not to miss is by a writer unknown (at least to me), William Southey. It's a witty, convincing account of one of those ancient Celts found pickled in bogs or frozen in glaciers. In Southey's version—a nice companion to Margaret Atwood's story "The Bog Man,"—modern scientists clone "Celtic" beer and bake "authentic" bread from wheat and barley found in the 3,400-year-old man's half-rotten leather pouch, and clone a baby, Brendan, from his genes. Brendan is the story's main narrator. He laments his racial "purity" ("I can't extract much in the way of benefit 'cause all my groupies are [racist] scum"). Although he refers to his genetic father, kept in a museum's deep freeze as "the fish-stick," it's his loyalty to Dad and other lost Celts that ultimately proves his undoing, and makes this story more than just a clever conceit.

Congratulations, William! We hope to see (and publish) many more of your short stories in the future.

BITS & BYTES FROM MY ELECTRONIC MAILBOX: "I thought the Horror/Dark Fantasy issue looked fantastic. Terrific cover, and I think it's a lot nicer having the bio notes at the ends of the stories, instead of at the back. Also, the elimination of the illustrations for each story is a real improvement; the portfolio at the front was much more interesting. Well done!" And from another reader: "What incredibly realistic bricks! Very, very cool cover art, almost palpably three-dimensional. And textures! Every now and then and I just stop what I'm doing and stare at it. Wow." (*Editor's note: Adrian Kleinbergen's "Surprise in the wall" Spring 1995 cover is a photograph of a sculpture, as was his creepily lovely "Bugs" cover for our Spring 1991 issue.*)

Last of all, **ANOTHER FAREWELL**, this one to our efficient, ebullient, cheerful, professional, and much-missed-already Coordinator, **MICHELLE WILSON**. Managing her own business, Farrago Productions, and volunteering for *ON SPEC* took up pretty well every waking minute of Michelle's day (not to mention a few twilight and midnight hours as well), and we were lucky to have her on our staff as long as we did. We will miss her cheery voice on the phone and her running agendas and organized minutes and her ten thousand other wonderful qualities. Best of luck in all your business ventures, Michelle! (And if you ever have any spare time, you know where to find us...buried under all the files!) •

ON SPEC DEADLINES

Aug. 31/95, Nov. 30/95,
Feb. 29/96, May 31/96

Submissions received after a deadline will be held for the next deadline.

Submissions must be in COMPETITION FORMAT: no author name on manuscript. Enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope with sufficient postage to cover return of manuscript (or mark "Disposable" and include SASE for reply only), and covering letter with name, address, phone number, story title and word count. Details, page 95.

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SF is back in *Prairie Fire*

*Winners of the
Speculative Fiction Writing Contest
will appear in the Summer, 1995 issue.*

First Prize: \$500

Robert Boyczuk: "Assassination and the New World Order"

Second Prize: \$300

Jon Paul Henry: "The Yummy Puffs Experience, the Babel Effect, and the Incidence of Feline Crucifixion"

Third Prize: \$200

Jennifer Mitton: "I'm Getting Out Alive, Jim Morrison"

Honourable Mentions:

Stories by Candace Jane Dorsey, Allan Weiss
and Cliff Burns.

Prize money for this contest was made possible by a grant
from CONADIAN, Inc.

Contest Judge was **Heather Spears**.

On sale at better bookstores in July, or order from:
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Price: **\$10.95** (160 pages)

To order by mail, send cheque for \$15 (includes postage and GST).

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNERS!

PRIX AURORA AWARDS

Best Long-Form Work in English (1993-94)*Virtual Light*, William Gibson (Seal, 1993)**Meilleur livre en français (1993-94)***La Mémoire du lac*, Joël Champetier, (Québec/Amérique, 1994)**Best Short-Form Work in English**"The Fragrance of Orchids," Sally McBride (*Asimov's SF*, May/94)**Meilleure nouvelle en français**«L'Homme qui fouillait la lumière,» Alain Bergeron (*Solaris* 111)«L'Envoyé,» Yves Meynard (*imagine.../Décollages*)**Best Work in English (Other)***ON SPEC Magazine* (The Copper Pig Writers' Society)**Meilleur ouvrage en français (Autre)***Solaris*, Joël Champetier, éd. (Les compagnons à temps perdu)**Artistic Achievement**Tim Hammell (*ON SPEC, SF Chronicle*, etc.)**Fan Achievement (Fanzine)***Under the Ozone Hole*, Karl Johanson & John Herbert, eds.**Fan Achievement (Organization)**Cath Jackel (*ON SPEC*, NonCon)**Fan Achievement (Other)**

Catherine Donahue Girczyc (Ether Patrol host)

PRIX BOREAL

Best Short Story

Alain Bergeron

«L'Homme qui fouillait la lumière»

(This story also won the Prix Solaris, and was tied with Yves Meynard's

«L'Envoyé» for the Aurora)

Best Novel

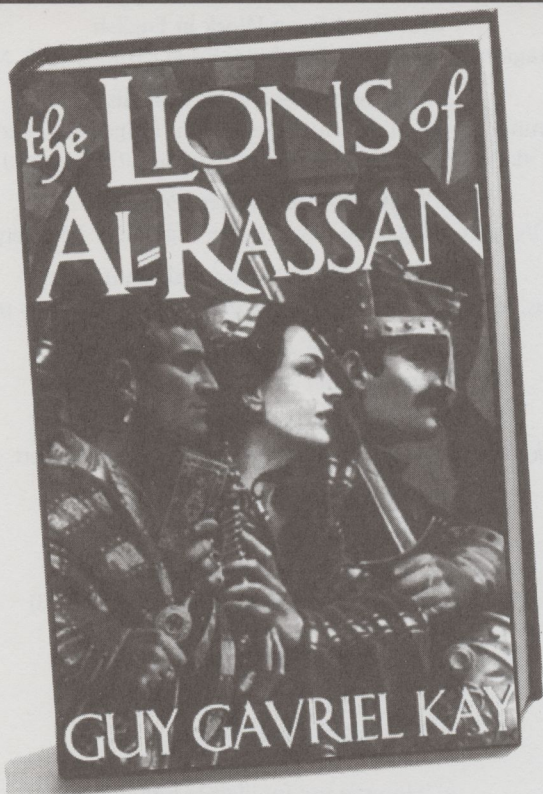
Daniel Sernine

*Manuscrit trouvé dans un secrétaire***Best Critical Work**

Claude Janelle

L'Année de la SFFQ 1991

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AL-RASSAN



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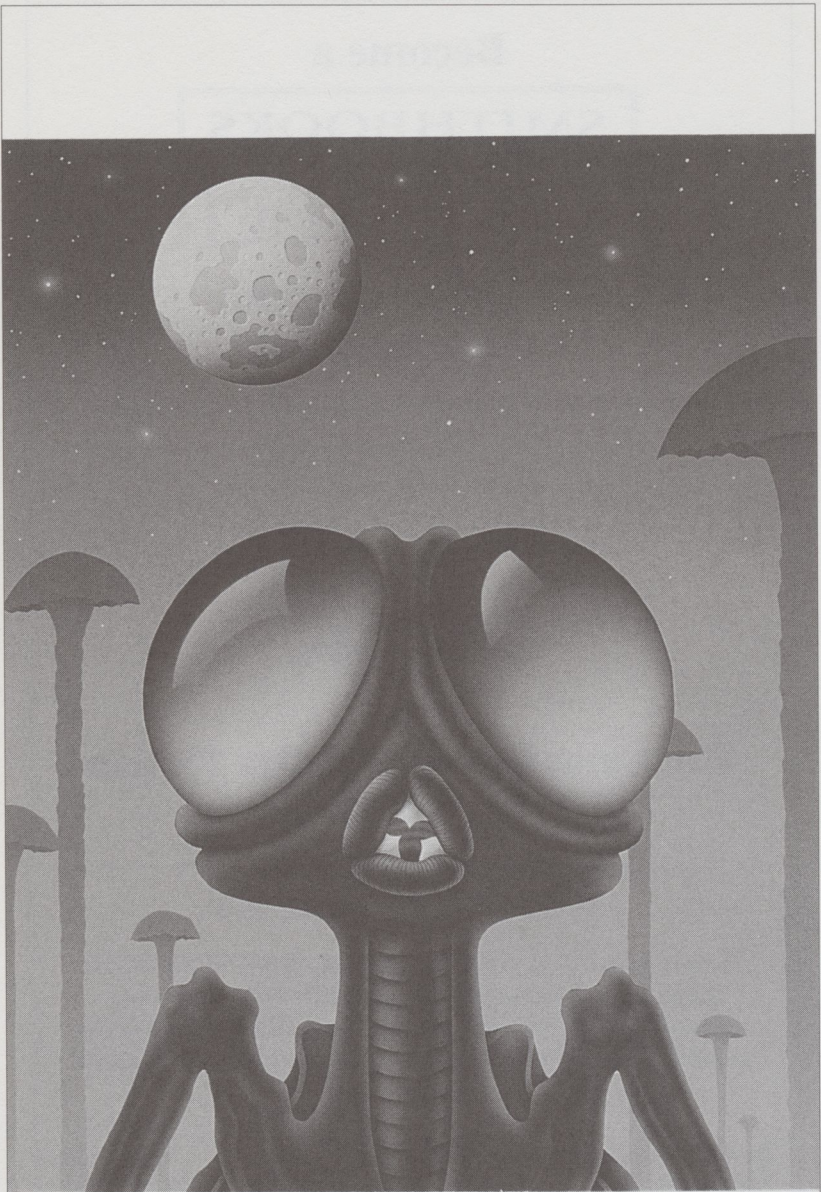
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West Edmonton Mall, P3	444-1307	Bower Place,	
Edmonton Centre	425-0854	Red Deer	347-2557



"ROKNEB" ©1995 W.B. Johnston

ON the Wall

GALLERY FEATURE:

W.B. Johnston

It was an unusually still evening that September 25th, back in 1957; almost spooky, some would say. Witnesses still claim there was an unearthly glow over Winnipeg's Grace Hospital as a woman screamed and a baby cried. Some claimed it was an act of a Higher Power, some gave credit to alien intervention. The truth may never be known, but no one could deny that an event of unparalleled magnitude had occurred that night...W.B. Johnston had joined us here on earth!

It soon became obvious that Johnston's destiny was that of an artist. At the age of nine, he was given the strap by one of his teachers for drawing in class. That teacher believed artistic endeavors to be a complete waste of time. (That same teacher is now an assistant night manager at a convenience store in a small Ontario town.)

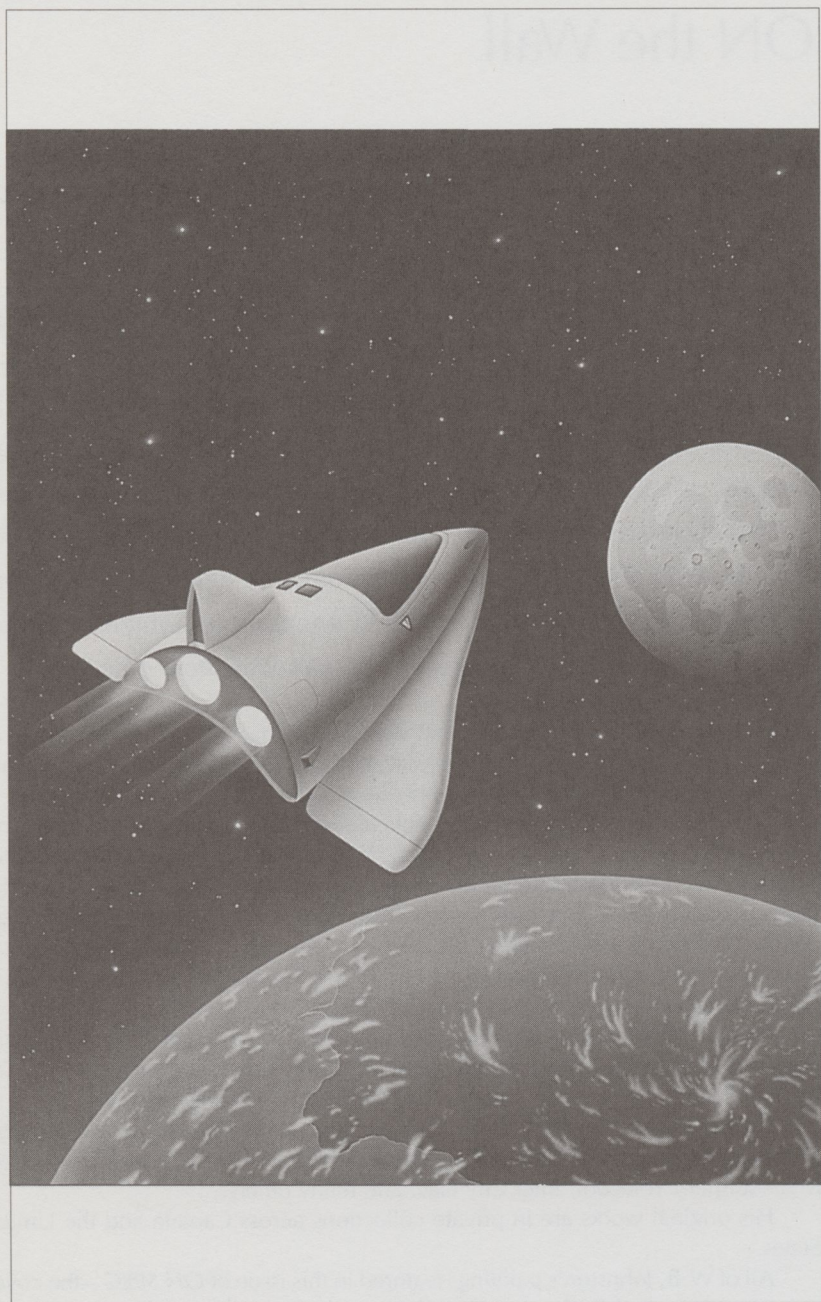
Jumping ahead a couple of decades, W.B. Johnston is now an artist of note. An award-winning illustrator, his work has been published around the world. The Japan Creators' Association has twice chosen Johnston's work to appear in their annual book of the world's best artists. Mexico's prestigious *Origina Magazine* has published a feature article about his work, as has Korea's *Design Journal*. He has written two how-to articles for *The Artist's Magazine*.

Johnston's editorial illustrations have appeared in a diverse array of publications including *Science Fiction Age*, *Penthouse*, *National Geographic World*, *Canadian Living*, and recently, the cover of Stephen J. Hawking's *Life Works*.

He has done advertising illustrations for an equally diverse range of clients: Microprose (Cyberstrike), Bristol Aerospace, Canadian Airlines, Labatt Breweries, MTS/Northern Telecom, Inter City Gas, and many others.

His original works are in private collections across Canada and the United States.

All of W.B. Johnston's paintings featured in this issue of *ON SPEC*—the cover painting ("Imported Technology") and this gallery section—were created using Iwata airbrushes, Comart and Rotring acrylics, and Crescent acid-free boards. •



"Moon bound" ©1995 W.B. Johnston



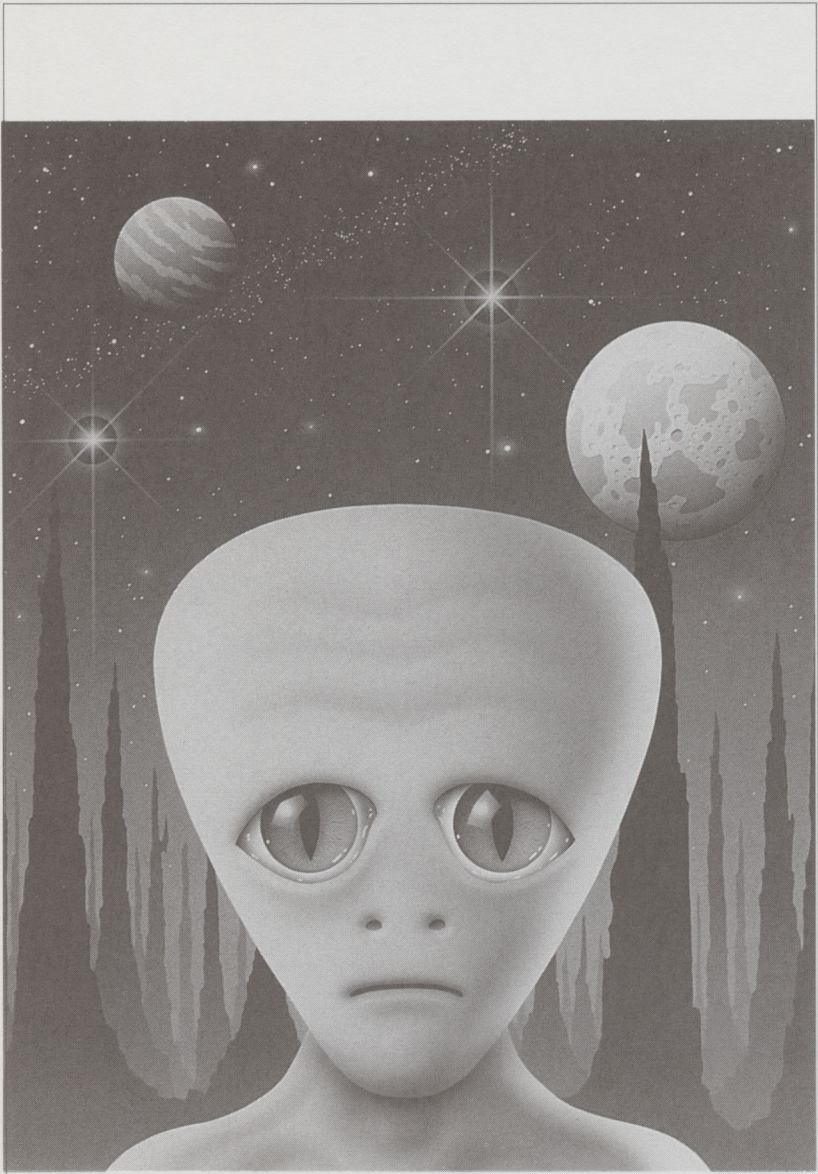
"And so the journey begins" ©1995 W.B. Johnston



"GARTWEE" ©1995 W.B. Johnston



"Four men sitting around the window contemplating the power of Magritte's hat"
©1995 W.B. Johnston



"ZNAPHOD" ©1995 W.B. Johnston

DUNG BEETLE

Heather Spears

Ka Eth activated the belly window and watched its shutter slide back under her feet. The curved pane she crouched on was all that lay now between her and the roiling cloud-mass four hundred meters below. Sunset on Venus. Swollen, gorgeous, never the same, never really changed, it seemed, in all these years though she knew it was subtly changing. Scoop One One Three hung over the equator just inside the shadow of the limb, and kept there to follow the sun, with its silvered greenhouse, and its panel extended like a wing into the harsh light, the rest of the craft shaded by thick cloud. Not quite so thick now. Redness seared it, pierced it—sometimes there were patches of void, bare plunges and even, inside the horizon, chunks of sky. The Scoop's position had to be adjusted gradually, so many meters lower, so many degrees to the east. Craft: poor word for a vehicle that could move in emergencies but had stayed put, to all intents and purposes, for three generations.

The window widened calmly up the curving wall and she shifted a little. Fully open, it banded the Scoop—and compensated for the rotation so that under her was always Venus, overhead the black sky and the fierce stars. And the Shitball behind her left shoulder, brown and glowing.

She stared down into twilight cloud. Huge, red surfaces boiled up into the sunlight. "Silver linings" went the ancient song but they weren't silver, they were blood brown. Turning and swallowing themselves and ever turning. Deep inside, a sudden blur of cold blue light widened and vanished, then others, in an uneven

sequence, as if they were being lit and quenched far under water, on, on, on—on, and extinguishing. Colbo had composed to it, waiting for the notes, finding not only the linear trace of them (which she also could follow) but some order in their erratic coming and going, a temporal syncopation. Said it was the silent music of Venus. The three Symphonies—impossible to watch the phenomena now without the famous theme of the First's *Adagio* taking over, re-forming what was seen. In the early days the lightning had been almost continuous; it was, she knew, less frequent now, but in the years she had watched she hadn't noticed any diminishment.

The Scoops took their time, but eventually Venus would be clear—sucked clean. *Artist's Conception*—they showed these to remind you, to make it all worthwhile. Verdant mountains and wide vales. Lakes. Not in my time, she thought. If I get to see a mountain it will be barren—yet I'll count myself luckier than those who worked before me.

It was possible—and the crews were competing—there had already been two false sightings from other Scoops, that the cameras later disproved.

She had seen a vortex. Usually, the Scoop's monster-tube hung into cloud, its snout hundreds of kilometers deep. The vacuum created a vortex: in a kind of waterspout, tonne by tonne, the toxic atmosphere was being sucked away—to end up in the Shitball, Venus' man-made moon. Brown snow. That circled the planet a thousand kilometers out, glowing—it had phases like the Terran Moon—seen from Scoop 113 it was always at just under Half, off to the night side.

•

Cleaning Venus was like trying to empty the Pacific with a fleet of vacuum cleaners. That's how they'd explained it in training. You had to be patient at this job; it took literally the patience of a lifetime. And then another three, or four. She was fourth generation out. Signed on for ten years, then come back again for another ten, as some did. The Agency only took the obsessed ones.

If you were obsessed you didn't complain; you didn't get bored either. She was a line artist. And a maker—she didn't work with any other tools than hand and eye. Her left index finger was sharpened and implanted. A little factory of carbon and blood, it could be capped; it was retractable. Usually, as now, she drew directly on the window. She would work till this part of the pane was a great, spreading calligraphy. Then closing the window erase it, or preserve it.

