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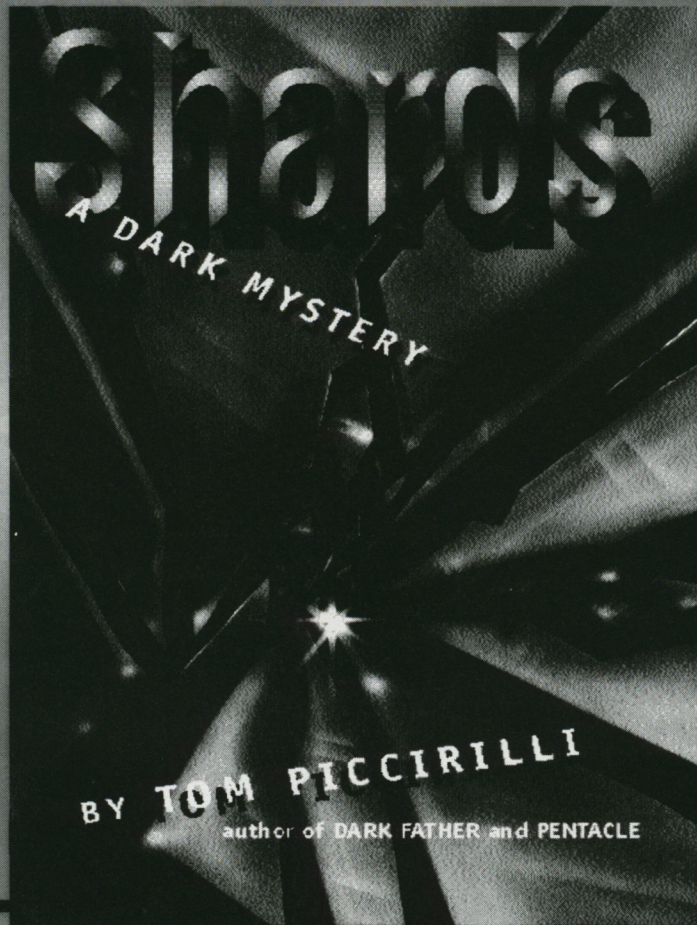
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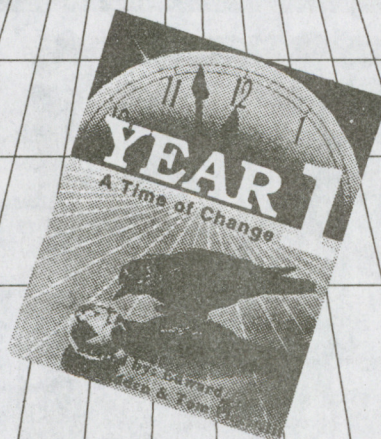
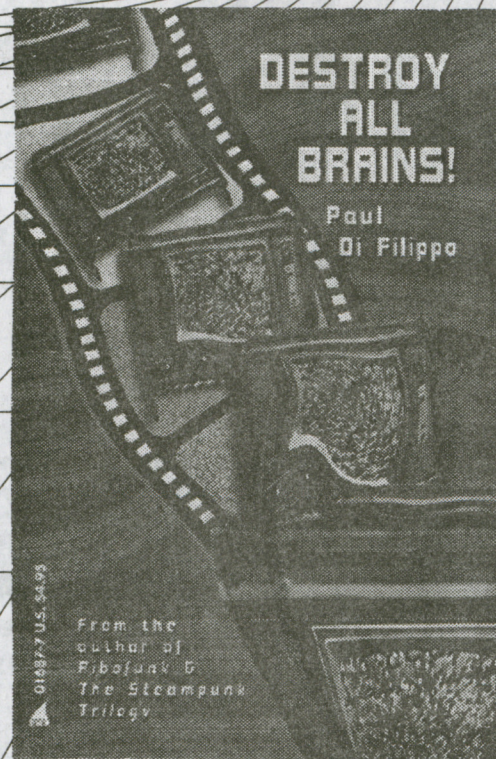
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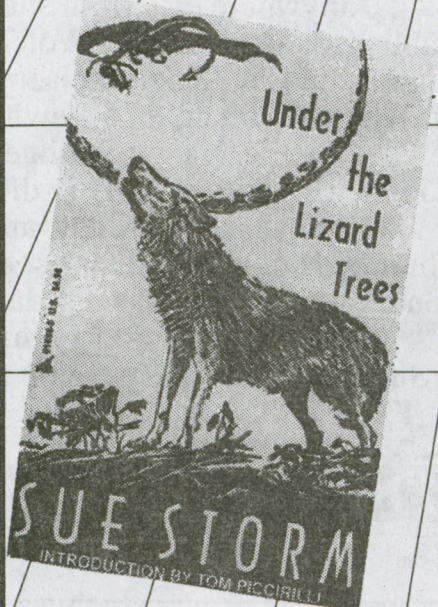
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## From the Editor's Desk

"And not one will know of the war, not one  
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,  
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn  
Would scarcely know that we were gone."