They took over from her then, the Agency's crew, converting the stuff mechanically—she wasn't concerned with that part of it. Relayed exhibits. *The Venus Equations*. *The Six Walls* of the new Academy in Chile. *The Book of Red Cloud Turning*. Mostly she worked in line but she could spurt a wash across the surface too. She had designed the implants herself—told the technician what she wanted, anyway—

An old conversation. "Could you make it come directly out of my eyes?"

No, they could not. Out of the orbitals, or the corrugators between—but that would not be accurate. It would have to be the pupil itself—at the fovea, the focal region on the retina—

"And how would you see?"

"Peripherally. I do that anyway. Focus is an extravagance. And I want to get closer—"

Not stand in the way, was what she wanted to tell him, but it would sound fanciful, though it was what she meant. "You have to understand—the eye sees, but the finger is actually in contact with the surface."

The technician, Foy, was young and ardent.

"You'd look funny with a line coming out of your eye."

"I am a tool; if you could do it, make it work, it would be beautiful, as a tool is."

But she'd thought twice about it, and left the idea.

Maybe for her third decade. If she returned. Sometimes she imagined that line streaming forth from her forehead, a dark seeking light. What she really wanted was to draw with her brain, with no other tools—yet it would have to be her eyes, she must be able to swivel them normally, following contour by contour, write the living cloud with her living eye. When it was all sucked away she'd be long finished with it; whatever she was doing now would be done and she'd be long dead but it would be part of the culture, the record—if they succeeded. When Venus was seeded and settled, Geish's epic, Colbo's music, her drawings, the work of all the rest—these would be the heritage.

Like most of the other artists, she spent eight months alone, then four with company. The rhythm worked well for her—by eight months she needed human contact, not the screen faces, the voices with the time pause between each set of words. And she'd switched off the

virtual stuff. Artists did, or claimed they did, "except for the earliest classics of course." Crew entertainment. However clever it was, it didn't fool you, not at gut level. Just left things lonelier than ever. A flat picture, a radio-distorted voice was the amount of human reality you could trust after all, when no one was around, and suited her better.

Her visitors would be a technician and, usually, a superannuated shrink, someone they didn't use any more. Hele had filled that slot, the last two years—she was sixty-eight now, went about the Scoops. Ka Eth seldom felt she was being analyzed or condescended to, and they'd become friends. Hele's understanding of the drawings was philistine and Ka ignored her comments—people's interest in her finished pictures was, after all, what made her valuable, enough to be allowed to do this. As for the making—Hele didn't interfere.

The technician might or might not be a man. Ka left that to chance, see who turned up. Sex was good after eight months alone.

And after four months she was glad to see the last of them.

The belly window received on its surface a long, pure, sliding line that emerged from her finger almost unconsciously—though unconsciously was a strange word to use for a process which involved the very core of her attention. She drew the limb—the line had a way of turning on itself; what she saw was never static even at a distance.

"Don't you ever feel like painting it?"

"No, it is painted already, out there, by the light—my line is the abstract, the equation."

Some of what she said appeared

later in print, up in the World.

"Did I say that?"

She closed the window, clearing it.

They were complaining lately that she was erasing too many. "Just give us the chance to evaluate them first, take what we want." That was the Agency. No, she cleared at random, it was now a question of what she felt like at the moment, exalted or tired or bored or whatever. She no longer studied what she had done. To preserve was the non-act; if she did not clear the window the work was relayed. And sometimes to act, to erase, was itself an interference. Perhaps eventually they would get it all, because she simply didn't care.

"Don't you enjoy seeing your exhibits when they send you a screen?"

"Hele, I do. I love beautiful drawings, looking at them. Not mine more than other artists'—not less, either."

Faru strolled in now—he had been courteous enough to wait till the window closed. The Scoop's bare central room, Ka's workplace, was blue-lit, restful after the cloud-light's dirty reds. Faru was neat, young, out on his first shift. Two years was what they chose, most of them, but a short shift meant going back steeper, maybe being stuck on an asteroid or station till there was space to get down.

"Any vortex?" He hadn't seen it for himself, only her drawing and the almost illegible replay.

"No." She stood up, retracted her point, capped it, swung her arms back from her shoulders. The weakness would pass, and diet would rebuild her blood. Sometimes, after a long session,

she strapped herself in and returned to herself a portion from the store—her own, hoarded from Terran days. Before the implant, a long period of tests, and the storing of plasma to take with her.

They stood close, the same height, both dressed in the loose, single unbleached garment which closed at chin, hands, feet. She walked past him into the canteen. It was the third month; soon she'd be alone again. There had been some sex, not lately.

She asked, "How's the old Shit Ball?"

He had been making measurements; his voice came from over her shoulder now, lazy and not too interested.

"As ever. Growing. One-one-ten has a shunt up—ours is practically ready to go—"

In the beginning there had been much official and unofficial talk of naming the moon they had created—the temporary moon. Poetic names had been suggested but had never caught on—Geish ended up calling it "*The Nameless One*" but unfortunately this was the syllabic equivalent of "*Old Ball of Shit*"; children learning the epic substituted the street-name gleefully. By now it had lost any scatological association.

*There hangs The Nameless One
a cauldron glowing
Into its orbit all the thunders
drawing.
Watch how its edges tremble in
their growing
Tamed into ice before its final
thawing.
Oh Nameless One, receive this
hectic air
Embrace it there.*

And the children's name fit well enough.

Ka Eth ate, and then crossed the workspace to the sleeping quarters, stripped and swam in the lap pool, a sunken trough of clear water that circled the room. It was designed to be covered when not in use, but Ka left it open, liking the continuous tiny shuddering of its surface, the only part of the ship that gave visual evidence of its power and purpose. She sidestepped it instinctively, though she remembered still how Hele had woken and stepped into it on her first visit—with a yell—later she said, "I know it's there now. Let it be."

Ka was careful with her regime—the Scoop had a leisurely revolution, enough gravity to keep the water settled in the trough, to walk the floor by, to put things down, but not enough to keep bones from atrophy without exercise. She swam as fast as she could, a narrow crawl that touched nothing, became directionless.

Hele had been sleeping; she looked like a foolish hammock in the float-space at center. She woke to Ka's splashing and turned over, the movement enough to bring her to her feet.

"I was giving the garden a complete going-over," she announced. "And I've swum—I got good and dirty."

Ka climbed out and sat on the rim, letting the air dry her. "I should go up and get some daylight, I suppose." She looked down her spare, drab-colored body. She was white—one of the rare examples of that ancient race still cropping up against the odds. Hele did not comment. "Shall I come with you?"

"If you like."

The greenhouse lay under silvered

panes up on the Scoop's shoulder, with the panel overhead, and the instruments spread up and outward. The tilted wing was enormous—like a long quadrated field, or the scoured side of a whole mountain. It filled the view to the west and overhead, blurry behind the conservatory's grid and silvering. A tiny mosaic of panes—if one cracked, only a small jet of air would have time to slip away before it repaired itself. Some of the panes were scratched. That scar, four panes long, over on the north quadrant. As if it had skipped. Superficial. About the same time as Scoop Three—

"They still say it was human error," Ka said aloud. She lay naked beside Hele, soaking in the sunlight and the green plant-stink. Red-flowered runner trees grew up the whole length of the south wall and spread overhead. The runner was a hybrid, flowering and bearing fruit simultaneously, and ripe beans in furred pods bulged among the blooms—thick and nourishing, modern potatoes. They dripped with moist heat.

"Are you talking about Scoop Three again?"

Ka heard the careful lack of interest in Hele's voice.

"Just an academic comment. It was a long time ago." She meant, No trauma, don't worry about me.

Scoop Three had disappeared over on the night side. No radio contact. The junk of her turned up, and one body, perfectly suited, Laji the dancer—a guyline trailing from her suit, its end burnt. Laji on a walkabout, or performing as she did sometimes, out on the line—and suddenly nothing behind her. Of course the scouts got around within hours looking but they did not

find her for some time. The suit was intact. DIES OF FRIGHT said the headlines. DANCER DIES OF FRIGHT AS METEOR MAULS SCOOP—VENUS TRAGEDY. The tabloids enjoyed this kind of thing.

"It's possible to die of fear."

Hele stirred, alert.

"A dancer. She ought to have radiated, kept up the chatter; they were coming, she must have known that. She could have danced into their arms."

Dancing in the sky over the boiling clouds. Human error. The error of being afraid? There had been no one with her on the Scoop and she should not have gone out—but going out had saved her.

Temporarily.

"Unless she did it!"

There was a popular opera in Shanghai after Scoop Three went, loosely based on the story. *Terminal Dance*. Ka Eth wondered whether she herself would have the nerve to draw on a walkabout. No, and it wasn't a case of nerves. Just not interesting. There had to be a surface to rest the line on—no surface out there. "On the sky," people said but that was wrong—the sky was bottomless. Leave space to the mud-slingers.

GIANT SPACE SNOW SCULPTURE FESTIVAL!

But no one had tried to sculpt the Ball of Shit made of frozen, toxic gas.

It wasn't visible from the conservatory, luckily. The bulk of the Scoop hid it.

BALL VISIBLE FROM EARTH! —another early headline: they meant, through a telescope; Venus at perigee, the morning and evening star, held her strange moon too close and small for

it to be otherwise observed.

VENUS ALBEDO DIMINISHING, SAY EXPERTS.

Indeed it was a glorious project, and those who had dreamed of it, and created it, did so with the realization they would never know its ultimate success, for even with over two hundred scoops working under unlimited solar power, the cleaning would take over two centuries. And then the cooled, nude planet must be seeded, the geological ecology protected—"Artists' Conceptions" again—Venus in soft air, a little like old rural New Zealand—cattle and people—all dreamlike under a pinkish sky, with a tree-clad volcano lazily smoking.

It had taken almost a century to build up the atmosphere of Mars. Thanks to the Movement that planet was still almost entirely harsh desert, with its great scouring storms of sand, its glorious rivers in the once dry beds, coursing through their canyons and out among the settlements. There along the tributaries, rare cities, soaring bridges, ribbons of green and soil—this much was allowed, but the planet was to be kept essentially wild and bald forever.

Perhaps it was the clouds of Venus that made the idea of her absolute taming permissible. Anyway, the Movement could not persuade themselves, let alone anyone else, that the hellish, unbreathable darkness under those boiling clouds ought to be preserved or cherished! No, Venus was to be sweet love's planet, all of it utilized, productive and flourishing. If everything went well.

•

The Scoop's proboscis was a monstrous, supple tube of overlapping bands, over thirty meters around, with its own internal cooling system. "The cold is pulled down, the shit is sucked up." The tube looked impressive where it emerged from the Scoop but distance dwindled it to a thread where it entered the cloud below. It was easy to see why clearing Venus was a long project. The scoops were mere blips against that great, suffocating ocean of gas. *Bright Star! would I were steadfast as thou art!* And steadfast she was, so that even through a lifetime of work and observation it was the stats and measurements more than what any single observer saw, that indicated progress.

The Scoop murmured and shuddered continuously but from the living quarters the humming was almost sub-audible, the shuddering no more than a jittering on the surface of water. Past the cabin and canteen was the compression area, where the gas cooled and was packed into the balloons. Then the shunt nosed them off towards the Ball—it was all mechanical now, though in the beginning there'd been a human crew. The technician on the Scoop directed the operation. And the Ball grew.

Faru's prof had been on a dung run. Ka's memory of his memory of the old man's memory, all muddled in her mind with their first sexual encounter, when he had lain across her body and told her the story to keep himself from coming—or was it to space himself, into the distance, the touch of the balloon bumping off the moon and then being oozily sucked in, everything timed to match his orgasm?

"That's gross!" she had exclaimed, sitting up, but her body was still shuddering, and he had laughed at her.

"Can you imagine the big squeeze? I mean, when the big one, mother of all Dung Beetles, shoves the whole Shitball into the sun?" He had rolled over, giggling. "The whole world in orgasm!"

She noticed Hele was looking at her appraisingly, and blushed.

"Odd," she said, "how your skin changes color."

"So I am primitive."

"I'm not complaining. It's a vestigial protective mechanism."

"Too much sun."

"From one minute to the next?" Hele touched, then stroked Ka's arm. "What are you thinking about?"

Ka looked down at the dark, glistening hand and felt its heaviness. "The Shitball, actually—" she said, and stood up. "Faru used to get off on it, with me, I mean—his prof was on a run, back then—told them how the balloons sort of bumbled at the surface, when they got near, and then, they got sucked in—"

Hele was looking calmly away and Ka said, to ease things, "The garden looks so good—you've done just enough—"

"I like to leave a little wildness."

They had lost one shunt to the Ball. Oddly, it was the first of the new models, that had no crew—or so the headlines said. BEETLE SUCKED INTO BALL, NO LIVES LOST. There was a general suspicion that it had been the last of the manned ones. Questions, an unsatisfactory investigation. Maybe the facts never came out because it would have been such a mucky, unheroic death. Who'd want to remember it or

be remembered? Not like Laji. No way beautiful.

Ka was floating outside the scoop—or, there was no Scoop, or, she was herself the Scoop because, extending out of her face like a nose grown indefinitely, hung a version of the Scoop's tube, gray and somehow fleshy, down and down into the clouds, and she was drawing with it.

Or trying to. But she couldn't manipulate it properly—it seemed to have a life of its own, swinging in wide loops and exerting on her a kind of pull, that grew stronger and stronger—till she woke with a jerk to Hele's voice and the Scoop strangely swaying.

"The grav's off—something's wrong!"

Ka rubbed at her face, still half in the dream. "Where is Faru? Why is there no bell?"

"Do we need a bell for this?" The weight of the Scoop's erratic swing pulled them heavy against the outer walls. The water in the trough was leaden—then slopped suddenly sideways and converged, as they rose, and hung in a cluster of disparate globes and blobs between the bunks. Ka set off after Hele, scattering them, pulling herself along by the hand-dents, making for the foreship.

Crossing the workplace, clinging, she activated the window. Venus heaved overhead! Then soared past as she slid after Hele across the floor, the Scoop sick, reeling. Out there, a huge pale-gray mass all wrapped and entangled with itself swooped into sight, like the loops of monster intestines, twirling slowly—it was the suction tube! And Ka trying to stand fell hard against the window to a rush-by of fran-

tic stars.

Hele was already at the far door. "Ka! Come on—we have to suit up—"

Faru, crouched over the controls, had no time for them or suits. What he was saying was so much mathematical gibberish to Ka, who had not paid attention to parts of her training she now wished she had. She had trusted the engineers, the Scoop, the enterprise. Had Faru not been here! Yet he too sounded helpless now, his voice breaking. Then the Scoop lunged suddenly, as if they had dropped a hundred meters. Struggling, they suited as quickly as they could, Hele and Ka helping each other, both helping Faru, almost having to fight him. He was shouting down the radio, probably to their closest neighbor, Scoop 112.

"Relay us! And get here!" She heard someone's voice saying "Jettison?" and Faru did something, there was a lurch, and the feel of the Scoop altered slightly and eased, as if it had slipped past a breakwater into calm water. It rocked. Ka staggered, clutching Hele while they checked each other off.

Hele locked her helmet and Ka's, then Ka pulled Faru's over his shoulders, and she immediately heard his voice direct against her ears: "This may be dangerous so we're going walk-about—all right?"

Ka's voice over his, coughing—"Is 112—?"

"Everybody's on their way. Better outside."

Like a sequence of the dream, but real this time, drifting with Hele and Faru away from the Scoop, watching it fall away under them against the planet's red-black shoulder, their backs to the

Shitball and the stars. They were roped—Ka's eyes traced the slack threads that joined her to Faru, him to Hele, Hele to Ka again, and the long guyline, that tweeled out from Faru's belt, dwindling and going invisible farther down.

Below them the Scoop rolled and rolled, end to end, its great panel yawing dangerously from wide to narrow, blinking out, widening again as it heeled into the full radiance of the sun. The tiny shunt showed round and dark as its nickname, moored into the swollen wall of the compression room; jet-tisoned, the bags nudged loosely against the foeship, turning vaguely on their own. They had nowhere else to go. And the suction tube, out of control, had pulled itself into a shapeless, sloppy mass, darkening the window's ring, and now seen to the right of the Scoop as well as under it. It seemed to be tying itself up in knots, almost as if it were alive and in pain. And all this time Faru's voice was going on, calmer now, and continuous at her ears as he talked to 112 over Hele's and her own breathing. "The tube's still activated ... we are walking out.... Coordinates, coordinates—"

Hele's voice pushing in suddenly—"Ka, the snout would be dangerous—not the rest—?"

"I can't see the snout, can you?"

"Well, it's not down in the cloud any more."

Perhaps it was the slowness and silence of those gray coils that misled Ka, for how could such a sluggishly turning organ harm the Scoop itself, or them, it being already so far away? For the Scoop and its rogue tube were falling from them, or seemed to be, as they

climbed steadily backwards, upwards into the sky.

They kick-walked towards the stars.

Ka noticed, too, that they were veering a little eastward, deeper into shadow, closer under the Shitball but also towards the surely approaching 112, towards rescue. She and Hele could not talk as she would have liked, except for a few words, to reassure and be reassured. Faru's competent voice was directed to the others. He need not talk so much, she thought; we are after all hot on their infra sounders. As they are hot on our trail.

Hele's rope tightened and she looked over, and saw the other woman had turned slightly away, and her suited body was outlined against the Shitball beyond her, tilted clumsily across its bright side. Ka had not looked at it directly, not in years—not since she'd made the pass when she had arrived on Scoop 113. And it was much larger.

Its sunlit limb from this distance looked soft and lumpy, and its surface leprous—as if odd darker and paler growths extended directly out towards them, and the terminator was a random scrawl between bright and dark. Dim Venusian light filled its shadow, turd-colored, warmer and muddier than the bitter cobalt sky behind with its millions upon millions of piercing stars. Ka turned away again and saw how the hottish shitlight illuminated Faru darkly—his back and the back of his helmet, as he resolutely climbed.

Now 113 had made another end-on rotation and this time the bulk of the tube came slithering over with it, its coils in full view in the off-light from the

filling panel. They seemed to squirm with slow purpose, closing around the Scoop's quarters: the craft was being roped in, and a long thick arm had snarled itself around the base of the panel, where the conservatory gleamed in greenish light.

The shunt, useless to them, appeared to be hiding under the bridge, and now another coil reared past the compression room, tautening—she heard Hele's gasp or her own. The bridge was bending inward.

"...no mechanism for jettisoning it," she heard Faru saying. "It's now breaking up One One Three. The cabin has collapsed—now the conservatory—"

"The snout!" Hele's voice competing with his. "It's there—it's sucking out the panes—"

As she said this the Scoop appeared to brighten suddenly and swell apart, enveloped in a cloud of whitening gas. "Air's gone—glad to be out of it. Compression bags about to go—ah—"

As Faru spoke, something seemed to catch at his voice, and Ka saw his body stiffen, and straighten out in space and make a straight dive feet first for the Scoop—it was the guyline towing him down.

An instant later and she and Hele felt the tug, and were off after him.

His voice had stopped. She heard 112's radio worrying and calling and Hele's scared gasps—perhaps her own—again the radio that had been behind Faru's voice—"Faru! Come in. Faru? Faru?"

The Scoop, encapsulated, white and horrible, with its burgeoning sheath of frozen air, and surely frozen toxins as well, rose under them. Ka felt a sudden jerk to the left and knew Hele had re-

leased her line.

"Ka!" she was shouting, oblivious of her ears—"Cut Faru or I must cut you! Now! Cut him!"

"No! Walk quick, we have to slacken our ropes — the guy rope is caught somewhere—we'll get to him!"

But Hele cut, the line behind Ka suddenly eased, and she alone followed Faru downwards.

To reach him, whatever had happened to him, and unhitch the snarled guy—this Ka could do if she walked swiftly, she was sure. She went on off downward, silent, the thread between her and Faru going slack at last as she came near him.

They were close down now. The Scoop with its writhing tube was lost in a snowball, had become a minor shitball on its own. Then, right under them, a grayish hump pushed forth, a loop of tube, and its blind snout, torn and half-choked with debris but still active, still reaching, as if it were searching and snuffing, pushing itself upward, blundering, hollow, nauseous—

Ka's gloved fingers closed on the rope and she dragged at it hopelessly—telling herself, *no, no, the belt—locate the release*. Fumbling, she made herself find it and with a whiplike gesture (a wide Giotto curve of a drawn line) the snagged rope circled downward, fell against the snout, was sucked in as it fell back, as they would have been, and after them in the brittle vapor, fragment by fragment, the shattered Scoop it had held them to.

"Faru! Faru!"

But his face within the visor was lost behind an echo of that clouded white. Some prickle, some grain of sand, something had entered and greeted

him—she caught his rigid, suited body in the curve of her arm and set off again skyward. She could hear Hele's voice, steadier now, talking with 112, listening to them. It sounded remote, careful: "I am in the same position, I am climbing. I have been separated from them." To Faru and Ka she did not call. And, for reasons Hele could probably have written a dissertation on, Ka said nothing, and made even her breathing silent: only silence would Hele receive from her now, from her and from Faru. She could not see Hele above them, only the lopsided passive Shitball and she walked, not towards her, but westward into the light, the Scoop in its death throes dropping slowly away, falling first beneath her and then imperceptibly eastward as she climbed the fiery limb, bearing Faru as lightly on her arm as a child.

The sun gilded them and seared her eyes; she darkened her visor against its force.

There was a period when Hele's voice and the voice of 112 faded out, and when she was not yet in touch with 114 beyond the limb—114 in the west whom Faru, though he had not said it, had surely informed as well. Had he not—? Then others would have, relaying their distress call to everyone; 114, 115, 116 were also on their way with the sun on their shoulders. Even now the Terran headlines would be assembling—SCOOP SNARLED IN SNOUT. LIKE PIG ON SPIT, SCOOP BAKES. FATE OF CREW UNKNOWN.

Was this dancing, then, as Laji danced? And why did she not call aloud, or speak? Was her voice silenced as mine is silenced, did she think, Their infra will find me, and

meanwhile I need not speak, because the silence is so large, and good, the stars even behind this darkened glass so murmurous?

And then when she did speak, the radio did not work? But mine works, because I heard Hele and 112, till the limb closed—mine works I am sure.

And then Laji was afraid and died of fear.

Ka Eth was looking down, into a chasm opening between the spouting clouds; dark it appeared in contrast to the bright surfaces, and she unshaded her eyes. In there, drops of lightning, like raindrops falling at hazard on a pool, swelled into being for an instant, occluded. Her mind heard their music. Deeper she looked, past the lightning, and there seemed to be a space where no cloud was, or anything else, and a strange half-light, reddish towards violet, but yet containing a clarity, a luminance—there, there were mountains, cliffs of fall—Venus, the first sighting, hers, and Faru's—

Gently she wiped his visor with the heel of her large, slow glove.

"Faru, look—"

And swung his body.

How long she looked, she was not sure. Too long? Long enough for Hele to have told the others how Faru and Ka Eth had surely perished, sucked with all its filth into the Scoop's snout? That was what the Scoop was for, after all, and it did what it should, even when it went wrong and turned to rend its own. The thought came to her not as a thought, but as a clear and quiet understanding, like the opening of a vale between clouds. 112 would close the band, would advise the others. Then,

after rescuing Hele, would search, vaguely, in the area of the whitened mass that had been 113. After that, they and the others would sift through the orbits, unhurriedly, the way they had for Laji; but by that time Ka's body heat would be as Faru's, brought to rest in harmony with the interplanetary dust, the other human junk, the asteroids and gravel lost between the inhuman stars, with the Shitball over her shoulder.

Carefully, Ka Eth unsealed her left glove, and struck the cap from her

finger against her hood. It stood out past her eye, still at her service, a little perfect silver pod, as the cold closed inward over her naked hand. Staring into the cleft, she stretched forth her hand and began to draw.

That was how they found her, and Faru, and the drawing she thought she could not make, made after all and preserved forever—the mountains, range beyond range, enclosing their drifting bodies in a frozen net of red-black lines. •

HEATHER SPEARS is a Canadian artist and Governor General's Award winning poet living in Denmark. She started writing SF in 1991 with *Moonfall*, the first of the Twinworld series—also *The Children of Atwar*, and *The Taming* (forthcoming). She is working on a collection of short stories called *We Would Have Had Red-Haired Children*, of which this story is the third published.

THE GRETTEL PAPERS

Sandra Kasturi

They phoned me yesterday
to tell me what you had done to yourself
and all I can think
is why and why and why
I suppose I ought to have known
that it would lead to this
but in truth
I never saw it coming, Gretel
I never saw it coming

You were always gay and golden-haired
before those weeks in the woods
and even now
it is that image that stays with me
not that of the silent young woman you became
the woman they tell me
is lying in a hospital bed
attached to tubes

Did you put your head in an oven
to atone for what you did
what we did
in that little cottage
in the woods
all those years ago

Is this your way of shouting?
Is this your trail of breadcrumbs, Gretel?

We had no choice
but to try to survive
me with my chicken bone
through the bars
and you
living in fear
but waiting for just one chance

I saw what you did to the old woman
Gretel
and only applauded your courage
your quick wit

Why did you never say anything
to me of all people
over these many years
I who suffered with you
who understood you
who stood fast beside you
in the darkness
after the breadcrumbs
had disappeared

Gretel
my sister
I'm coming now
to hold your hand again
in your new terror
to push back the darkness
and lead you out of the woods
once more

But remember
Gretel
remember my love for you
and know
that when I sit by your hospital bed
and ask to take your hand
to feel your fingers in mine,
know
that I,
I will not be fooled
by a thin chicken bone •

SANDRA KASTURI is a Toronto poet and (once her attention span increases) a short story writer. She is an aficionado of Ogden Nash, Tchaikovsky, certain Ottawa/Toronto and Longueuil science fiction writers, Magritte, Sinatra, Raymond Chandler, Glenfiddich, and Jean-Luc Picard.

THE NEW FATHER

Brent Hayward

Beyond the gardener's reach, where the lawn became too rocky to trim evenly, grass grew tall and thick. There were paths leading through it that James and his older brothers before him had worn, some winding their way to a small stream that could be easily crossed, others meandering between ginkos and yews and dates until they opened upon a series of quiet, sun-filled clearings.

In one of the larger glades, there was a statue of a man. His stone face was turned skyward, his expression one of wonder, as if he could see something miraculous in the clouds. On one shoulder a stone squirrel perched. There was a bird on the other, forever about to take flight. The man's hands were extended, palms up, fingers splayed.

When the last of James' brothers had gone off to school, leaving him alone and bored on their father's estate, he would often find himself talking to the statue.

"Do you have any brothers?" he'd ask, accustomed now to the silence of the clearing's occupant. "I have seven, but I only met three of them. They don't live here any more. Do you remember when they first brought me to visit you? They used to play with me, but now they're gone. Now it's only me and Father. And the staff, of course. They're no fun."

The stone man would stare up into the sky, his mouth open wide. He was not much company.

Two years had passed since Richard had left for college. Two long years. And Father was too busy for games, sometimes working for days on end, locked in his room, coming out only for a quick meal and a few grunted reprimands. He certainly did not like to be disturbed by such minor things as what James had to say. Father was a man with short patience, a man who could yell impossibly loud when

he was angry, a man who would shake his fists and throw dishes at the walls that the cleaners had to sweep up. In some ways, James didn't mind his absence.

Now that James was older—almost ten—he seldom tried to converse with the statue. Instead, he sat at its sun-warmed feet and daydreamed. He thought a lot about school, and what it would be like to finally leave his father's house. His brothers sent such fascinating messages over the video; they had seen so much, learned so much about the world since they'd left. James wanted to learn these things too. He wanted to ride in a streetcar down the hills of San Francisco, towards the ocean, or to sing in an opera, like Sebastian did. He wanted to skim methane gas from the atmospheres of far-away planets and bring it back to Earth, for fuel, like Richard had done for the past two summers. James wanted to meet other people.

"James!"

Moving quietly through the foliage and tall grass, the caretaker approached. James could see the sun glinting off steel-plated skin. He did not respond. But the caretaker knew where James was and homed in on him without effort. Coming into the clearing, he made his way over on long, long legs to where James sat.

"Hello, young Master," the caretaker said, his head bobbing and swiveling. "A fine day, don't you think? Very little humidity. I like that; good for my joints. How are you?"

"It's not dinner time," James said, scowling. "What do you want?"

"Ah," the caretaker answered. "Your

father, you see, has a surprise for you."

James frowned, reluctant to reveal the rush of excitement that he felt. "What is it?" he asked.

"I'm not permitted to tell you."

Getting to his feet, James brushed himself off. "Well, give me a hint, then."

"A hint? I think your father would like to tell you the news himself."

"What if I want to stay here?" James said, but he knew that was impossible.

"Come," said the caretaker. "Climb on my back."

James hoisted himself onto the caretaker's saddle and held tight. Soon they were trotting out of the clearing and through the grass, picking up speed. A thin, diaphanous shield wrapped around James to protect him from the branches whipping past. A secret, James thought. This was something new!

They came out onto the lawn in a flurry of leaves and shorn grass. In the distance, at the crest of a gentle, green hill, was the sprawling white building where James and his father lived. Columns gleamed in the brilliant sun. A fountain sparkled. The caretaker increased speed further still, dropping lower and widening to change his center of gravity. His legs seemed barely to touch the ground. Wind roared through James' hair. From somewhere distant came the muffled sound of the gardener's rotors as he clipped a hedge; the only sound on this otherwise quiet day.

Father was waiting in the study, standing by the fireplace, his back towards them, when they entered. James leapt off the caretaker and

stood at attention.

"Sir," he said. "Here I am."

Father did not answer, as if deep in thought. Finally though, just as James was about to speak again, he turned.

"How are you, son?"

James hadn't seen his father for almost a week; he was taken aback by the shadows around his father's eyes and the stubble that darkened his chin. "Uh, fine, sir."

Father nodded. "Son," he said, "are you lonely?"

"Pardon me, sir? Lonely? Well..."

For an instant, James considered telling the truth. But instead he said, "I have the caretaker as a friend."

"A machine," his father retorted.

"What sort of friend is that? You know how I feel about getting too close to one of *them*."

At James' side, the caretaker said nothing.

"Well, sir, it's just that—"

"I *know* you're lonely, boy. This is a big house for the two of us, don't you think?"

Unaccustomed to this mood in his father, James didn't know what to say. "Yes, sir," was all he could manage. "I guess it is."

Suddenly, disconcertingly, his father grinned. "Let's dispense with these formalities, shall we, James?"

"All right, sir."

"Son, I would like you to meet your younger brother."

And from behind a heavy curtain that hung against one wall of the study stepped a boy, dressed in shorts and a blazer, like James always wore. In his hands he clenched a cap. He seemed pale, and moved with a sad air.

James stared, unable to speak.

"This is Simon," his father said. "He just arrived from Mother's house this morning."

"Hello," said Simon, holding out one hand. "How are you?"

Like the three brothers that James could remember, and like the four that he had never met but that still sent videos of their adventures at school, Simon looked just like him. He had the same almond-shaped eyes, the same high forehead. Their hair was an identical shade of red. Simon, of course, was shorter than James, but James could remember being his new brother's height. Recovering from his shock, he reached out and shook Simon's hand.

By the fireplace, father was still grinning. "Go on," he said. "Show Simon around. Teach him your games."

"Yes sir!" James replied, letting his excitement take over at last. Still holding Simon's hand, he began to run from the study.

The caretaker turned and loped after them.

"I'm afraid you're not to go back there," the caretaker said.

"Why not?" James was livid; he had his father's temper and angered easily.

"I was told not to let the two of you leave the lawn area. Until Simon is a little more accustomed to the grounds. Surely there are games you could play out here?"

"There's nothing here, just you stupid machines!" James had picked up the word that his father had used, hoping it would fluster the caretaker, but the caretaker seemed to take no heed.

"What about tag?" he said. "I can show you how to play that, if you'd

like, young Master. If you promise not to exert yourself *too* much; you know how I worry. Your older brothers used to love a rousing game of tag!"

"No!" James said. "Tag is stupid!"

Between them, Simon remained silent; he did not appear to be listening. Instead, he looked about the lawn, the rock gardens, the clumps of trimmed shrubs, his face furrowed with consternation. And when the gardener flew over their heads, on his way to water the cherry trees, Simon ducked low, whimpering with fear.

James laughed. He suggested that they play hide and go seek. The caretaker, of course, was "It." As the caretaker turned his head to begin the count, James and his brother ran off, across the lawn, to leap over a short stone wall that skirted the goldfish pond. On the small ledge of gravel between the water and the wall, they crouched. Hide and go seek was a pointless game to play with a worker; they could find James—and Simon, he presumed—in an instant, at any given time. But the brothers would be indulged and, for a short while at least, they could be alone.

Now James could tell Simon everything that he wanted to. He didn't know where to start. Should he begin with what he would take in school, or talk about the statue and the stream? Or about the exploits of their older brothers? He had a living, breathing playmate now! Someone who would listen to him!

But Simon did not want to listen. He was staring into the water of the pond, his eyes wide, his lips moving silently. His skin, in the sunlight, looked gray.

"Hey!" James said, and, after getting

no response, he poked at Simon. "What's the matter with you? You're as much fun as the stupid workers. You're supposed to play with me. Isn't that why you're here?"

Simon looked up slowly; it was as if James was seeing his reflection in a mirror. But the face looking back at him, though younger, seemed to radiate age and weariness.

"This pool..." Simon whispered.

"What about it? It's for stupid goldfish." James threw a stone angrily into the water and watched as one of the fish went for it, turning away at the last second.

"I remember a pool like this. Yesterday. Being under the water..."

"Yesterday?" James frowned. "At Mother's house? I don't remember a pool there. Did she just have it put in?"

Simon was peering into the water again. His hand, held out over the surface—not quite touching it—was trembling. "No. The pool was *here*, in Father's house. In a white room. There were tubes down my arms, and one in my mouth."

"What are you talking about?" James snapped. "You just got here. Mother keeps all of us at her house until we're seven."

Simon grabbed James' sleeve. "I remember Mother's house, too. She packed me some oranges, mandarins. She was crying when she kissed me goodbye. The carriage ride took all night. I slept in the back seat." Simon's voice dropped lower still, barely audible. "But just now, James, I remembered being in a pool, in this house. And that was yesterday, too."

The look in Simon's eyes was starting to frighten James. He tried to pull

back but could not free himself.

"Father was there. He pulled me up from the water, pulled tubes from my arms, and smiled at me. 'Another beauty,' he kept saying, as I dried. 'Another beauty.' "

"A pool...of water?" James frowned. Like the goldfish, fleeting images briefly surfaced in his mind—too quick to leave him with any impression—before sinking back to the murky depths they had come from. Sweat broke out on his palms; his fingertips had gone cold, even though sunlight dappled him. He was breathing hard, his chest hurt. The strange story seemed to have disturbed something inside him.

Simon pulled James closer. "Then Father took me into another room and sat me down. He started asking me how Mother was, and how the trip from her house had been."

"The...trip?"

"And I said that Mother was fine." Simon was near tears. "What do you think it means?" he implored. "What?"

James managed to pull away at last. "It means you're crazy," he said loudly. As he stood, and backed away from his brother, the caretaker's head appeared suddenly over the wall, startling them both.

"My, my," the caretaker said. "I've just let your father hear what you said, young Master Simon." A thin arm whipped out and pinned Simon's arms to his sides. Simon struggled, but a worker's strength was limitless. "He wants to see you both, right away."

James turned and tried to clamber over the stone wall, but the caretaker lurched towards him too, grabbing him around the waist and hoisting him into the air.

Father was furious. In his dressing gown, he paced the study from wall to wall.

"What nonsense!" he shouted. "What utter nonsense you were talking! I thought you were old enough to leave your mother's house, but I was wrong!"

Simon was still being held tight by the caretaker. James stood off to one side, rubbing the bruises on his hips. The caretaker had not been too gentle; he had never been like this before. Something serious was happening, and James was terrified of his father's wrath.

"James," his father said, red-faced, shaking one fist. "I don't want you to think about what Simon told you! Do you hear me!"

"Yes, sir," James answered. He could see sweat beading on his father's forehead. Veins were bulging there, and tendons stretched tight at his throat.

"I've worked so damned hard to keep you boys out of trouble! Do you know how hard it is to raise nine sons? Have you any idea—"

Father stopped speaking abruptly. His face, for an instant, took on the astonished look of the statue's. Then he fell forward, clutching his chest, and crashed down hard, face-first, on the thick carpet.

"Oh dear," the caretaker said. He was still holding Simon with one arm; he hurried forward and stood over father's body. "Oh dear!"

James said, "Is he...still alive?"

"He is," the caretaker replied, somewhat frantic. "But he's had a massive coronary again. That heart of yours, you know; it doesn't last forever. I kept telling him to take it easy. Oh dear!"

The caretaker turned towards James, who had been backing away. "I want you to go to your room, young Master."

"But I want—"

"Go!"

When James turned, he saw two squat cleaners standing in the study doorway. They each took an arm and led James down the hall. He did not resist.

James was shut in his room. He sat in the wooden chair by his desk and wondered what had happened to his father. As he toyed with a paperweight, he remembered another time when his father had become ill, just a few days before Richard went off to college. Father had recovered then. James had no reason to believe that things would be different this time.

And then, despite the warning that his father had given him, James found himself recalling what Simon had said to him and the sensations that the words had aroused. He felt as if he were about to remember a dream that had been lurking, always, in the periphery of his thoughts; the pool, the tubes—

There was a knocking at his door.

James got up, but before he reached the door it burst open and he was grabbed once more by steel arms.

"Young Master," the caretaker said. "I'm afraid that things have taken a turn for the worse. Even though you are but a child, it's time for you to go to school."

Being borne aloft, James looked about himself, fascination mingling with his fear. He was in a part of the house that he'd never been in before, the part

where Father worked. Events were happening too quickly for him to follow. Was he really off to school? He had tried to ask a few questions, but the caretaker was quiet now.

He was taken to a large, brightly lit room and thrown roughly onto a bed. As he tried to rise up, several writhing thongs caught hold of his arms and legs and held him, pulled him spread-eagled on the mattress.

Then the caretaker ran back out the door.

Is this part of school? James wondered, but before he had a chance to think about his predicament further, the caretaker returned, pulling Father's body on a gurney. It was wheeled adjacent to James. He could see that his father was very sick. A mask covered his mouth and nose. Under it, his breathing was ragged, uneven. A stand attached to the gurney held up a soft bottle that dripped solution into his arm.

The caretaker had Father's clothes off in no time, slicing them with sharp fingers and throwing them to the floor.

James tried to turn away but could not. His heart was pounding. As he watched, a compartment opened in the caretaker's chest and a narrow arm extended out, towards Father's body. At its end, a tiny saw unfolded and began to whirl. James fought the bindings on his arms and legs but they only seemed to tighten.

"What are you doing, caretaker?" he asked breathlessly. "What are—"

The revolving blade sank deep into Father's breastbone, whining, making his body shudder. Leaning over the gurney, the caretaker grasped both sides of the cut and, while the saw

continued to send out a plume of pink mist, started opening Father's ribcage. There was a rending, crunching sound—

And something sharp jabbed into James' buttocks. He gasped at the sudden pain. Almost instantly, though, the room and the horror began to swirl around him, fading. He felt his eyes closing, and soon there was nothing but a welcome blackness.

He woke to a quiet, sobbing sound. The room around him was dark.

"Young Master?"

"Yes?" James said.

"Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Something terrible has happened."

"Let me up." There was a fumbling; pressure was relieved from his wrists and ankles. James pushed himself onto his elbows; the lights came on. There was a bloodied sheet covering the gurney where his father had lain. James could see a large, lumpy, unmistakable shape under the sheet. The caretaker stood at the foot of James' bed, making soft, crying sounds. James frowned.

"I warned him about his heart," the caretaker said at last. "He knew how weak it was. I told him not to get too excited; you weren't old enough to go to school, like your brothers. At least they were his size! It probably would not have worked anyway." The caretaker bowed his silver head. "I tried my best, but he died very quickly... We've been together for two hundred years! I don't know what to do now! I don't know what to do!"

James got off of the bed and walked over to where his father lay. "Is he really dead?"

The caretaker nodded.

"Have you told my mother? She will come and get us."

"Don't be silly," the caretaker said abruptly, as if angry. "You don't have a mother! The memories you have of her are of a woman that died centuries ago, a woman who no longer exists. You were made in your father's image. All nine of you, without a mother. And you all have the same damned faulty heart!"

James felt like he was falling. He put both hands on the gurney to steady himself. "Why are you saying that?" he asked, his mouth gone dry. "Call my brothers and tell them. Call Richard..."

"Richard? Richard's gone. He never made it past this room. It was me who generated the videos that you watched, so that you would look forward to school. That bed was where Richard—where all your brothers—got their...education."

"Oh," James said, because he did not know what else to say. He could not think straight. Nothing made sense to him. The world he knew was receding from him, crumbling. There was silence for a long, long time.

The caretaker finally ended it. "I have just accessed my procedures," he said, looking over at James, blinking his large eyes. "I have consulted your father's last will, which he insisted on telling me, when I first started working for him. There are no barristers for several hundred miles, you see. It seems, young Master, that the house and all it contains are now yours. I apologize for raising my voice."

They rode on the caretaker's back, whipping him with makeshift crops to

make him go faster. The caretaker made horse-noises that were drowned out by Simon's giggling. When they grew tired of this game, James led the caretaker to the statue's clearing, where they would have a picnic.

The caretaker pretended to graze, as he had been told to do.

Simon spread out the blanket.

"Not like that," James said. "Put it in the sun! Don't you know anything?"

Rebuked, Simon moved the blanket into a warmer part of the glade. He seemed to be feeling better after taking the medicine that the caretaker had prescribed. He no longer talked about strange, unsettling things.

"Come on, caretaker, set the food out!" James said.

"Yes, my young Master."

They ate a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches, and washed them down with iced tea. The statue ignored them, as usual, staring up into the blue sky. James scratched the bandage on his arm, where the caretaker had scraped at his skin with a blunt knife, just this

morning, in the room where his father used to work. In the room where James worked now.

"Tell me again why you won't be going to school," Simon said, when they were lying side by side, each chewing on a blade of grass.

James huffed. "I've told you a thousand times! Father has gone on vacation until he gets better. How many times have you seen the video that he sent us? Jeez! I'll be staying here to run the house, and to welcome our new brother, when he gets here from Mother's."

"But I will be going to school, won't I?" Simon asked. "Won't I?"

James tried to control his anger. But he was so sick of these incessant questions. "Of course you'll be going!" he shouted. "Of course you will!" He felt his heart pounding and took a deep breath.

"Yes," the caretaker said, sighing as he cleaned up the wax paper wrappers that the boys had strewn about. "All good sons must go to school." •

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MEMORY'S CHILD

Mary Soon Lee

Perched high in a great oak, Arna flexed one wing and then the other, her talons gripping the frost-coated branch. Snow lay folded over the land, moonlight and starlight reflecting from the thick blanket in ten thousand points of glitter.

Movement flickered beneath Arna: a long-tailed mouse, ears quivering, darted across the forest clearing. With one beat of her wings, Arna left the tree, plunged downward. The cold wind shivered through her feathers, the ground swelling toward her. There was nothing in her mind but the rush of air, the tiny crunch of the mouse's feet on the snow.

The mouse blinked once, its eyes bead-bright, and then Arna's talons closed on its warm neck, spilling blood.

Arna? someone whispered, but she was intent on the furry body, its earthy scent hot in her nostrils.

Arna?! Stop that. You promised you wouldn't hunt, and you're fat enough anyway. Come back to the inn, I need some help.

Memories snapped into place. Arna dropped the small carcass. In owl form, she couldn't think clearly, but she managed a *Sorry*, aimed as much at the mouse as at Ethne waiting in the inn. In a moment, she was airborne again, headed back to the village.

Hurry up. That slimy, two-faced liar snuck my pouch from under the pillow as I slept. If we don't catch up with him, we'll be eating lentils all winter.

Arna didn't need any words to convey her disgust.

And the wretch even stole my tunic—oh, no, there it is under the bed. Ethne's voice wound on continuously until Arna landed on the broad window sill. Ethne pushed the window open, stretched out her right arm.

Arna hopped onto the broad band of leather above Ethne's wrist, and let the woman carry her over to the bed's wooden headboard. Ethne's face bent over her, pressed against her. Arna ruffled her feathers in protest, but the woman's touch

was soothing.

Ethne chanted the string of words that Arna never remembered, each syllable falling onto her like the sound of a flute. As the last sound faded, heat flared through her body, surging pain-sharp from her talons up to her chest as though her bones were turning inside out. Dizzily, she swayed, her eyes closing.

When she opened them again, she was lying on the bed. Her legs were long, awkward human things, her body a pallid brown heaviness. But she held her hands up in the flickering lamp-light, admiring them. Such useful things, almost worth the change by themselves.

"Thank you," Arna said carefully. She had spent most of the night in owl form, and it took a while to ease back into normal speech.

"Put these on." Ethne thrust a bundle of clothing at her. "He's on foot, and I've cast a tracing spell. Let's hope we catch him before he steals a horse."

Arna slipped her tunic on. "I warned you not to sleep with him. All the sense goes out of you when you meet red-heads."

"Well, not any more. I swear this is the last—" Ethne stopped, one foot half-way into her boot. Frowning, she took the boot off, dug round in it, and pulled out a scrap of parchment.

"What's that?" Arna asked.

"A note from Merigon: 'Dearest Ethne, whose embrace is as honey to a starved bee, my apologies for taking your money, but I did not trust you to lend it to me'—indeed not!—'If you meet me at Tilbury Fair come spring-time, I will return it with interest. Yours in eager anticipation, Merigon.'"

"Hmmp. What did he expect you to do until spring? Beg?"

"Or spread my honey around." Ethne led the way into the dim hallway, and out of the inn.

Arna paused on the threshold, and took a deep breath. The air was fragrant with wood smoke, gray wisps curling from the chimneys. She followed Ethne down the road, and along a fork to the left. Ahead, the horizon glowed with the translucent blue of the minutes before true dawn.

"Still," said Ethne as they passed the last house in the village. "At least he had the grace to apologize."

Arna snorted. "He probably guessed that would mollify you enough to let the matter drop."

"Perhaps," Ethne said. Twelve paces later, she shook her head. "You didn't see how sweet Merigon was. I'm sure he didn't mean any real harm."

Arna recognized Ethne's wistful expression all too well. "Next you'll be making excuses for him. You ought to know better."

"What if he needs the money for a sick relative?" Ethne stopped in the middle of the road. "Maybe we should let him go. There's no guarantee we'll catch him anyway."

"If we don't, we'll be eating lentils."

"Lentils." With a shudder, Ethne set off again.

They scarcely needed Ethne's tracing spell to find Merigon. He was just eight miles down the road, sprawled flat on his back, eyes closed, his red hair wet with snow.

"Merigon?!" Ethne pelted over to him, touched his neck. "He's alive. Arna! What's wrong with him?"

Arna bent down beside them. Gently, she pushed back a lock of hair from Merigon's forehead, grunted at the purple swelling beneath it. "Nothing mortal. His head will ache for a day or two, but likely no worse than that."

Arna probed the man's torso, but found no other injury. And no gold. His pockets were bare, even the dagger gone from his sheath. "Seems someone decided to rob him too."

Beneath her, Merigon shifted. Wincing, he fingered the lump on his head. "A pleasure to meet you again, fair ladies. What brings you to these parts?"

"We wanted our money back," said Arna. "But I see you've already mislaid it."

"I was *robbed*."

Arna thought the indignation in his tone quite ludicrous, but she saw Ethne nod sympathetically.

"Three wild men assailed me, each six feet tall if they were an inch, and with no manners whatsoever. If you have any pity in your most kind hearts for a wronged man, help me to recover my funds."

"Why should we?" asked Arna.

He looked away from her, and fixed his gaze on Ethne as he eased himself into a sitting position. "Please, sweet lady. The Duke has given me only a sevennight to pay the fine for killing one of his stags, else he will hunt me to the death."

"A fitting end for a poacher," muttered Arna, but she knew her opinion wouldn't matter.

"Of course we'll help," said Ethne.

"For a price," added Arna. Ethne glared at her, but Arna continued, "If we find these men, first Ethne gets her money back, and then we split any

further gains in three equal parts."

"Agreed." Merigon grinned. "By the bulge of their pouches, they've enough gold to satisfy us all."

"Good." Arna squinted down at the road. A host of tracks lay pressed into the snow: horseshoes, boot prints, an assortment of paw marks. The Duke's troops marched along this route frequently, and she couldn't distinguish their tracks from the bandits'. She turned to Merigon. "Which way did they go?"

"Regrettably, I was indisposed at the time."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Correct. But surely one of you fair ladies can find them, in the same manner you found me."

"No," said Ethne. "I cast a—"

Arna cleared her throat noisily, but Ethne didn't take the hint. Give a man pretty features, and instantly Ethne was convinced his intentions must be equally handsome.

"—cast a tracing spell," Ethne continued. "But since I don't know these men, I would need a strong link to focus on them: a piece of jewelry, a weapon, something they wore recently."

Merigon's eyebrows rose. "You practice spell-craft? But you do not bear the band of the sorcerers' guild."

"I . . . didn't feel comfortable in the guild. I agreed never again to work spells for money, and they let me leave."

Arna snorted, that was a delicate choice of phrasing. The guild had kicked Ethne out—they'd have cut out her tongue to stop her casting spells, save that the Guild Master had favored her.

"Enough chatter," said Ethne, her

cheeks scarlet. "If we hope to catch the robbers, we must hurry."

Merigon gazed down at the mess of tracks for a moment, and then shrugged. "Ladies' choice: east or west?"

Arna took a deep breath. She didn't trust Merigon, and she hadn't *changed* in front of anyone save Ethne in years. But they needed the money back, and in owl-form Arna was an expert spy. "Maybe we can do better than guesswork."

Ethne looked at Arna. "Are you sure you're willing to do this?"

"I'm sure. Merigon, describe the robbers to me, in as much detail as you can."

Merigon's eyebrows arched, but maybe he caught her mood, because he kept his questions to himself. "The tallest had black hair, straggling to his shoulders, a hooked nose. . . ."

Arna concentrated on what he was saying, but still the hairs rose on her arms as she thought of him standing there while she changed. By the time he finished speaking, she was shivering.

Delay wasn't going to make this easier. Arna unclasped her cloak, handed it to Ethne, unlaced her boots. Merigon's eyes widened, but he turned his back without being asked, and that helped a little.

"Take care, gentle lady," he said.

"Why? Is there something you forgot to tell us?"

Merigon shifted awkwardly. "The men struck me as more than common thieves. I'd hazard they are amongst the bandits who overran the Seli dukedom while the nobles were squabbling over the right of succession."

"But Seli's more than twenty leagues

away."

"Even so, the innkeeper said their raids had been extending further since the cold set in. They may be running short of supplies."

All the more reason to hurry before the bandits reached one of their strongholds. Arna yanked the tunic over her head, and stood naked in the snow. A few yards away, Ethne murmured something into Merigon's ear, neither of them watching her. Arna waited for Ethne to come over to her—not that she needed help, the change was always easier this way round. But needed or not, Ethne had never left her to do this alone.

At least, never before.

Arna saw Merigon lean closer to Ethne. Fine. They were welcome to each other. She closed her eyes, letting the chill air embrace her. The cold whispered through her. For a moment she was giddy, her bones as light as wind, an iron taste in her mouth.

When the world steadied, she was in the air, the couple on the ground reduced to toy figures. The beat of her wings was barely audible, quieter than the rustle of a squirrel on the ground far below.

Arna, can you see any sign of the bandits?

The bandits. Arna formed the image she'd made of the bandits, scanned the land below her. *No.*

Tell me when you find them.

Arna flew high over the road, searching. Her mind reached for Ethne to show her what she saw: a boy trudging up to his knees across a field deep with snow, icicles poised on the edge of a frozen waterfall.

The bandits? asked Ethne, the

thought tangled in a chaos of hot sensation.

No. Arna swiveled her head back a full half turn, and saw Ethne pressed into the man's arms. The sight annoyed her, though she couldn't find the words to articulate why. But later, later she would. She flew as hard as she could, east along the road, watching for the bandits, or for sets of tracks leaving the road.

Nothing.

She turned round, ready to try the other direction.

ARNA—the call sliced into blankness.

Ethne?! But there was no response. Muscles aching, she streaked back. The wind gusted around her body, cutting like a knife. *Ethne?*

She saw the fresh imprint of horse-shoes in the snow, swerving from the road into the forest. Uncertain whether to follow them, she circled for a minute, then continued flying over the road. A dark smudge resolved into a man walking hunched over, like an old crone. Seconds later, she recognized him: Ethne's friend.

His right arm was bound to his chest in a crude sling. Where was Ethne? Arna called out involuntarily, a long low hoot. Flinching, the man looked up. Seeing her, he held out his good arm.

Arna swooped onto the perch, swiveled her head to stare hard into his face. *Where is Ethne?*

He started, his arm dropping, so that she had to flap her wings to keep her balance. "I heard you. How?"

The sounds made no sense, but she needed to understand this man. Slowly she opened her thoughts to him. The

roughness of the contact shuddered through her. He didn't belong there. No one but Ethne did. *Where is Ethne?*

"The bandits took her. They returned on horses, rowdy and drunken. We fought, but they overpowered us easily—"

Ethne hurt?

He hesitated. "I'm not sure. She struggled until their leader hit her on the temple with the flat of his sword, and threw her over his saddle."

Arna caught an image of Ethne folded motionless across the horse, blood matted into her thick hair. She launched herself into the air, following the trail of horseshoes. An old image thrust into her thoughts, a picture she'd read in Ethne's mind the first time they met: a naked child, bruised and wordless, hair matted with blood, huddled in the corner of a noble's bedchamber. Arna as she had been, a decade ago.

"Arna? Wait for me!"

She turned her head back, saw the man stumbling after her, his face taut. But she had no time to wait.

"What do you hope to do even if you reach the bandits?"

She caught the unvoiced tail-end of his thought, that there was nothing she could do to help in the form of an owl. But he was wrong, he had to be wrong.

"Beg pardon, gentle lady, I meant no insult. Luck be with you."

His mind-voice faded. In the emptiness of wind and sky and snow, she found herself missing it. Wings straining, she flew on while the pale-bright sun inched upward. The throb in her muscles sharpened to pain, but she ignored it.

The horse tracks led down to a thin river, climbed the other side, wound up

a steep hill to a weathered gray fort. The drawbridge was raised, and a squad of unkempt men patrolled the parapets. Winter sun glistened from chain mail and weapon-metal.

Arna perched on the tree closest to the fort, an old elm with large spreading branches. Her wings trembled, fatigue heavy as lead in her blood. *Ethne?*

No answer. But Ethne must be inside.

Arna scrutinized the fort. The tower at the corner nearest her had an unbarred window slit, and the gap looked wide enough for her to slip inside. Warily, she took off, flying for the tower.

One of the guards pointed toward her, yelling to the others. When his neighbor picked up a long-bow, Arna circled back, away from the men. She would have to wait until dark.

She settled into the elm tree, her eyes closing almost immediately, too tired to think.

The clank of armor, the snorting of horses, faint but growing clearer. Arna started awake, blinking in the dusk light. An infantry troop was marching up from the south, led by a handful of riders. Between the infantry and the riders walked one unarmored man, his cloak spattered with mud: Ethne's friend.

Arna flew toward them, her mind brimming with questions that she couldn't form into words.

Lady? The man looked round, smiled when he saw her perched above. Rest easy, I have found us aid. The bandits made the mistake of encroaching on the Duke's personal hunting grounds. They killed fully half

his stags in a single night, and now the Duke swears he will kill them in turn.

The soldiers stopped in view of the fort. A commotion of shouting broke out, none of it intelligible to Arna. The guards on the parapets were pointing at the soldiers below, the Duke consulting with his officers. A minute later, the Duke's soldiers began setting up camp.

No. The soldiers were settling for the night, but Ethne was still inside the fort. Anger stole every word but *No* from Arna. She flew away from the soldiers, away from the man who was doing nothing to help. Through the darkening air, silent, she drove straight for the tower.

Lady? Come back, be sensible. The fort is well guarded, but the bandits are low on supplies. In a matter of days, a siege will force their surrender.

But Arna remembered the time before Ethne first found her, the man skewering her beneath him in the bloodied sheets. She couldn't wait.

She forced coherence into her thoughts, pictured the drawbridge lowering, herself and Ethne emerging, sent the image back to the man.

And then she was at the window slit of the tower, all else but Ethne forgotten. She wedged herself through the opening, fluttered down. A narrow, rounded room encircled her, the floor layered in dust.

The door was closed.

She flew to it, stretched one foot out to the handle. But her talons slipped on the metal. She tried again and again, but she couldn't get the right angle, couldn't grip it.

Arna? said Ethne, her mind-voice blurred.

Ethne?!

My head—where am I? And then before Arna could answer, Don't tell me, I remember, the bandits.

Arna outstretched her wings, savoring the contact with Ethne, reaching to strengthen it, to welcome her.

I'm happy to hear you too. But if you're planning a rescue, you might hurry. This room's so filthy it's hard to be sure, but I think the lump in the middle that stinks of sweat is a bed. And I don't imagine it's there for my comfort.

Arna showed Ethne the image of the door handle, her talons struggling for purchase. *Change.*

I can't help you change, not from here, not without touching you. But you can.... Ethne's voice trailed off. *I'm sorry. Thanks for trying.*

Ethne had left it unsaid, but Arna knew she should be able to transform unaided. Hearsay had it that other shifters found the change straightforward. And since neither Arna nor Ethne had met anyone else who claimed to be a shifter, hearsay was all they had to judge by. But Arna had tried changing to human form countless times, and never altered so much as a feather.

Well, she could try again. She balanced on the ledge, closed her eyes. Humans. Long, heavy-boned limbs, bare fleshy skin, short-sighted eyes. She focused on the image, concentrated.

No change.

Again she willed herself into human form, into that heavy ugliness—she caught herself. Why? Why ugly? Ethne wasn't ugly. But there was something there, something she hated. She pictured Ethne waiting in the room that stank of sweat. In the room, she had been in a room, the scent of rich un-

guents overpowered by the sweat of the man. The man a gross heaviness above her, his damp skin pressed slick against her as she squirmed.

She had yelled, a raw sound that she scarcely recognized as her own voice. The man thrust a cushion over her face, swallowing the noise, swallowing the air. In the blind suffocating darkness, the weight of his clammy body moved against her, centered into a splintering agony.

Afterward, when the man had left her, she crept to the darkest part of the room, and rocked back and forth, back and forth.

A tear rolled down her face, dropped onto the window ledge.

In the tiny globe of water, she saw her face reflected, a flickering image. An owl's face. A child's face, scared, scarred. An owl's face—but Ethne had come to her, and she would come to Ethne.

She held the image of the child that she had been. Pain ripped through her, pulling her apart, a liquid fire hot as molten metal.

And the reflection steadied to the child's face. Naked and cold and tired, she crouched on the window ledge in human form. There was a tattered, dusty tapestry lying on the ground. She tied it round her, went to the door. She reached up to grasp the handle, turned it.

The door opened onto a spiral staircase. Carefully, Arna tiptoed down, and edged along a corridor at the bottom.

"Whoa there!" A burly guard grabbed her as she rounded a corner. Arna clenched her teeth together: so close and yet she had to be caught by

some big ox of a guard. His grip on her shoulders was gentle enough, but she could see from the muscles bunched in his arms that escape was unlikely.

The man chewed at his bottom lip, his face creased in puzzlement. "A girl. A little girl. The big women are in the cellars, but this is a little one."

Evidently the bandits had selected the guard for his strength not his quick wits.

"The big women go into the cellars. What about little ones?" He picked her up until her eyes were level with his. "Where do you go, little one?"

"With the big women," said Arna.

"Well then, that's good. That's good. Off you go." He set her down, and pushed her toward an opening on the left.

Arna walked over to a dank staircase. Patches of white mold clung to the sides. She crept down, past one landing then another, her palms as moist as the stones under her bare feet. The air grew fouler, a cloying stench of decay that unsettled her stomach.

The stairs ended in a smoky corridor, the only light coming from a pair of greasy oil lamps. In the dimness, Arna made out a row of iron doors. She tiptoed across to the nearest door, and peered through the keyhole. The stump of a candle burned fitfully in a cramped cell, shadows moving over a dark-skinned woman curled in the far corner. The woman's face was puffy, her jaw at an odd angle.

Arna swallowed hard, and moved to the next door. Through the keyhole, she saw Ethne slouched against the wall, her hands tied together, and her mouth gagged. She put her mouth to the keyhole, and whispered, "Ethne,

I'm here now—"

Footsteps echoed above.

Swinging round, Arna realized they were coming from the stairwell. She glanced along the corridor, but there was no other exit. She ran down the passage, pushing at each door, but they were all locked.

Arna backed into the darkest corner, and steadied her breathing as best she could.

A guard strode out, a bottle of wine in his hand. He swaggered over to the cell next to Ethne's, set the wine on the ground, and fumbled with a set of keys.

No. She had no hope of overpowering the man in a fair struggle, but she could not stand by uselessly. She adopted her most helpless expression. "Please, sir."

The guard spun round. His face split into a leer as he eyed her. "Lost your mother? I'll warm you up."

Bile rose in Arna's throat, and for a moment she could not make herself move. But she forced her feet forward, walked over to him.

His leer widened, and he stroked her cheek, his stale breath hot against her.

Arna tugged the sheet loose from around her body. As the guard's mouth sagged open, she bent down, grabbed the bottle of wine, and swung it hard between the man's legs.

He doubled over, his face screwed up.

Arna struck the back of his head with the bottle, and he subsided to the ground. Her fingers shook as she took the keys from his belt, but he lay quite still. She took a deep breath, and went to Ethne's cell. In a minute, she had the door open, and Ethne unbound, and they wrapped each other in a fierce

hug.

"What's happened to you?" hissed Ethne. "You look like a nine-year old."

"At least that's better than having wrinkles," said Arna as she walked into the corridor, and began opening the other cells.

Ethne glared at her. "I don't have wrinkles."

For once, Arna was too happy to argue the point.

"I can't believe it," said Ethne the next evening, downing her second tankard of mead. "The cheek of the man, insinuating that I should be grateful to him. For what? For sitting outside the fort, snug in a tent?"

"Ah," said Arna. She had been wondering what was souring Ethne's temper. For a while she had even worried that it was because Ethne felt somehow ousted now that Arna was learning to change by herself. That morning Arna had succeeded in returning to her adult form unaided. "You wanted Merigon to

charge to the rescue."

"Not exactly. Well, yes. As it was, you freed me; I spelled the drawbridge into lowering; and the Duke and his men did most of the fighting. Merigon did look very fetching holding a sword, but as his right arm was injured he wasn't much help."

Ethne stared glumly into her empty tankard. "And he's married. Twice. Two wives, and he didn't tell me."

"That never stopped you before."

"He's also late. He said he'd be here an hour ago. He's gone back to his wives."

The door swung open, and Merigon strode in. The lamplight chased through his hair like a red-gold flame. "Greetings, fair ladies."

"He did his best," hissed Ethne. "He *did* try to rescue me."

Arna shook her head in despair, and reached for the jug of mead. It promised to be her only company for the night. •

MARY SOON LEE, who was born and raised in London, England, has an M.A. in mathematics and a diploma in computer science from Cambridge University, and an M.Sc. in astronautics and space engineering from Cranfield University. She lives in Pittsburgh, where she splits her time between writing and computer science research. She also runs a local speculative fiction workshop called "Pittsburgh Worldwrights." Her stor, "Ebb Tide" appeared in the May 95 issue of *F & SF*, and she has had eight other stories published, including work in *Just Write*, *Random Realities*, and *Thirteenth Moon*. Look for new work due to appear soon in *Aboriginal*, *Beyond*, *Galaxy*, *Pirate Writings*, and six more small press magazines.

ON Writing:

CONSTRUCTING CHARACTERS

Robert J. Sawyer

Psst! Wanna hear a secret? The people in most stories aren't really humans—they're robots!

Real people are quite accidental, the result of a random jumbling of genes and a chaotic life. But story people are made to order to do a specific job. In other words, robots!

I can hear some of you pooh-poohing this notion, but it's not my idea. It goes back twenty-five hundred years to the classical playwrights. In Greek tragedy, the main character was always specifically designed to fit the particular plot. Indeed, each protagonist was constructed with an intrinsic *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, keyed directly to the story's theme. These days, writers have more latitude in narrative forms, but we still try to construct characters appropriate to a given tale.

Consider, for instance, Terence M. Green's *Barking Dogs*. The book posits the invention of infallible portable lie detectors. Of all the people in the world, Green chooses to give such a device to Mitch Helwig, a Toronto cop. Why that choice? Well, no one other than a cop deals so directly with questions of truth, and no one but a cop is so frustrated by the perversion of that truth, seeing guilty people he's arrested get off on technicalities. Armed with his lie detector, Mitch goes on a vigilante spree, ascertaining as soon as he nabs someone

whether that person is guilty, and, if so, executing them.

Green knew he had to find the character who could best dramatize his premise. Frederik Pohl knew the same thing when he wrote *Gateway*. Its premise is simple: near a black hole, the passage of time slows to a stop.

To make this dramatic, Pohl came up with Robinette Broadhead, a man who had done something horrible to people he'd left behind near a black hole. The story is told through psychoanalytic sessions: Robinette can't get over his guilt because no matter how many years pass for him, it's always that one terrible moment of betrayal for those he's left behind. The novel works spectacularly—in fact, I'd go so far as to say it's the finest SF novel ever written.

Others liked the book, too—and Pohl was pressured for a sequel. But the second book, *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon*, fell flat on its face. Why? Because Pohl had to shoehorn the character he'd built for a very specific job into a different story. Robinette, absolutely perfect for *Gateway*, was a fish out of water in the follow-up story about the discovery of a human child on an ancient alien space station.

Clearly, your character must fit your premise—but it's also important that you not make the fit too comfortable.

Everybody knows Steve Austin, the

fictional test pilot who lost an arm and both legs in an aircraft crash and was rebuilt with super parts so that he could undertake secret missions. Austin first appeared in *Cyborg*, a mediocre novel by Martin Caidin, and was played by Lee Majors in the wonderful, Hugo-nominated movie *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

Why was the novel just so-so but the movie glorious? Simple. In the novel, Steve Austin was a colonel in the United States Air Force. When he was asked to undertake his first mission as the bionic man, he told his new secret-agent bosses, "You have a job to do. It's serious, in many ways it's dirty, in some ways it stinks, but having worn the blue suit [an Air Force uniform] for a long time, I understand and even appreciate what you do. You will receive my absolute cooperation."

Ho hum. Screenwriter Henri Simoun saw that Caidin had missed the essential conflict. For the movie version, he changed Colonel Austin to *Mister Austin*, one of six civilians in the U.S. astronaut program. Simoun's Austin fights those who are trying to make him an obedient little robot every step of the way — making for much better drama.

(When *The Six Million Dollar Man* became a TV series, the producers went back to Austin being an Air Force officer, and the show degenerated into mindless adventure.)

I almost made the same mistake

Caidin did in my novel *The Terminal Experiment*, which is about the discovery of scientific evidence for the existence of the soul. My first thought had been to have a protagonist who had undergone a metaphysical bright-light-and-tunnel near-death experience. But that would have been absolutely the wrong choice. A person with that background would be predisposed to believe in the existence of the soul, accepting any proof too readily. No, what was called for was a skeptic—someone who had stumbled on the existence of the soul while looking for something else, and who would be bothered by the discovery. The lesson is simple: your main character should illuminate the fundamental conflict suggested by your premise.

And, of course, that means that you shouldn't start with a character and then go looking about for a story;

it's a lot easier to do it the other way around. First, come up with your premise (for instance, "I want to write about a telepathic alien who can read subconscious instead of conscious thoughts"). Then you ask yourself who could most clearly dramatize the issues arising from that premise ("There's this guy, see, who's been suppressing terrible memories of the suicide of his wife").

After that, head for your keyboard and build the character to your specifications, for that one specific job. (In this case, the story has already been done brilliantly; it's *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem.) Of course, you have to add subtleties and quirks to give your character depth, but if you do it right, only you will ever know that underneath the real-looking skin, your hero is actually a made-to-measure robot...

ROBERT J. SAWYER of Toronto is the author of the novels *Golden Fleece*, *Far-Seer*, *Fossil Hunter*, *Foreigner*, *End of an Era*, and *The Terminal Experiment*. His story "Just Like Old Times" (which won both the Arthur Ellis Award and the Aurora award) appeared in the Summer 1993 issue of *ON SPEC*, and has since been reprinted in the anthologies *Dinosaur Fantastic*, *Northern Stars*, and *ON SPEC: The First Five Years*.

THE END OF THINGS

Jason Kapalka

Even before he was born, Peter's parents were anxious to see that he had no illusions about the grim world he was entering. "The end of things is coming!" his father barked into a specially-designed megaphone positioned next to his mother's stomach. "There'll be nothing but cold, and dark, and silence, and across the face of the earth no movement, none at all...except maybe for a few grubs and small snuffling creatures nosing through the rubble."

Peter's father projected charts indicating the probability of nuclear Armageddon onto his mother's belly, reversed so that they would be legible to the child inside her womb. And as she rocked slowly back and forth in her easy chair, his mother recited to the growing bulge in her midriff rates of species extinction, global warming, and disease spread, concluding with the gentle cooing lullaby which Peter, for the rest of his life, would always associate with her. "Doom, doom," she sang, "doom."

"It's a miracle you lived this long," his father said to the squalling pink-skinned infant in the delivery room. "But you know, the hole in the ozone is spreading. And there's that trouble in the Middle East."

His exhausted mother on the delivery table still had the energy to croak out, "Doom."

Peter's parents stocked his crib at home with plastic skeletons, the better to familiarize him with death. When he swallowed a little skull, turning red and purple before it was ejected, they thought they heard an acknowledgment of mortality in his pathetic bawling. "The end is near," his mother sang, tickling him under the chin, while his father tried to explain the Malthusian food-vs.-population model with flash cards. "Famine, plague, death," his father said.

"Doom, doom," cooed his mother.

When Peter was five his father bought him a glossy book with photographs of radiation victims, while his mother gave him the Easy Reader picture-book adaptation of Sartre's *Nausea*. Peter flipped through them both with no discernible soberness, then ate the twenty-page Hiroshima pictorial.

"Doom," his mother chided him, before whispering worriedly to his father, "I don't think Peter appreciates the gravity of the situation yet."

"You're right," his father sighed. "But remember, these are just toys. What he needs is some personal experience with death."

They started small, with a gerbil in a cage. When they judged that Peter had become attached to it—he called it Henry, letting it run up his sleeve and down his shirt—they poisoned it and left Peter to make this mortal discovery on his own. When they entered the room a little while later, they weren't quite sure what to make of the scene before them. Peter had stuffed Henry's limp form into the crow's nest of his Tinker toy schooner, which he was attacking with a pirate ship.

And by the time Peter had grown to a talkative, pudgy boy of seven—several pets later—they were seriously worried about the efficiency of their educational technique.

"I don't think he really grasps the concept of total obliteration," his father said. "He thinks it means there'll be no more gerbils."

"Doom," his mother sighed.

They kept trying, but became fearful that their boy had a learning disability of some sort. And so, when one day Peter waddled up to him and asked,

"Dad, does the end of the world mean you'll be dead?" his father was secretly overjoyed.

"Why certainly, Peter," he replied.

"And Mom?"

"Sure thing."

"And me?"

"Deader than a doorknob."

"And all the gerbils?"

"Every one of them." His father looked down at the boy with tenderness. "Son, are you asking me all this because of Henry the Sixth?"

Peter, who hadn't yet noticed that his latest gerbil had mysteriously expired during the night, shook his head. "Nah, one of the girls in school got run over today."

"Why, that's awful," his father smiled.

"Yeah, but Dad, when is the end of the world coming?"

"I don't know. Could be any second now."

"Can you do anything about it?" Peter said slowly.

"Why, hell, no, son."

Peter hesitated. He had a look of great concentration on his young face. "It's dumb, then," he said at last. He threw up his hands and stomped away from his father's frozen smile.

By the time Peter was nine his parents agreed that somewhere along the way he had taken a wrong turn. Though he readily agreed with their predictions of food riots, nuclear winters, and environmental catastrophes, somehow his heart wasn't in it: he only seemed to be mouthing the responses they wanted to hear. It came as a great relief to them when one June evening the conflicts roiling interminably in various corners of the globe finally

reached a satisfactory conclusion, and the eastern sky lit up with a series of white flashes.

"Multiple impact re-entry vehicles," his father said happily as he stood with Peter and his mother on the porch. "See? Looks like payloads in the ten-kiloton range. Didn't I say this was going to happen?"

"We both did, dear."

"Doom?" Peter asked, shouting to be heard over the sudden thunder of the blast wave from the distant strikes.

"Doom," his mother confirmed, fondly tousling his hair.

Peter's parents moved with serenity through the hectic days that followed, watching from the porch as station wagons loaded to the windows with food honked and squealed in their urgent need to escape.

"Can we go too?" Peter asked.

"Don't be silly," his father said. "It won't do any good. Fallout, remember?"

"Aw, this is boring. There's nothing to do."

"Look, Peter," his mother said to cheer him, pulling a tuft of hair from her head.

"Wow," Peter gasped, but he grew restive again when he tried yanking his own hair and it remained in place.

Peter turned ten in July. For the first while he was sure that the end of the world was the stupidest thing he'd ever experienced. He couldn't go to school to see his friends, his seventh gerbil had died, and all his parents ever did was sit around the house throwing up and pulling out their hair. But one day, while he was breaking the windows of parked cars in the empty neighborhood, he ran into a group of other kids

his own age, who said they were going to play in the abandoned supermarket, which had lots of food, and stuff to bust. Things started to look up.

Peter's parents spent most of their time now in their easy chairs, which had been moved out to the front porch for a better view. Convulsing in illness, they commiserated on their failure to instill in their son the proper respect for the apocalypse. They sat together on the porch, staring out at the empty streets, and from time to time one would heave a dismal sigh.

One morning, after Peter had left to go play in the supermarket, there was a sound overhead, and Peter's parents looked up in time to see a streak of silver plummeting toward the horizon.

"Well, I'll be darned," his father said.

"Doom," his mother agreed happily. "Though heaven only knows what they're bombing now."

The flash this time was so bright that for three days afterwards every fissure on the moon's surface was clearly visible in the daytime, the blast so loud that it rolled past Peter's neighborhood, around the world, and back again with diminished volume five times over the next week. Peter, who along with his friends had been playing with rats in one of the supermarket freezers, came out in time to see winged brown shapes pattering down onto the smouldering concrete outside: birds baked in mid-air.

"Cool," he said.

When he got back home he found his parents scorched into crispy black shapes, still sitting on the smoking remains of their easy chairs. He pondered them in silence for a moment, until he

saw that the two charred heads had rotated about to fix on him.

"Peter!" came a breathy voice from the leftmost black shape. "What are you doing walking around? It's the end of the world."

"Aw, Dad, you said that the last time. It's just some more bombs."

"Doom," whispered the other corpse, sadly shaking its head back and forth with a crunchy sound. "Doom, doom."

The days and weeks and months passed. By the time Peter was eleven, the burnt bodies of his parents had been worn down by the winds until the charcoal-black substance flaked and blew away like crepe paper, leaving only a jumble of bones heaped in the two easy chairs. Peter avoided them when he could but was obliged to stop and talk to them briefly in the mornings, when he left the house to go play with his friends.

His father's skull sighed, and the bones in the chair rustled and clacked against each other. "Boy, in my time if there was an all-out nuclear war you'd just lie down and die," he said. "None of this gallivanting around eating rats."

"The rats are all dead, Dad. We eat roaches now."

When Peter had loped off into the rubble to chase bugs with his friends, his father ground his teeth together in ire. "Do you think we could have been wrong about all this?"

"I don't know, dear. I think Peter's just being stubborn."

The radiation that evening was particularly fierce, and Peter came home through a dusk of flickering emerald-green light.

"It's a crying shame," his father's

skull said, "you running around all night in this sort of weather. I wouldn't be surprised if you started mutating."

Peter felt a rush of shame. "And what if I did, Dad?"

"Peter!" his mother's skull whistled. "Are you mutating?"

"Aw, geez, Mom...it's just a hand, it's not like some big deal or anything—"

"A hand? What's this? You show me what you're talking about this instant!"

Reluctantly Peter pulled his shirt up to show his parents the rudimentary hand that was beginning to grow out of his left side.

"Peter," his mother's skull said slowly, "if this is something you want to talk to us about—"

"I think it's disgusting," his father interrupted. "A boy his age—"

"Dear, try to understand what he's going through—"

Peter squirmed in mortification. "It's nothing! Can't you both just leave me alone!" he shouted as he ran inside.

By the time Peter turned thirteen, all the topsoil had eroded, and tumultuous duststorms were blowing through his neighborhood. Though the rest of their bones were swept away by the winds, his parents grimly clamped their jaws onto the chair frames, and so the two skulls remained in place to berate Peter each morning.

"Just look at you!" his father barked. "Ragged hair, no clothes, dirt all over—and that extra arm, and those feelers growing out of your head! For heaven's sake, you look like some kind of feral child!"

"He is a feral child, dear."

"Honey, please..."

"Geez, Dad, gimme a break! Everyone looks like this these days."

"And look how thin you are! That's what comes of eating roaches."

"The roaches are all dead, Pa. We eat cement now."

"You eat what?"

"And rubber and cardboard, when we can find it. Look, I gotta go."

"No you don't, young man! You're grounded!" his father said in a scolding voice. "No son of mine is going around eating rubble!"

Peter pulled himself up indignantly. "I don't have to take orders from you."

"Oh you don't, do you?"

"No," he said, scratching himself with his third arm. "I'm going to live with Skaz and Ox. They've got a cool place in the sewer."

And Peter galloped away on all fives into the glowing ruins.

"You know what it is?" his father said. "We went too easy on that boy."

Peter did not come home that night, or the next. His parents hoped that he had come to his senses and succumbed to death somewhere in the ruined city, but suspected otherwise. They maintained their vigil on the porch.

The two skulls became pitted and porous from the acidic raindrops that splashed down on them, but still they waited for Peter to come home.

Finally one day they heard the shriek of missiles passing overhead once more.

"Thank God!" his father cried.

"It didn't do much last time."

"They'll get it right now, you just watch."

"Oh, Robert."

There was a light.

In the ruined courthouse, Peter put

down the chunk of cement he was chewing and squinted upwards.

The blast, when it came, was phenomenal—a series of chain-reacting explosions so forceful the earth shifted in its orbit and spiralled away from the sun. Peter's parents' skulls were shattered into fragments by the shockwave, and the fragments were devoured by electrically glowing grubs that had come worming up from the center of the earth. A neon-red worm ate the scorched shards of his father's skull; another grub, pulsating purple, swallowed the more delicate remains of his mother.

Time passed. As the earth flew further from its orbit, the light of the sun waned, until everything was dark and cold. In the flattened, carbonized remains of Peter's house, the phosphorescent grubs squirmed randomly about. By the time Peter would have been fifteen, most of the glowing creatures had moved off, burrowing back into the earth, but two, one neon red, the other a pulsing purple, remained side by side in the debris, seemingly maintaining a watch on the ruins.

At some undefinable time in that unending black, a small snuffling creature padded past the two grubs and fell asleep nearby, its feelers and antennae vibrating as it snored.

"You see?" came a very small voice near the ground.

"Doom," came another voice. "Yes, I think you're right. I think we've reached the limit."

"It's the end, finally."

The snuffling creature rolled over in its sleep and made a grunting noise.

"Did you hear that, Robert?"

"Yes, I did, dear."

"You know, it almost sounded like..."

A long tongue flicked out and scooped the two grubs into the creature's questing maw. "Food, eat," Peter murmured drowsily as he went back to sleep, "good."

Later, as it probed through the blackness with its feelers and sensory arrays,

the creature sometimes heard two small shrill voices somewhere inside, barking incomprehensibly, and sometimes it heard something familiar: "Boom. Boom," or the like. But these annoying chirps were drowned out by the creature's own primal emotions: the gnaw of hunger, the surge of victory, and always, the simple violent joy of living on. •

JASON KAPALKA lives in Edmonton, where he earns a sort of living from proofreading newspapers and reviewing computer games. He's recently finished a movie script which he describes, in typical Hollywood high-conceptese, as "Reservoir Dogs vs. E.T.," and will be pleased to entertain offers.

BREAKFAST, 2052

Kirsten A. Oulton

The setting sun gelled,
trapping the trash heap like
a fly in amber.

Hot. Orange. Kinda Stiff.

To one side of this
monolithic mountain
of their broken, forgotten toys
lies a humble form.

“Rise and Shine,” it says
in pretty script—
sunshiny gold, rimmed in red
all the better to contrast
the slick-spun carbonex.
Smaller Roman letters march solemnly
across the lower left of
the device—

SynthCan, ©2051.

It vibrated slightly as
it whirred to life,
stirring the fine gray ash
locomotive-fashion.

There aren't any locomotives
any more,
disturbing the buffalo and such.
But no one has noticed in
years.
(There aren't any buffalo to
complain.)

Its internal chronometer
(extremely accurate, but
the designer hadn't
anticipated the blast)
read
06:30:00.

The door slid open
to reveal:
2 glasses (appl. juice, conc.)
2 croissants (2 pats butter sub.)
2 plates with blue rims
bearing:
eggs (1 "over," 1 scrambled),
soy-protein sausages,
synth-tomato slices,
ferro-plast utensils and
2 crisp napkins, folded neatly
on a clean plastic tray.

The tray was pushed forward
by unseen hands,
only to rest,
somewhat awkwardly,
on the battered remains
of a crib—
its bars poking through the trash.
(Wind and dust-gnawed ribs.)

Unsure of its perch,
the meal tilted,
toppled, and landed on
three hundred and sixty-four
identical trays
twelve meters below. •

KIRSTEN A. OULTON is the faithful servant of a slither of snakes, some turtles, tortoises, and a husband. Born and raised in Quebec, she is adapting slowly to the Ontarian environment. Unable to buy a small world of her own, she is painting and writing a new one into existence.

THE BURDEN OF PROOF

Erik Jon Spiegel

I was in the graduate students' lounge, drinking coffee with Leonard Barthelmess, when Dr. Hugo Rothstein burst in with the news.

"My God! He's here!"

"Who's here, Doctor?" I asked.

Rothstein stopped dead in his tracks and frowned.

"Hmph. Weren't you listening? *Him!* God!"

"Does he need a research assistant?" Leonard asked.

Dr. Rothstein, undaunted, thrust a pile of papers in front of my face.

"Look," he commanded. Hugo and I shared a similar conceit in this regard: We both preferred working with medium ballpoint pens on those pads of unlined canary yellow newsprint. I liked the feel of the pen against the texture of the paper; Dr. Rothstein often commented on how much he liked the Turner-esque quality of the blue smudges in his own work.

Now, he sat down quite contentedly.

"Go on, look," he said, nodding at the sheaf in my hands.

It was quite an impressive calculation, all those upside down triangles, superscripts and subscripts that I adored so well, that had prompted me to enter into a career of mathematics and physics in the first place. I often pinned up the rough work for my assignments in the kitchen at home, and my former roommate always thought they should be blown up and properly done in calligraphy, so artistic were they.

"What is this?"

"Can't you read?" Dr. Rothstein bristled. "It's *God*. Look."

"Well, how do you figure that?"

"My God, man, look at it! Look at the connection coefficients on page nine. What does that look like to you? It describes a perfect four-dimensional submanifold with boundary in which there exists a spherical domain with time but not entropy. If that doesn't sound like Eden, you tell me what does."

"What about the Tree of Life? What about the serpent?"

"They're in there," Rothstein nodded, barely containing his excitement. "They're in there."

I turned the pages ruefully. I must confess I lacked Dr. Rothstein's mental agility on such matters, and I desperately craved a canary yellow notepad and a ballpoint pen. Rothstein had been looking for God in physics for as long as I had been a graduate student, which was longer than I wanted to remember. It started just after his wife divorced him, people said. But some of the faculty insisted Rothstein had been looking for the Alpha and Omega among his alphas and omegas since he, himself, had been a graduate student, and maybe even longer than that.

I just nodded dumbly.

"Maybe it really *is* God," Leonard offered, obviously enjoying my ignorance. "Let's see how it reacts to this formula for fatted calf."

"Heathen!" Dr. Rothstein hissed. Then, turning to me, "Obviously, this is not the place to carry on a theological discussion. Why don't we go to my office, Russell?"

I followed the professor down the hall, noting the endless parade of bulletin boards with much the same disdain as I noted the linoleum floors or the fluorescent lighting. The whole physics department, from the graduate students' lounge to the professors' offices was furnished in the same institutional tastelessness numerous studies had shown to be anti-conducive to any sort of work, creative or otherwise. Looking for God here seemed as remote a quest as looking for the Holy Grail in the Dixie cup dispenser in a bathroom.

Dr. Rothstein's office was ill-decorated, even by these standards. There were crumpled balls of paper on almost every tile of the floor, and paper nap-

kins were strewn everywhere, some even unwritten on. A crust of French bread of indeterminate age had been there longer than at first it appeared: It, too, bore fragments of mathematical inscriptions in Dr. Rothstein's scraggly, unsteady hand.

"You see what this does for science, don't you, Russell? Barthelmess is an incompetent; I was opposed to his admission to this faculty. But I've always felt there was something more to you, Russ. Something that told me you would appreciate this."

I nodded, unsure of what else I could do. Dr. Rothstein had clearly gone 'round the bend. Someone had to talk him down, for the sake of his career. I mean, God forbid he should try to get this published.

"Getting back to that submanifold on page nine." Dr. Rothstein said, easing himself into the one piece of high tech in his office, his burgundy desk chair. "If you delete a single point from the spherical domain—hint: partition of unity, as it turns out—the spherical domain collapses, and the submanifold becomes a four dimensional Lorentz manifold *without* boundary, perfectly described by the Einstein equation."

"So...?"

"Well, don't you see? God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to remove their access to the Tree of Life. This is ontologically equivalent to removing the Tree of Life from Eden. Hence, removing a single point."

"So you're saying that the Tree of Life in the Bible was a single point? That doesn't sound very much like a tree."

"God can make a single point look like whatever He wants it to," the professor said indignantly. "Please try to

have a little faith in these matters."

What I needed was a little time to study Dr. Rothstein's notes, to try to make some sense of what he had written. In his heyday, he had been a brilliant theoretician, and a harsh critic of the unscientific. I could hope, perhaps, that some part of this remained inside of him, that if I could arm myself with sufficiently good arguments, based on good science and hard fact, I could get him to recant before he managed to embarrass himself further. I would have to swear Leonard Barthelme to absolute secrecy.

"To think that, among those numbers," Rothstein was going on dreamily, "lie Job and Abraham. To think that Moses may be leading the Jews from the Pharaohs on page ten, or that Deuteronomy is transcribed with certainty amid the uncertainty relations on page eighteen. To think that all these things are present there..."

He leaned forward suddenly, fixing me with an unbreakable gaze.

"Only one holy book explains why there is suffering, Russell. Only one, and that book is the Bible. Look at this universe, at the soundness of it, at its perfectness, its completeness. Nothing so exquisite could be the result of chance. There must be a guiding hand to it all. Davies, Hawking, even..." His voice grew quieter, more reverent.

"Even Albert said it was so."

"I haven't had a chance to study this yet," I said. "But off the top of my head I might wonder how an infinite and omnipresent God can be constrained by mathematics."

"Constrained? *Constrained?* Nothing is constrained here. A constraint would imply some limitation on the domain

of the variables, and this is precisely what I have not done."

"I meant it more colloquially..."

"Abuse of language, Russell. Always be aware of abuse of language."

I persuaded Dr. Rothstein to let me make a copy of his work to take home and study, though I still don't know how I managed to get away. Hugo would have gone on for hours, if he could, and this perhaps explained why he had so few graduate students. None, in fact.

There was something to Dr. Rothstein's hieroglyphics. As I studied them, pen and paper in hand, I began to see some of the mathematical tricks the professor alluded to play out before me.

But what caught me out were some statistical relationships on some of the later pages which resembled more general forms of the Heisenberg uncertainty relations from quantum mechanics. It didn't take much figuring out, actually, to see that these equations, which could lead to the spontaneous creation of anything, could also be used to derive a number of mathematical statements *as well as their negations*. In other words, the equations supported both a statement and its contradiction, meaning that they were inconsistent. Hence, all of Dr. Rothstein's work was rendered mathematically invalid, destroyed by this weak link in his chain of reasoning.

This was all pretty incontrovertible, and, I suppose, no real surprise. The equations were just too good at doing everything, even to the point of doing things which would exclude them from doing things.

I guessed it was wishful thinking that had kept Dr. Rothstein from examining his own work too closely. Still, he had

annotated the uncertainty relations with the margin note, "Gödel!!!" and I made a mental note to ask him about that. Gödel was a logician, so maybe this was a reminder the professor had written to himself about the contradictions inherent in his work; logic was, after all, the undoing of his equations.

But if that were true, why had he neglected to resolve the problems with the work before showing it to me? I decided to check everything one more time before going to sleep, and did so to my detriment, dreaming all night of the illogic and mutual contradictions which are supported only by the logic of dreams.

The next day, I showed my work to Leonard Barthelme, more of a tactic to delay meeting with Prof. Rothstein than anything else.

"The worst part of it is, he was apparently aware that some problems were going on here—he wrote 'Gödel' in the margin, to remind himself to check on the logic of the situation, I guess—but he completely ignored it."

"What are you going to tell him?" Leonard asked.

"The truth; what else can I do? He's got to listen to reason."

"If Linus ever found out..."

"I know, I know." Paul Linus, the department chairman, had never seen eye-to-eye with Hugo Rothstein. Linus, an engineer *cum* experimentalist, mistrusted theoreticians as a matter of course, though he had learned to tolerate them as a necessary evil in his department. To make matters worse, Rothstein's ex-wife had left her husband for Linus. Needless to say, the two men seldom appeared together in the same room. Life would be very

difficult for Hugo Rothstein if Paul Linus ever found out about "the God equation."

When I came in on Hugo, he was bent over the blackboard of his office, putting the finishing touches, apparently, on transcribing a piece of his equation.

"Excuse me, Dr. Rothstein?"

He didn't look up from his work, though he did stop writing.

"I looked over your equations last night, sir, and I think I've found a problem."

Rothstein sighed and put the chalk on the ledge at the bottom of the blackboard. He stood slowly, massaging sore spots on his neck and back, before turning to me with eyes that had obviously not been closed for many hours.

"Good morning, Russell," he said. "I'm glad you were able to look over my work. Now, what are these 'problems'?"

"Well, I think you picked them out already, and must have forgotten to correct them. See? Here, in this section you've marked 'Gödel.' These equations allow you to prove— Well, here are my calculations."

I handed him some work I'd written up in good before coming in. I demonstrated to him that I'd deduced a number of statements and their converses from the same set of relations contained in his work.

"Yes, yes, yes," Rothstein nodded impatiently. "Now explain your problem."

"You mean you knew about this?"

"Obviously I knew about it. I annotated it, didn't I?"

"As I understand it, sir, no mathematically consistent statement or

theorem can have as its consequence two mutually exclusive conclusions."

Hugo Rothstein sat down with exaggerated weariness and motioned me into a chair across from him.

"Oh, Russell, has none of this sunk in yet? This equation is *God*. The Almighty can certainly support any number of mutually exclusive constructs, don't you think? *God*, at least as I understand Him, can do anything."

"What about Gödel?"

"What about him? 'Gödel' was just to remind me how right I was. Do you know the Incompleteness Theorem?"

A much misinterpreted result, to be sure. I knew it, and had endured its repeated abuse at the hands of less knowledgeable comrades for many years.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, therein lies the mathematical proof for faith."

"Hold it. This one I've heard before. All the Incompleteness Theorem asserts is that in certain kinds of mathematical systems there will be true facts that cannot be proved or derived from statements within the system. It does not constitute mathematical proof for the existence of *God*, nor does it, for that matter, prove that all math is wrong so that we may as well believe in *God*, since our other supposedly competing belief system—science—is self-defeating."

Dr. Rothstein remained serene throughout my diatribe. Finally, after a long pause, he spoke.

"You miss the point again, Russell," he said wearily. "The Incompleteness Theorem, you are quite correct, does not prove the existence of *God*. But it does provide for faith—to accept what

is true without proof—and that is what is so extraordinary about all this. This equation can be neither derived nor proven from anything in mathematics; I constructed it *ex vacuo*, if you will, based on what I knew must be true about Him. If I had derived it, it would have been a servant of Its own Creation, which is a contradiction. 'Gödel' means the equation must be what I claim it to be, for it is a true fact which cannot be validated by recourse to logic or mathematics, but must be believed to be true based on the behavior it exhibits. It is the mathematical embodiment of faith, made consistent with modern physics!"

I left Dr. Rothstein to the section of the equation on his blackboard. I didn't know what to say so I mumbled something incoherent, got up and left. Dr. Rothstein didn't notice: as soon as he finished his mini lecture he abruptly got up and returned to the blackboard with his back to me.

Leonard Barthelmess was still in the graduate students' lounge when I arrived.

"Well, I don't have to ask you if you engaged in satisfying repartee with Dr. Godhead," he said.

"Apparently the contradictions arise because *God* can do anything, and—this is the real prize—the equation can't actually be derived from anything since that would invalidate it as an article of faith. It's an unprovable true fact that, according to him, must therefore mathematically justify faith; that's what 'Gödel' meant."

"Where did he get it from, then?"

"Oh, he made it up," I said simply, sitting down. I tossed the sheaf of papers over to Leonard, who thumbed

through them idly.

"I give up," I said. "He can do what he wants. If he wants to try to publish it, fine. If he wants to wear it, fine. He's not my advisor; I don't know why he came to me anyhow."

"I think because you're one of the few people around here who still champions his early work, who still talks about him as if he were a physicist."

"He was one of the best, you know," I reminded Leonard. "His work was part of what inspired me to go into theory rather than experimental. Theory's just such a mindblower; you never know what you're going to find next."

"Like God?"

"Maybe some of God's residue. A fingerprint on some of the gears, perhaps."

"Or a hair in the milk of the Milky Way."

"Never mind," I sighed. "I guess I have just have some compassion for the old guy."

"Well," Leonard began. "All I can tell you is what I've heard, and what I've heard is that he's been more than a little—shall we say beatific?—since she took up with Linus."

That last part gave me an idea.

"I just had a thought," I said. "Maybe she could help out with this. She must know him pretty well; do you think she still might be inclined to save his ass if it came down to it?"

"I don't know," Leonard shook his head. "From the stories I've heard..."

"I think I'll try anyway. She's in Anthropology, right?"

Professor Teresa Linus née Rothstein née Albright's office was, indeed, located

in the Anthropology department, at the Cro-Magnon end of a hundred foot mural of human evolution. Such were the benefits of tenure, I supposed: the Anthropology graduate students' lounge was located at the primate end of the same mural, and teaching assistants and associate profs had offices in between, doorknobs at genital height for various Neanderthals and Australopithecines.

Dr. Linus was seated at her desk in a comfortable office of wood, earth tones, Navajo blankets, strange religious artifacts, and dusty leather-bound volumes. A half-dozen African masks lay about the room, their cheeks streaked with proud, white lines. The room had a real sense of style, of atmosphere, which was a jolt to my physics-lounge-trained eyes.

"Are you in my Experimental Morality seminar?" She asked.

"No, no. I, uh, I'm a graduate student in physics."

"Yes...?" She seemed hesitant and more than a little suspicious.

"It's about your ex-husband, Hugo."

"Oh, God, he hasn't killed Paul, has he?" She waved me over to a chair. "Wouldn't surprise me. One of them's bound to get to the other, eventually."

"No, no; nothing like that," I said while sitting down. The chair was *comfortable!* Real wood and real leather! Did I pick the wrong discipline?

"I just need your advice," I went on. "I need to know how to handle him, to tell him he's wrong about something."

Dr. Linus snorted.

"Well, good luck to you. I'll give him this, he's seldom wrong about anything. If you've caught him out on something, and can make it stick, then

you're in some very distinguished company, indeed."

"I have caught him out on something. I've tried to tell him he's wrong, but I can't get through to him."

"Like I said, good luck. I was married to him for fifteen years, and I certainly never figured out how to get through to him. And you know, I'm always made to feel like the villain in all this, because I was the one who had the affair and I was the one who left *him*. But you know he was no treat to live with, either."

I don't know what it was, but everybody seemed to be confiding deep truths in me these days. I wasn't particularly interested in Dr. Rothstein's, or Dr. Linus's, married life, but here it was, whether I wanted it or not.

"Do you find yourself saying things to him and getting back answers that seem only peripherally related to your questions?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes! That's *exactly* what the problem's been!"

Dr. Linus nodded sympathetically.

"It's no better being married to him," she said.

"It's like you're not really there," I agreed.

"No. It's like *he's* not really there. Did you know that he's won awards from the United Nations for his humanitarian work? Did you know that he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize? Yet, despite being so utterly and passionately concerned about human suffering and the greater good and happiness of all the peoples of the world, he has no concept of *your* suffering or *your* happiness."

"It's all abstract to him," I ventured.

"No. What's abstract to us is more

real to him. Oh, yes; if I was upset he could comfort me, and felt sad for me, but only after relating it to the more general misery of human suffering. Even when I won my Pulitzer Prize, he was happy about it, but happy for what the work represented for humankind. The individual is opaque to him. He should have been a socialist."

She paused. She had been staring at some sort of artifact in the corner of the room, but now she turned to me.

"Is any of this helping you?" she asked sweetly.

"Actually, it does a little bit. It at least explains why he won't listen to reason."

She nodded vigorously.

"That's what I liked about Paul. Paul didn't give a shit about the rest of the world, only himself and me. When I got upset at something, Paul got angry at the thing that upset me; he'd *do* things, even if it was only act out. Hugo would just get sad for all humanity. I just couldn't stand it anymore."

I let my eyes float about her office. There was as much mystery here as in all my beloved, inscrutable calculations. What were those artifacts? What was the language on that piece of bark hanging on one wall? And what were all the other gods and goddesses doing now, shut up in their endless volumes of folklore and folk religion, arrayed on Linus' shelf like so many apostles, shut up in their tombs?

"It explains, I think, the problem I'm having," I said. I reluctantly drew my eyes away from the details of her office and withdrew the now dog-eared sheaf of papers from my backpack.

"Oh, that," Dr. Linus said. "I should have guessed. He dropped that off at

our place—uh, that's mine and *Paul's*, you understand—a couple of nights ago."

"He says it's God," I pointed out.

"That seems likely. It's what we've all been looking for, isn't it? See this?" She held up small stone figurine that had been holding down some papers on her desk. It looked a little like an astronaut. "There's a Central American aboriginal tribe that thinks this is a god. Who is wrong? I used to talk to Hugo about gods. I would tell him about what the Navajo believe, or the Japanese; I would tell him about stone circles, phallic monuments, and straw airplanes in New Guinea. I guess that's my professional obsession: other people's gods."

"But it's a strange thing, now that I think of it," she went on. "In fifteen years we never spoke about God; the Judeo-Christian God. We never spoke about *his* God."

I realized, suddenly and very uncomfortably, that if Dr. Teresa Linus knew about the equation, then there was a good chance that Dr. *Paul* Linus did as well. I had to get back to the physics department.

I could hear Paul Linus' screaming from the stairwell on the first floor, four stories below the department. As I ascended each flight of steps, the voice grew more and more coherent, and I became less and less pleased with what I was hearing. The word "dismissal" was to be heard often, and clearly.

I confess I hid as I approached the glass doors to the physics floor: I caught sight of Linus pacing back and forth and wanted to be able to squeeze in anonymously.

"I want him out of here!" boomed

Linus' voice.

I opened the door after he had passed and rushed—as nonchalantly as possible, of course—to find Leonard Barthelmess.

"You can hear him, can't you?" Leonard reacted as soon as I asked him what was going on. "Rothstein's had it, if you ask me. Linus is even threatening to review *all* of Hugo's previous research."

"He wants to discredit the man's whole life!" I cried.

Hugo Rothstein was still in his office, slouched before his blackboard. I didn't knock, just went in and quietly closed the perpetually open door behind me.

"Yes, Russell," he said, without looking up.

"Hugo," I said softly. "Things are very bad, Hugo. Not everyone is ready for this."

"Look, Russell," he said, pointing to the blackboard. "I found myself. Here I am, Russell."

I went over to him, and saw that he was crying. He pointed to a part of the blackboard with one chalk-dusted hand, and with the other wiped the tears away, leaving long streaks of white on his cheeks so that his face resembled the masks in his Teresa's office.

"I'm right here. And this—" pointing to another part of the blackboard. "This is why she left me. It's all so simple. It's all part of His Plan. It all makes sense to me, now."

Hugo was, I knew then, beyond the reach of myself or anyone else, as man is as far from God as the uncertainty of his faith will endure.

"Dr. Rothstein," I said finally. "Hugo. Where is God right now?"

"Here," he said, pointing to the blackboard. "Here."

Paul Linus stood at the door, shaking his head, looking at the shrunken form of his onetime rival.

"This is priceless," he sniffed. "The great Hugo Rothstein and his quantum Torah. Do the Scientologists have a refereed journal? Maybe you should look into it, Hugo."

"Scien..." Dr. Rothstein murmured absently. "No. *Scientific American*. I know it's not refereed, but I think they'll be interested. I sent it to them. Everyone should read about this."

"Well, that's a fitting coda," Linus went on. "They'll have a good laugh. Thank your algebraic God for tenure, Rothstein. Unless I can prove you're insane, you'll stay on. This isn't the craziest idea to come out of a university."

"That's what it always boils down to, isn't it?" Hugo Rothstein at last turned and slumped to the floor, exhausted, his back propped against the blackboard. "The burden of proof."

He tossed the chalk on the floor. "I'm sorry, Russell, but I can't seem to find you anywhere in there," nodding behind him. "Nor you, Paul. I can't seem to find anyone."

"That's okay, Hugo. I'm sure you tried," I said.

Linus shook his head. "Don't waste your time with sympathy for this tired old loon, Russell. Now would be a good time to practice the Japanese art of distancing yourself from a disgraced comrade."

"Leave him alone, Paul." Teresa Linus appeared behind her husband at the door. "What's done is done."

"I can't believe it! You're actually

going to defend this idiot?"

"I'm not defending him. I *am*, however, reminding you that the situation is irreversible. I see no reason to keep flogging it. And the reporters are here. It seems to me that they're more of a priority right now."

"What reporters?" Linus was suddenly anxious.

Rothstein perked up. "They came after all! Good. Good!"

He stood up, doing his best to brush the chalk from his clothes. He ran his fingers through his hair like a comb.

"My God, Rothstein! Do you know what this will do to the department?"

Rothstein ignored him, and tried to step past the larger man. But Linus grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him back inside.

"Do you know what's resting on this, you bastard? *Funding*. Even if you don't give a shit about your own career, you could at least think about someone else."

As soon as the media got wind of this, there would almost certainly be a reaction from higher up. Nobody much cared what you did or what you published as long as it was in the right journals, which nobody read anyway. Now, however, the harsh light of public scrutiny would be brought upon the department... Budgets would be reassessed, as would priorities. Some might even wonder at the competence of a department head who would let this happen right under his nose.

Linus had not let go of Rothstein. The same blackboard which beheld the mind of God for Hugo was merely a page torn from a ledger to Paul Linus. In one instant, the latter had seen his whole academic career repudiated, his

ambition, his reputation consumed as quickly and as easily as Yehovah had consumed Gomorrah.

He bounced Rothstein again and again against the blackboard, to the horror of Teresa Linus and myself. We each tried taking one from the other; I pried at Hugo Rothstein and she at Paul Linus. Finally, Linus threw Rothstein over his desk. There was a crack as Rothstein's head whipped downwards at an impossible angle, striking a corner.

Doctors will tell you there is something qualitatively different about a body that has died, something that tells you it is dead even before you examine it. They will tell you there is something different in the room in which the body has died. I do not know if this can be photographed, but it is what the reporters' cameras saw when they burst into the room, a triptych with Paul and Teresa Linus framing the dead body of Dr. Hugo Rothstein, who lay in the shadow of his blackboard equations, now smudged beyond legibility by the struggle of the two men.

It was weeks before I could face the department again.

For a time, I wandered up and down the hallway, scrupulously avoiding the door to Dr. Rothstein's office, which I imagined locked for the very first time. Eventually, I came to be in the computer room, where I found Leonard Barthelmess.

"Russell," he said quietly. "I don't know what to make of this."

He wheeled his chair from the computer terminal that he had been working at. It was obvious that he had been up all night.

I pulled a chair over to him.

"It feels strange here, now," I said after a long silence.

"What? Oh, yes. I guess so. You haven't been here for awhile. I want to show you something."

He bent back over the keyboard.

"You know Rothstein's equation? Well, I made a copy before the administration seized everything. I thought, just to see what would happen, I'd try putting it on the machine, in one of the simulator programs. I'll just boot it up..."

He was shaking as he did this, and it took him more than one try to get it right.

"Look what happens," he said.

C:> HarvardSim appeared on the monitor, then a **File?** prompt.

Leonard typed:

Barthelmess:GodProof.sim.

There was a pause as the computer searched its directory for the specified file. Then the lights in the room dimmed, and all the monitors went out except the one at Leonard's station.

"Good morning, Russell," came Hugo Rothstein's voice. •

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JHORZIA AND THE DRAGON

Bruce Barber

On High Feast Days in the valley at the foot of Mt. S'Mün, when the Speaker recites the legend of Jhorzia and the Dragon, this is how the tale is told:

“Long ago, when women still bore arms and fought as men, the Valley cringed in slavery to a hideous Demon, a Beast abhorred in the sight of God and Man, a Creature that tormented our folk for untold years, until at last the Great and Wise Mother Behanne sent her pupil Jhorzia, a warrior as beautiful as she was brave, to seek out and defeat the monstrous Dragon....”

That is how the tale is told—
But *this* is how it was:

Jhorzia cursed, with the cold, fluent efficiency which even the most battle and life-hardened in her barracks (both male and female) found alternately admirable and shocking.

The mountain was much, much steeper than it appeared from the valley below, and her feet ached with a ferocity unmatched even by the most gruelling of forced-march drills. Those, after all, were mainly on level ground, and lacked the brambles, rocks, and crevices which here seemed to have been trained in guerrilla tactics against novice mountaineers. Even the air fought her—there was not enough of it, and what little there was lodged brittle-cold in her nose, her wind-pipe, and did not satisfy.

But she had no intention of giving up, nor of stopping to rest; she had a certain

distance to cover before nightfall.

So, she cursed.

(Behanne had cackled, "Now, down here, m'girl, y' might have a better chance—the breathing in the valley be a trial to the monster. Air's too warm, too heavy; it'd be slower, y'know. Y'might be able to dodge its eyes for a bit longer...but not much!" Then the hunchbacked weirdwoman had laughed herself into a coughing fit, waving Jhorzia out of her hut.)

Crazy old misfit, she thought, with that rough tenderness, that fondness which binds apt student to harsh mistress. She saw a sheltered, level patch a few yards beyond and above, and decided she must stop to eat; it would be bad strategy to ignore in the name of pride such a protected area in which to refresh herself. There might be no other such chance, and she would need all of her strength, soon. If Behanne had told the truth....

If the dragon awaited her on the peak of Mt. S'Mün.

She stepped onto welcome flatness, sat to remove her heavy boots, to flex cramped toes. (The pale rose slippers in her bridal chest came to mind, followed closely by her mother's handsome face. Those poor, pretty excuses for footwear would be long-tattered, by now. And her mother—her mother would be prone with exhaustion by now, as would all of the other women in the town, and most of the men, even the soldiers. Jhorzia's long-suffering mother had birthed a potential Baroness, at least a rich merchant's wife, but had unwillingly raised a warrior. Behanne, who midwived all girl children in the valley—and she *always* knew when a female was to be born—

had hovered on the edge of Jhorzia's childhood. When Jhorzia received her woman's blood at age eleven, it was Behanne who first observed another change: one of the girl's emerald green eyes was now an intense and brilliant blue. "Sign of the fighter!" Behanne had announced. "Portent of the warrior!" Behanne's word was law in such matters.)

She unwrapped a hunk of dried beef and a bit of heavy bread, chewing at one, then the other, thinking uncertain thoughts in the hard light. The meal was soon finished, and she unsheathed the cure for such thoughts. Her mismatched eyes travelled up and down the blade's strange, smooth greyness. The weapon looked fresh-forged, but Jhorzia knew differently. She herself had tested it daily after Behanne had presented it to her during a powerful ritual, against bronze-armored dummies, then against soldiers who bore normal bronze swords. The armor had bent, buckled, the swords had shattered. But *her* blade remained sturdy, immaculate, its edges unpitted by the heavy blows. It was as much the power of the sword as Jhorzia's own calculated viciousness in combat which had earned her the battle-name so detested by her mother—"The Beast," her comrades called her, and Jhorzia answered to it with pride.

"It's not from these parts," was Behanne's only explanation of the sword, "but it'll pierce the thing's damned hide, if y' hit the right spot, as I've taught y'!"

The right spot. And there was only one—if she struck anywhere else, her horrible death would surely follow; that spot was between its eyes...the eyes

into which *she must not look!*

Hour upon hour she had trained, thrusting blindfolded, then with eyes taped shut, until she was sure that reflex would not force her lids apart at the crucial moment; thrusting over the shoulder, to the side, counting on intuition and battle-sense to guide her hand; learning to gauge movements in time and space with only the barest of visual cues to go on. All of this she learned, without even being sure if the mock-up head was anywhere near the worm's actual size and shape. Behanne's recollections of these things were confused, sometimes contradictory. In fact, on only one point was the old one constant:

"Its eyes, Jhorzia—where fang and claw might fail, its cursed eyes will always triumph!"

She resumed the climb, and had time for many ponderings, including random, batwing thoughts of death....

Motive? Glory, it would undoubtedly be whispered among the ungenerous, most of whom did not even believe in the dragon's existence. The Beast would slay an imaginary beast to earn herself a better name, they would taunt. Jhorzia ignored all of this—she did what she did for Behanne, who despised the dragon.

Jhorzia had wondered many times at the origin of this hate. (She stubbed her toe against a jagged bit of granite, kicked it aside. *Pay attention!*) Once again, Behanne had provided little enlightenment.

"He...*It* be evil!" she had scowled.

"Very well," was Jhorzia's reply. "Evil must be destroyed."

But: Why was it evil? What made it so?

Unimportant. Irrelevant.

Behanne had taught her skills which other warriors did not know; Behanne had supported her when she had petitioned for training in arms, and Behanne's Healer's voice (edged with madness though it might be) was listened to by those who feared the pox, the plague, and black magic—by everyone, including Jhorzia's mother.

If not for Behanne, Jhorzia might now be facing betrothal, marriage even, to one of the suitors who had begun to arrive after her twelfth birthday. She was safe from all of that now—even the most intrepid of the area's young swains were unwilling to woo The Beast. So, if Behanne said that the dragon was evil and must be destroyed, so it must be. As to how it had come to live perched on Mt. S'Mün, overlooking the small dukedom, her mentor would only mumble that it had always lived there, and always would, until its malevolent existence was ended.

By Jhorzia. Tonight.

A mist had risen, not thick enough to cause her any problem, but Behanne had suggested to her that when the clouds began, the prey was near. She felt, then, a hesitant tingling of what might be fear, but could not be sure—she had never been afraid. Outraged, yes; indignant, of course; in pain, often. But she had not yet encountered the situation or being which could make her afraid—

There was a sudden airy sound, like loud breathing, ahead of her to the right, which pushed all wool-gathering aside, and her years of rigorous training took over. The sword was in her hand, without conscious effort, as she

dropped into a low fighting crouch. Her ears were alert for a repetition of the noise; her blue and green eyes swept the terrain.

Silence. Rock. Emptiness.

Then, with no warning, no thunder of wings, no deafening bellow, no tongue of fire—the dragon.

All of her skill and training deserted her for a brief moment, leaving her open, unguarded, just long enough for the monster to pounce and put an end to her, had it been poised for attack.

But it was lying down, evidently asleep...and nothing like what she expected. She quickly shook off most of her surprise, and tightened her grip on the sword. Taking a deep breath (and thanking a god she did not really believe in for the creature's somnolent state), she circled and moved toward it, from the rear. She was nearly all hunter now, but part of her was busy being confused by the sleeping dragon.

It was a small thing, for a start, no more than ten feet from tail to neck (its head was partially concealed by rock), and it was...beautiful! Its skin—triangular, overlapping scales, regular and symmetrical—was of soft, polished gold, and the visible hind leg did not end in a menacing claw, but in an elegant ivory hoof, like a fine stallion's. She sensed graceful strength in the carefully articulated joints and musculature—

She was almost upon it when her leather greaves rasped against shale. It seemed to her that the dragon came to its feet in one fluid motion, like a serpent. She gasped: it walked erect, and its forelegs were not legs at all, but arms and hands! Strong, supple hands, she noted, with a soldier's instinct for as-

sessing the enemy. Its russet-maned head, now in profile, was something like a man's, something like a hawk's (but more carefully sculpted, and more noble), and something completely *other*.

But she had no time for further scrutiny. It was turning its head, to fix her with its gaze. Jhorzia clamped her eyes shut and raised the sword, maintaining a firm mental picture of the dragon's position, as she had disciplined herself to do. Running, she counted paces and seconds, visualized the turning head, the arc of her sword, the raising of its beautiful hands....

One chance.

One spot.

Now!

She felt metal cleave scale cleave flesh cleave bone. She heard a scream which was all too human and uncomprehending in its pain. The heavy body crashed into her as it fell, sending her sprawling, and she heard it thrash about for long seconds. There was a smell of cloves and cinnamon.

Then, silence once more. Jhorzia, bruised and shaking, picked herself up from the ground, took a few careful steps backward, then waited another cautious minute before looking at her handiwork.

The dragon lay a few feet from her; the sword protruded from a spot precisely between its deadly eyes.

Eyes which had not closed in death.

Human-shaped eyes, but much larger, with sky-blue irises and bright silver pupils. She felt quick tendrils of warmth curling about her body, caressing it, then found that she could not move a single muscle, not even to close her eyes again. Paralyzed, she waited

for the agonizing death which she had been taught must soon follow. Instead, her mind began to flood with memories. They were not her own.

The dragon's life flashed before her mind's eyes.

Most of it made no sense to her. She was able to understand how *old* it was (old enough to need naps, to move more slowly), so old that it remembered a time before man was on the earth, and a time before that when *its* kind had walked an otherwise empty, paradisiacal earth.

And she was able to understand that there were no more such "nightmares" to trouble the sleep of mankind: she, Jhorzia, had slain the last dragon.

And she was able to understand another thing. The "it" was "he." Not in a physical sexual sense—dragonkind lacked tangible regenerative organs—but in its soul it was male, the soul that she knew for certain existed: she was covered in it, drowning in it. This maleness, however, seemed to have little to do with what *she* knew of men—it did not demand, did not dominate, did not destroy. Exactly what it *did* do, she could not sort out of the confusion of images, but it was *not* the evil she had expected to destroy.

She saw this dragon love, and it was the strangest image of all, for they did not mate among themselves—they were all "male" (how had they come to exist at all? Even they did not know) — but with select human women, in wondrous dances of mystical complexity which transcended the merely sensual world. She saw, briefly, children who *looked* human, but became wizards and statesmen and warriors of the highest caliber.

Then, she saw Behanne; a Behanne young, straight, and tall, steeped in arcane lore and wisdom, questing for a partner. But, not just any husband; she wanted a worthy mate, a powerful mate—a dragon.

The dragon had not wanted *her*, for she lacked the genetic mark of those very, very few who could merge with him, and live. So she had reviled it, and spent the rest of her years working necromancies to bring about its end, magicks which, by their intrinsic dark nature, had coalesced within her as well as without, warping her mind and body. She had become the secret, bitter lunatic who had raised Jhorzia....

The memories became less vivid, came less quickly, and Jhorzia felt her muscles loosening, her own thoughts returning. But there was one final vision, the face of the dragon's first human lover. Then, that lingering, wistful visage faded, to be replaced by the last sight the beast had seen, the face of the woman who would have been its next mate: Jhorzia's face, marked with the brand which cut certain women from the human flock, identifying them as compatible with the shining beings Behanne called dragons, the mark which Behanne had identified, but lied about: one green eye, and one blue.

The paralysis lifted. Jhorzia stared for a long while into the dead dragon's eyes, dull and grey now, all power faded. Her own eyes held back unheard-of tears.

Finally, she walked on numb legs to the golden corpse, and wrenched the sword from its—*his*—skull. The blade was coated with slick purple blood, already corroding the magical metal.

Jhorzia the Beast hurled it from her

with all of her strength, then stumbled back down Mt. S'Mün, to the village where a celebration waited, in anticipation of her victory.

That is how it was. Jhorzia told Behanne only that the Dragon was dead, then saddled her horse and left the valley forever. She died old and almost alone, in seclusion at an obscure religious retreat far to the north, where she had taken a vow of silence, unbroken even

on her deathbed.

But, thanks mostly to Behanne, *this* is how the tale is ended, when the Speaker recites it on High Feast Days in the valley at the foot of Mt. S'Mün:

"...and so it came to pass that the Hero Beauty Jhorzia slew the beastly Dragon, and ascended shortly afterwards to Heaven, there to be rewarded by God, to live eternally and happily thereafter." •

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THE GIFT OF STEWARDSHIP

Karen Keeley Wiebe

A gust of wind fluttered the autumn leaves pressed against the cement curb. Raindrops splattered from the branches of an evergreen. One man, dressed in tweed and sensible brogue shoes, stood, and thought of the wind as it blew up the channel, the smell of the river coming as far as the creek where he'd played as a boy. Sometimes he'd caught the whiff of sawdust, the stink of diesel fuel, the scent of creosote soaked through the old railway ties discarded at the sides of the abandoned tracks.

One woman, her blond hair streaked by sunlight, her silver fox fur belted at her slim waist, gazed down from the height of the overlook at the barnacled boulders. Something lay wedged between two of the rocks. A single strip of pink cloth — polyester, perhaps, because of its texture? Or maybe it was the mist that made everything appear out of focus. The woman regarded the cloth as alien, discarded in a world of sand and sludge and sea weed, all of it colorless and reeking with decay.

The man approached the woman and acknowledged her with a smile, a polite nod of recognition. Not that he knew her by name, or even by sight, he was quite sure he'd never seen her before, but having met at the same spot meant a recognition of kind.

They stood and faced the ocean.

The waves, timeless in their movement, timeless in their being, rolled in toward shore. They had always been, always would be, as if time itself were an all-consuming thing. A flock of gulls appeared out of the mist, and hovered above the cloth. Their screams echoed off the rock, the salt-spray, the sea. Fear, or apprehension, clouded the woman's eyes.

"Do they bother you?" the man asked as he pulled a large white handkerchief

from the breast pocket of his suit coat.

The woman backed away from him and slowly sat on the single park bench. She leaned forward, her canvas bag hugged to her chest. "It's their numbers, isn't it? Unsettling, is all."

"Understandable," the man replied as he blew his nose. "But they're quite harmless. Scavengers by nature. Beautiful to some. A nuisance to others."

Further up the beach the rock levelled off to gravel and finally to sand. Wood chips bobbed and bumped the shore while sea weed stretched in kinship with the long grasses the woman remembered seeing as a child. The prairie had breathed back then. A thing alive. Her mother had laughed, and told her, "It's the wind. I wish *all* life were as simple, as clean, as unpredictable as the weather."

She had not understood her mother's words. Not when flannel sheets snapped, and threatened to uproot the pole, or the cooking pots, strung from the porch, clanged and banged as topsoil, kicked up by the wind, scrubbed them clean. A shortage of water had meant a change in even the simplest of things.

The man folded his handkerchief and held it hidden in his hand. Earlier he had entered the park from the northwest, his steps quick and lively as he twirled his walking stick, thrust it forward and set it down. He now rested his walking stick on the wrought-iron railing. The gulls' cries pivoted with the swell of the waves. A church bell tolled in the mist. The woman stiffened. Her fingers felt cold against her cheek as she wiped the mist from her face.

The man told her, "Two sides of the slatted tower are gone. The weather,

perhaps. Or time, coupled with indifference."

The woman's shoulders sagged with disappointment. "North of Ferguson Point is a buoy," she said. "It too makes noise. Like the waves. I counted forty three thousand...one every second in a twelve-hour period."

"How did you arrive at that figure?"

The woman patted her bag. "Used pencil and paper, didn't I?"

"Very clever. But why?"

"It gave me something to do."

The man nodded as though the answer were so profound, how could he not have thought of it himself? After a long pause he told her, "I tried to count the gulls once. Found it difficult though, as they kept moving. I couldn't tell one from another."

"You, too?" The woman's laugh resembled a dry twig snapped under the weight of a heavy boot. The man tapped his walking stick on the asphalt. The tilt to his chin suggested he could see no humor in his words. The woman said, "I am sorry. Your comments about the birds. Rather ironic, you know?"

The man nodded. "I hadn't thought of it that way." He held his handkerchief to his mouth and politely coughed up phlegm. "My apologies. It's the smell. Sometimes I can taste it."

The woman pressed her thighs together and planted her eel-skin boots squarely before her. She wiggled her toes. A flock of pigeons fluttered from behind an abandoned parked car. A soft cooing sound thrummed in their throats as they approached the bench. The woman lowered her head as if in prayer: elbows on her thighs, hands clasped near her lips, chin rested on her

thumbs. How many times had she sat like this? Waiting. She thought of the pigeons, different in size, in color, in the thickness of their bodies. But the differences meant little because simply as pigeons they shared the same genetic code.

The man stared at the scuffed toes of the woman's boots.

As a boy, he'd discovered a clay-walled embankment near the creek near his home. The cliff had reminded him of a giant egg-carton set on its side. Hundreds of mud swallows darted one way, then the other, the sky so thick with them, he had often wondered how they avoided mid-air collisions. The birds were rarely vocal, not at all like the gulls that fought each other for the rotted fish or garbage washed up on shore.

The woman looked up. Her eyes were the color of slate grey. "Time has a way of healing," the man said. He then added, "You weren't affected. The exodus, I mean."

"Depends what you mean by affected." Earlier the woman had entered the park from the south, her steps made awkward by her calico canvas bag heavy on her shoulder. "I tried to stop them," she told the man, "but they wouldn't listen. They wouldn't even look at me."

The man rocked back on his heels. He inhaled. His nostrils flared. He wondered if she meant the birds, but no...not the birds.

"After awhile, I gave up. I waited for it to happen to me. I sat at the pavilion near the Point, and wondered what the urge would feel like. Would I know it when it came? But it didn't come. So I walked for days," she said. "It gave me

something to do. I found jewelry. This coat. These boots. I decided to stay at the mansion near the commodities exchange. Do you know it? East of here?"

The man stiffened and said nothing.

"There I found an old lady. Dead, she was." The woman smoothed the fur on the arms of her coat, saying, "She had a rosary in her hand. The New Testament on the floor. A crucifix on her wall. And her room was a mess. As if she had suffered, or struggled with someone."

The man recalled the first time he'd been stung by a wasp. He'd watched his father hold a single ice-cube between thumb and finger. Slowly the ice melted, dribbled down the sides of the cube. His father had told him, *Press it against the swelling...hold it this way.* And he'd laid his son's finger against the impression left by his own.

"Can you imagine?" the woman said. "Physical violence? I wondered if the old lady died not knowing what was coming."

A muscle twitched in the man's cheek, an annoying tic near his left eye, something inherited from his father. Was it yesterday he'd been startled by his own reflection in a plate glass window? He couldn't understand why he resembled his father, when his father had become an old man long before any of this.

"It was the children, you see? Broke my heart, that did." The woman rested her chin on her thumbs. "No tears. No words of denial. And the ones that couldn't walk, were carried. The babies, too. Their eyes as cold and as lifeless as the sand."

The man pressed a finger to his cheek. It did little to alleviate the

throbbing, the pressure. If the woman had looked up, she would have seen each manicured nail bitten down to the quick.

She said, "I never thought about it before. I mean, whoever thinks about it? Especially when you're young, and your whole life is ahead of you. It's something that happens to old people. Not children. Not to those you love. Not to those with work schedules. And responsibilities. And especially not the rich. I always thought money could buy everything."

"Not everything," the man told her.

"Do you know what I did yesterday?" The woman expected no answer, saying, "I made a fire. A bonfire, it was. I burned money. Bags and bags of it. Took me hours to gather it all from the shops. I thought it would be fun. Or funny. I don't know which. I laughed. God, how I laughed. And then I found myself crying because I was alone. I hate being alone."

The man sat beside the woman on the bench. "Are you lonely?" he asked. He watched the waves as they foamed over the sand.

"Of course!" the woman exclaimed. "Aren't you?"

"No. I've enjoyed it actually. I've made friends with the animals. Cats mostly, looking for a kind word, a scratch behind the ears. The quiet has been rather peaceful."

"Cats," the woman sighed. "I had a cat. Beautiful, she was. Silver grey with black paws. Did you come across one like that?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Just as well," the woman said. "I wouldn't be able to care for her now, would I?"

She laughed and opened her bag while asking, "What did you do?" as she picked through the bag's contents. "Before, I mean."

"I played with numbers. A little thing called actuaries at the commodities exchange."

"We all worked at a government-run-*something*." The woman unwrapped a package of Lifesavers. "What did you do for fun? For enjoyment?"

"I tried to grow vegetables. In a garden."

"Outside, you mean?"

"Yes. Outside."

"Toying with the authorities, were you?"

The man looked away. "It was a private place," he said.

Hundreds of mud wasps had crawled over the face of the clay-walled embankment. As a boy, he had studied their hourglass bodies and long thin legs that hung useless, grown too big, and yet, *as excess baggage they couldn't be lopped off at the knees, could they?* he'd shouted at his mother, only she hadn't been there to hear. Not her! Hiding in the tomb she'd called a home. The man saw himself as he'd looked at age ten, his skinny fish-bellied arms aching as he'd poked a broken stick repeatedly into the clay, a childish effort he now realized, one born out of desperation to dig his own hole, his own private nest.

"I can see why you'd like all this," the woman said. She nodded toward the vacant park, the vacant overlook, the expanse of ocean. Her tongue pushed the candied Lifesaver from one cheek to the other. "But it's much too quiet for me." She snapped the bag shut and gathered up the strap in one fist.

"I miss my friends. My mother. Even my younger brother."

"There is a difference between lonely and being alone," the man replied.

"Like the difference between fun and funny?"

"Something like that."

The woman stared at the strip of pink cloth. The gulls, now focused on their quest to clean the bones that lined the shore, screamed in a tug-of-war of sight and sound. *Scavengers*, she thought. *That's what he called them*. She saw herself walking mile after mile, and all the inanimate objects she'd found. The jewelry. The fur coat. The high-heeled leather boots. But most of all, the money. *Who is the scavenger?* she wondered as she watched the birds.

"We could go to the mountains," the man said.

"Too far away, isn't it? Nothing but rock," and *windswept cliffs devoid of moss*, the woman thought. "Even the trees can't get a grip." The woman laughed. "The mountains hold nothing for us."

"They will allow us to see," the man said. "Height has its advantages." He smiled. "A signal fire perhaps. Ours, or someone else. The mountains offer hope." He held out a hand, saying, "There must be others. Someone left, like us."

The woman accepted his offer, telling him, "Left behind, you mean." She rose to her feet. If she'd been aware, she would have noticed that the man's hands were blistered, marked by unfamiliar manual labor. But she was not aware. She was thinking of the lemming as she scraped the soles of her boots across the asphalt. The fact that

the lemming committed suicide as a means to survive. A kind of preservation for the whole. A way to save its habitat overtaxed by population.

She wondered if a wad of chewing gum was throwing her off balance, knowing that dinosaurs, prior to extinction, drowned themselves. Their remains fossilized in bone-beds, a link for the paleontologists to discover.

"I hear things," she said. "Or sense movement. But when I turn and look, there is nothing. And sometimes I feel eyes are watching me. I call out, but no one answers."

"Fear and shock can't keep them hidden forever," the man said.

The woman leaned over. It was gum. One pink wad stuck to the sole of her boot. She picked at it with a fingernail while watching a ray of sunlight break through the cloud cover level with the horizon. She thought of her first view of the ocean after an endless trip on a Greyhound bus without food, little water, and even less sleep. She had kicked off her sandals and folded her *midi-dirndl* skirt between her legs before plopping herself down—her knees hugged to her chest, her bare feet pushed deep into the warm sand.

She remembered the tide pool, the water crystal clear as she reached forward, wet her hands, and held them to her face. The taste hadn't been at all like the iodized salt her mother used for cooking. This taste had been different: musty, rank as the earth itself.

The man rubbed his cheek, his temple, the tufted hair of one eyebrow. "My father too fancied himself a gardener," he said. "My mother ridiculed us both, saying, little boys must play in the dirt. She often said spiteful things."

The woman reached out—hesitated, and then lightly touched his arm. “We tease because we love?”

“Possibly. But first, a meal. Then, the mountains.”

“Your mother? Is she—?”

“She was old. And ill.” The man tapped his walking stick on the pavement, saying, “The day prior to all this—”

The sandy floor of the tide pool had been littered with cracked crab, snail shells and abalone mother-of-pearl. A turtle, no larger than one of the woman’s toes, had rested at the water’s edge. She remembered a tiny crayfish, smaller than her toes, scuttled past

before it had disappeared beneath the sand, swallowed whole.

She told the man, “Maybe it was better that way. For her, you know?” while telling herself: *We were responsible. Every last one of us. Caretakers for a potential Garden of Eden and we couldn’t even get **that** right.*

One man, one woman, turned to the east. He with his walking stick which he twirled and thrust forward prior to setting it down. She with her calico bag nestled in her arms. As dusk fell, the pigeons strutted in the lead. Ahead lay the commodities exchange, the mansion, and beyond that, the mountains. •

KAREN KEELEY WIEBE’s first obsession: painting pictures with words. Her second obsession: fishing with Harvey for walleye and bass, and her third obsession: laughter—manna for the soul. She is thankful for her fourth obsession: her Accounts Payable day-job, because without that, she would not be able to enjoy her first three obsessions. “The Gift of Stewardship” is her first story in *ON SPEC*.

CEREAL PRIZES I HAVE KNOWN & ENJOYED

Jan Lars Jensen

(1) MONKEY PALMS 2000

I got these from a box of O So Nutty O's! which asked of me the question, Have You Eaten Your O's Today? "No, I have not," I would answer every time I took the box from the cupboard, and although my wife Celine only shook her head each time I made this little joke, I was certain that on some level she found it very amusing.

One morning as I poured from the box, the usual cascade of cereal was accompanied by a cellophane package containing the Monkey Palms. A simple prize—two rubber gloves injection-molded in the shape of monkey paws, which fit over the wearer's hands, and, when rinsed under ordinary tap water, become coated in an adhesive of extraordinary strength.

Celine used the Monkey Palms more frequently than I did. Sometimes I

would come home and not be able to find her anywhere. Then I remembered that our walls served well as the “clean smooth surface” recommended in the Monkey Palms’ instructions, and I would see that yes indeed, she had used them to climb to the ceiling and tuck herself out of my line of sight.

“Celine!... Celine!... Celine!...”

She liked to have fun with me in those days.

(2) Flightless Birds of Yore Series: The 1750 Moa

What impressed me most about this prize was the ingenious packaging. Rather than the transparent wrapper which cereal prize aficionados such as myself have come to equate with the joy of receiving a gratuity, some whiz came up with the idea of encasing this one within a nugget of the cereal itself.

I admit I was fooled.

Anxious to begin my collection of flightless fowl (along with the moa, the box also promised the tantalizing possibility of a DODO, OSTRICH, EMU or CHICKEN!), I reached the last bowl without having seen any sign of my rightful bird. Contemplating a strongly-worded letter to the company, I irritably poured milk over my cereal, and lo and behold, one of the sugary nuggets began to crackle and split before my eyes—the prize at its core was made from a rubber which expanded when soaked with

milk, and so the moa’s head, wings, and legs burst through the lump of wheat like a hatchling from its egg.

Clever!

In my head, the letter of complaint instantly became a letter of thanks and congratulation, and my enthusiasm for the gratuity was dampened only slightly when repeated attempts to convey this pleasant surprise to Celine elicited only an indifferent grunt.

(3) Talk-Like-Casey-the-Clown! Throat Insert

Not recommended for smaller children. I myself had a difficult time overcoming the gag reflex one first experiences upon inserting the diaphragm in one’s throat.

It is worth the effort, however, because although the insert cannot transform your voice into an exact duplicate of Casey-the-Clown’s famous falsetto, the end result is an infallible knee-slapper. I could not stop laughing when I heard my voice transformed into such a fluty noise!

After much trial-and-error, I’ve come up with a selection of phrases that I found the funniest when distorted by this amusing device:

“What do you intend to do with that plunger?”

“I have a song I’d like to sing you to sleep with.”

“Don’t make that face at me please.”

“Here I am again! Here I am again!”

"Turn your frown upside-down!"
 "Why won't you come out of
 your room, sweetie pie?"

(Repeat for humorous effect)

(4) Command'r Crunch's Stealth Submarine

A 1:10,000 scale model of the *USS Corpus Christi* that really works! An additional bonus was the remote device that actually controlled the sub. The first "theater of war" I toured was the ocean of milk left over in my extra large cereal bowl—through the thin ceramic, I could watch the sub's shadow as I dove it down to the bottom and did a circuit around the rim, then surfaced again and began dispensing with the fleet of sodden cereal bits still floating on top.

Regrettably, I no longer own this wonderful prize.

Although I blame myself, it was Celine who actually disposed of it. One evening, tired of her stony silence, I decided to provoke a response from her *vis-à-vis* a harmless surprise as she soaked in the tub. I activated the sub by remote then pressed my ear to the bathroom door to listen for her reaction.

All I heard was the flush of the toilet.

In retrospect, I can't fault Celine for her action, and it consoles me some to think that my sub now braves unexplored depths somewhere far beneath the city.

(5) Rice Crispeez, Hal Linden Adventure Hour Edition

This wasn't a prize per se, but the sheer craftsmanship involved in the concept and design was so impressive that it merits inclusion. After pouring on the milk, the cereal itself actually played the theme song to that ever-popular Saturday morning show; each specially designed Crispee contributed a note to the tune, *We're All Here to See Hal Linden*. "Misfirings" aside, the reproduction was impressive.

I am not myself a devotee of the program, but when I wetted my first bowlful of this remarkable product, the music vividly reminded me of the last time I had watched.

It's my belief that if one is going to watch a television program, one should experience it *fully*. Which means turning the volume way up high and allowing the visual projections the full run of the room. So was the scene that particular Saturday morning, me sitting crosslegged before the set as the program's various dancers and stunt artists gamboled about the den.

All of a sudden, Celine strode in, looking...haggard. She surveyed the goings-on with a grim expression.

"Come to join in the festivities, sweetie pie?"

She backhanded a lampshade that had been serving as a receptacle for one of the show's projections. And left the room without further comment.

Respecting my wife's unexplained objection to the show, I ceased watching. Even when I indulged in this fine, limited edition cereal, I was careful to cup my hands over the bowl as it made its music, in case she found even the theme song objectionable. A testament to the product, I suppose, that this should be a concern.

(6) Crick, Crack, and Crock Fingerpuppets

Amazing how much can be accomplished nowadays with a single piece of plastic. When the Crock fingerpuppet first landed in my bowl, I wasn't very enthusiastic. However, when I unwrapped the figure and popped him onto my digit, excitement seized me. The little grenadier had arms I hadn't noticed before, and his costume was nicely detailed, from the plume on his helmet to the piping of his jacket. The insertion of my finger lent his malleable form startling vitality, and his cherubic features seemed to brighten with the coaxing of a fingertip.

I spent an hour in my room just working out the nuances of expression which the fingerpuppet was capable of. During this process, I came up with an appropriate voice for my newfound chum, and then found myself creating adventures for him. Soon we engaged in witty banter, and my joyous laughter rang through the house.

So absorbing did I find this little rascal that I stopped hearing other sounds around the place: not the plea of the tea kettle, nor the cry of neglected plumbing, not even the slam of the front door, and footsteps down the driveway.

(7) Wunderpux Gag Cereal

The good people at Wunderpux outdid themselves with this hard-to-find item: gag cereal. It was designed with such attention to detail that, except for being made from nontoxic rubber, it was virtually indistinguishable from the real puffs of brightly colored wheat. Nonetheless, the decision to place it directly in the cereal without separate packaging was an ill-advised one, and the manufacturer found itself in a morass of legal difficulties when consumers began producing stool riddled with fluorescent pellets.

The efficiency with which the product was pulled from supermarket shelves created a bonafide collector's item.

Unfortunately for me, although I did have a box from the coveted run, I finished it off during a period when my thoughts tended to aimlessly drift, many hours spent at the breakfast table simply chewing away like some mindless quadruped working its cud. I probably worked on those rubber nuggets until they actually became digestible.

Whatever the case, the prize never turned up, and all I had to show for it was another empty box for my other significant collection.

(8) The Plastic Butterfly

The most difficult entry.

How well I remember standing in the kitchen with one arm dug shoulder deep in a box of McGuffin's Puffed Ruffage, sifting the cereal with my fingers for the promised Plastic Butterfly—I'm sure all aficionados know the feeling, the almost unbearable, skin-tingling sense of anticipation which accompanies such moments.

But as I dug deeper, and deeper, and deeper still for the item, something struck me.

My surroundings.

Unwashed bowls piled five high, in and around the kitchen sink (some quick math told me just how long I'd been eating cereal three times a day). Looking at the floor, I could spot any variety of nugget lying somewhere, neglected—and in some cases, furry.

And when I saw the white puddles, or worse, white stains, on horizontal surfaces all around the room, I felt suddenly on the verge of crying over spilled milk.

But it was no use.

I withdrew my arm from the box, holding only a handful of dry breakfast product.

The Plastic Butterfly is remarkable as the only prize in my collection that remains buried in its box. Quite abruptly, I'd lost all interest in finding it.

A significant crisis.

Days later, I still couldn't muster any enthusiasm. So I started to review the history I share with cereal prizes, hoping to rekindle some of the excitement that the best ones had dropped into otherwise unremarkable mornings. Or at least determine how they could lose their magic. Another opinion would be helpful, I suppose. But when I slip the Crock fingerpuppet onto a digit and ask him what he thinks, he seems capable of nothing more than his smiling face, nodding silently, silent as the empty house around me. •

JAN LARS JENSEN is a recent graduate of the University of Victoria Writing Program, and has also published fiction in *Aboriginal SF* and *Grue*. He works for the Fraser Valley Regional Library System and in his spare time cycles the local mountains, or searches for antique toys to add to his collection. He will be happily married in September.

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- **Vol. 1, No. 2** (#2) Fall/89
Eileen Kernaghan, Leslie Gadallah, Paula Johanson, Drake Dresen, Trevor Murphy, E.C. Bell, Tor Åge Bringsvæld, Clélie Rich, Richard Davies, Coralie Adams, Janet Elliot Waters, Jena Snyder, & Spider Robinson. Cover: Robert Pasternak.
- **Vol. 2, No. 1** (#3) Spring/90 *SOLD OUT*
- **Vol. 2, No. 2** (#4) Fall/90
Edo van Belkom, Bruce Taylor, Susan MacGregor, Sandy Robertson, Beth Goobie, Anna Mioduchowska, Sandra Hunter, Catherine Girczyc, Alice Major, & Cheryl Merkel. *Aurora-winning cover*: Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk.
- **Vol. 2, No. 3** (#5) Winter/90
Theme: Youth Writing & Art – Nicole Luiken, Peter Tupper, Keynyn Brysse, Cory Doctorow, Rhonda Whittaker, Christine Gertz, Cairo & X, Jeb Gaudet, Marissa Kochanski, & Monica Hughes. Cover: Deven Kumar.
- **Vol. 3, No. 1** (#6) Spring/91
Richard deMeulles, Herbert Steinhouse, Sally McBride, Humberto da Silva, M.J. Murphy, Edith Van Beek, Leslie Gadallah, Barry Hammond, Catherine MacLeod, & Michael Skeet. Cover: Adriane Kleinbergen.
- **Vol. 3, No. 2** (#7) Fall/91
Keith Scott, Alice Major, J. Nelson, Jena Snyder, Barry Hammond, Cheryl Merkel, Anna Mioduchowska, Dot Foster, Diane Walton, & Brent Buckner. Cover: Martin Springett.
- **Vol. 3, No. 3** (#8) Winter/91. *Theme: Humour* – Michael Skeet, Diane Mapes, Hugh Spencer, Hazel Sangster, Carolyn Clink, Allan Goodall, A.J. Axline, Beth Fogliatti, Jena Snyder, Alice Major, Donna Farley, & J. Nelson. Cover: Nancy Niles.
- **Vol. 4, No. 1** (#9) Spring/92
Hugh A.D. 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. *Aurora-winning 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.
- **Vol. 5, No. 2** (#13) Summer/93.
Robert J. Sawyer, Jason Kapalka, Bill Wren, Marian L. Hughes, Alison Baird, Bruce Barber, Nicholas de Kruyff, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Barry Hammond, Colleen Anderson, Tim Hammell. Cover: Rob Alexander.
- **Vol. 5, No. 3** (#14) Fall/93
Leslie Gadallah, Jason Kapalka, Dan Knight, Bruce Byfield, Alison Baird, Robert Boyczuk, Keith Scott, Preston Hapon, Rand Nicholson, David Nickle & Karl Schroeder. Cover: Robert Boerboom.
- **Vol. 5, No. 4** (#15) Winter/93
Derryl Murphy, Catherine MacLeod, T. Robert Szekely, Robert Boyczuk, Ivan Dorin, Luke O'Grady, M.A.C. Farrant, A.R. King, Wesley Herbert, Dave Duncan (excerpt from *The Stricken Field*). Cover: Robert Pasternak.
- **Vol. 6, No. 1** (#16) Spring/94
Theme: Hard SF. Karl Schroeder, Leah Silverman, Jean-Louis Trudel, Cory Doctorow, Phillip A. Hawke, Jason Kapalka, Wesley Herbert, Lydia Langstaff, Leslie Gadallah. Cover: James Beveridge.
- **Vol. 6, No. 2** (#17) Summer/94
Peter Watts, Harold Côté, Karin Lowachee, Bonnie Blake, Kate Riedel, Wesley Herbert, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Brian Burke, Jocko, Catherine Girczyc. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 6, No. 3** (#18) Fall/94
Charles de Lint, Mary E. Choo, Lesley Choyce, Marianne O. Nielsen, Braulio Tavares, Rudy Kremberg, Michael Teasdale, Michael Stokes, Spider Robinson, Alice Major, Jocko, Barry Hammond, *Art Feature*: George Barr. Cover: Tim Hammell and Peter Renault.
- **Vol. 6, No. 4** (#19) Winter/94
W.P. Kinsella, Alex Link, Keith Scott, Alison Baird, Marcel G. Gagné, Christopher Brayshaw, Brian Panhuyzen, Roma Quapp, William Southey, Jocko. *Art Feature*: Robert Pasternak. Cover: Jean-Pierre Normand.
- **Vol. 7, No. 1** (#20) Spring/95
Theme: Horror & Dark Fantasy. Lyle Weis, Eileen Kernaghan, Peter Watts, Marie Jakob, Tanis MacDonald, Peter Darbyshire, David Nickle, L.R. Morrison. *Art Feature*: Peter Francis. *Nonfiction*: Barry Hammond, Robert J. Sawyer. Cover: Adrian Kleinbergen.

Do you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe? Mr. Science can answer it! Send your question to: Ask Mr. Science, c/o ON SPEC Magazine, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6

Ms. JS of Edmonton, AB, asks:

Q: If evolution is continuing, what are human beings evolving into?

A: As you already know, insects are constructed with a hard exoskeleton on the outside of their bodies to protect the soft parts inside. Human beings have already techno-evolved into pseudo-insects, by encasing themselves in wheeled metal shells to protect the soft, squishy parts inside.

Ms. AJ of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q: Why does static electricity cause certain materials to stick to me?

A: Your skin is so dry that it behaves as an electrical insulator. Addition of 150 ml. of glycerine and 10 grams of table salt to your bath water will have a remarkable experimental effect. By rendering your skin electrically conductive, the static charge on the outside of a charged object will be rapidly distributed over your body, giving both you and the object the same polarity of static charge. This will result in the object flying rapidly away as soon as it has touched you. Be sure to wear rubber gum-boots when performing this demonstration.

Mr. MM of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q: So when will hell freeze over?

A: A complex examination of all meteorological data in recorded history predicts, with greater than 95% probability, that hell will freeze over on January 28th, 2004, with a margin of error of two days either way. A vast number of promises must be fulfilled on that day.

Ms. LT-F of Edmonton, AB, asks:

Q: Why are tomatoes red?

A: For most of their growing life tomatoes are quite green, the most common color of photosynthetic members of the plant kingdom. The older they get, the more they understand of the world around them. When they hear the stories of the birds and the bees they become very embarrassed, blushing quite red. Despite their shy, sensitive nature, tomatoes are very well represented in all of the four basic food groups—order-in, take-out, frozen and canned foods.

ON CONS:

Canadian Convention & Reading Calendar

When contacting conventions for more information, include a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for their reply. Abbreviation code: GoH = Guest of Honor, TM = Toastmaster, MC = Master of Ceremonies.

- **JUNE 15-18 – AD ASTRA 15****

Holiday Inn, Yorkdale. GoHs: Roger Zelazny, Anne Crispin, Shawna McCarthy, Ellen Datlow. Memb: \$28 to Apr 30, \$35 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 7276, Station "A", Toronto ON, M5W 1X9.

- **JUNE 30-JULY 3 – KINGCON 95**

Courtenay Bay Inn, St John. Relaxacon. Info: #9, Peters St, Saint John NB, E2L 2Z8.

- **JULY 1-2 – CONQUEST 95**

Agri-com Building, Edmonton. Comic, card & game show. Info: Box 2, Site 6, Calahoo AB, T0G 0J0.

- **JULY 21-23 – CONVERSION XII****

Glenmore Inn, Calgary. GoH: Lois McMaster Bujold. TM: Greg Bear. Comic GoH: Len Wein. Memb: \$35 to July 5, \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 1088, Station M, Calgary AB, T2P 2K9.

- **AUG 4-6 – TORONTO TREK 9**

Regal Constellation Hotel, Toronto. Info: Suite 0116, Box 187, 65 Front St W, Toronto ON, M5J 1E6.

- **AUG 4-6 – CANGAMES**

Ottawa. Wargaming. Info: 162 Laurier Ave W, 2nd Fl, Ottawa ON, K1P 5J4.

• AUG 18-20 – MIGSCON XVI

Hamilton Ramada Hotel. Gaming, historical miniatures. Info: Box 37013, Barton Postal Outlet, Hamilton ON, L8L 8E9.

**Cath Jackel will be attending Ad Astra in Toronto and Conversion in Calgary. All *ON SPEC* contributors and subscribers are invited to stop by our dealer's table and say "hi."

ON SPEC would like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send us 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.

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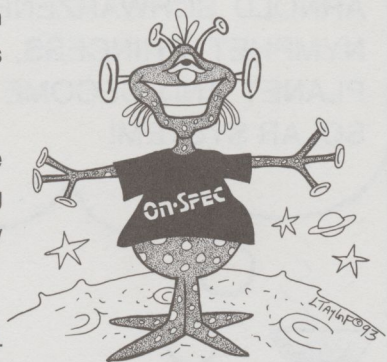
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THE LAST WORD

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk, Art Director

Last issue, we talked about change as a positive thing. Well, sometimes it's just plain old necessary.

Sadly, this will be my last issue as Art Director of *ON SPEC*. As the magazine has grown and expanded, so has the amount of time and energy required to ensure the highest artistic quality possible.

After three years as Art Director I have found, unfortunately, that I am no longer able to volunteer the time that *ON SPEC* deserves and still maintain my artistic freelance career. The decision to leave was a difficult one. *ON SPEC* is making great strides in the field of speculative fiction and I hate to miss out on all the fun. But I also have an extremely jealous airbrush that whimpers and fidgets whenever I ignore it.

Starting with the Fall issue, art direction of the magazine will be in the very capable hands of JANE STARR and JIM BEVERIDGE. They both bring unique talents to the job, so watch out for some great new ideas!

Before I go, some thank yous are in order here. I want to thank the *ON SPEC* staff for asking me to be a part of this exceptional magazine. Thanks especially to JENA SNYDER, Production Editor, for picking up the phone every morning even though she knew it was me on the other end. Her heroic efforts give the magazine its professional look and high standard of quality. Thanks to BILL WILLIAMS, our printing rep, for his unfailing commitment to the magazine. Thanks to my husband, the lovely and talented STEVE FAHNESTALK, for being so supportive and incredibly helpful. Thanks to you, the READERS, for expressing your appreciation of the artwork. And last, but certainly not least, thanks to the many talented ARTISTS who made my job interesting, challenging, and lots of fun. •

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.

Do NOT send originals. All submissions **must** include a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (SASE) with sufficient postage to cover return of manuscript, or for reply if MS is disposable. If submitting from outside Canada, send International Reply Coupons with SAE.

Submissions must be in **competition format** (author's name should NOT appear on manuscript). Enclose separate cover page with your name, address, **phone number**, story title and word count. Submissions in incorrect format will be returned unread.

Please send SASE for complete guidelines before submitting.

Deadlines are August 31/95, November 30/95, February 29/96 and May 31/96.

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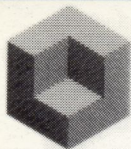
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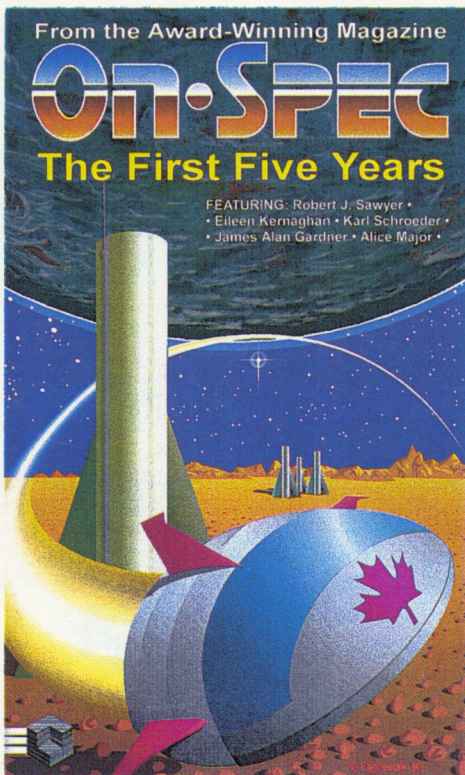
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