The above lines from Sara Teasdale's poem which appear in Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains" represent the powerful impact of a story that has been read by millions of people. It has always been one of my favorite stories—yet I still haven't figured out why. Recently I re-read the piece and reflected not on the main theme of the tale—which in my opinion is humanity—but the satire of the house itself and the irrelevance of the people who live there.

The McFadden House: I don't need to adjust my heat. There is a small computer gizmo that is programmed to turn my heat off when I'm gone and turn it back on before I arrive home. My porch light—programmed. My driveway lights—on a timer. I have several motion detection lights which come on as my car pulls up and as I make my way to the back door. They turn off automatically. Coffee machine—programmable to fix my coffee. My Christmas lights this year were on a timer—holiday cheer without the effort. My fax machine and answering machine require no interaction from me. "Ten-fifteen. The garden sprinklers whirled up in golden founts..." My sprinkler system is automatic. You can give water and food to your pets with elaborate contraptions that require little human interaction. Get it? You think your house would miss you? I agree with Sara...it wouldn't even know I was gone.

Wow...that was deep, huh? Read on and enjoy...

Ed McFadden, Editor

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Tales of Fantasy, Mystery • Science Fiction

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## Letters

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I bought my first copy of *Pirate Writings* the other day (#11), read the editorial, read the letters-to-the-editor, and then had to respond, even though I have not yet read the stories in this fine-looking issue.

I have spent the last year and a half as editor of a magazine, and didn't know whether to laugh or look for a lawyer upon reading Dale Hoover's letter. I don't know how many times I've packed up and sealed rejected manuscripts only to spot the paper clip lying on the table. Do I open the envelope and slip the clip in, resealing it with tape? I admit, I have never done that. I feel the paper clip police breathing down my neck.

The point of my letter is this: to those budding writers out there (and even the more experienced ones), do not send anything that you can't live without. That includes the paper clip that has been handed down through your family for fourteen generations.

Artistic angst is fine and natural, but if you find yourself flying into a rage over the loss of a paper clip, it's time to seek counseling.

Sincerely,  
Marie Loghin

[Well...what's left to say?]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I just picked up my first issue of *PW* (#11). Nice work.

I have a question about paper clips. Is Dale for real? I mean does she actually exist? The paper clip as "...a symbol that runs deep into the heart of every writer..." I think a pencil, paper, postage, the *Jetsons* would all be significantly better symbols for any writer.

Thanks for printing her letter(s). I needed the reality check.

Regards,  
Randy

[As I noted when you E-Mailed me this note...I couldn't make this up...I'm not that good a writer.]

[And that's it on Dale...we've punished her enough. Let's hope she takes Randy's advice and picks a new symbol.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

What's all this crap I'm hearing about another rag your publishing...*Epitaph* I think it's called? (Only kidding about the rag stuff...I've been a *PW* subscriber since issue three. Boy have things changed.)

Later,  
Kim Westbrook

[*Epitaph is a new horror magazine published by Pirate Writings Publishing. The first issue was just released. See the ad on the back cover of this issue for ordering information.*]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I enjoyed *PW*#12 immensely and I have a question: Who is the seriously ill person who is afraid of eggs and mustard. I thought I'd heard of every phobia known to man (my sister is afraid of milk) but your friend sounds like she needs a shrink. I'm fairly cheap...

Yours,  
Dr. Lance York

[*Ha! Very good. I would never suggest she go to a shrink...that would destroy all the fun!*]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

Some words about the *More Mystery Issue* (#12)—as a fan of the three genres listed in your subtitle, especially *Mystery*, I'm glad to know that someone like myself can pick up one magazine and find such a fine mix of solid SF/F/M fiction, articles, interviews and reviews. The macabre, affecting works of Mark Rich and Sue Storm were gripping, intriguing reads, and "Milk-ing Belle" by Brian Plante was a powerful and sorrowful tale that combined the strongest elements of science fiction and fantasy. I also enjoyed Mr. Piccirilli's informative interview with Ed Gorman, as well as his darkly brooding (yet funny) tale "On Oswald Avenue". You've done a terrific job bringing readers some of the best work in the business. Keep up the great work!

Yours,  
Freddy Monroe

.....  
Your letters and comments are welcome:  
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## PIRATE WRITINGS

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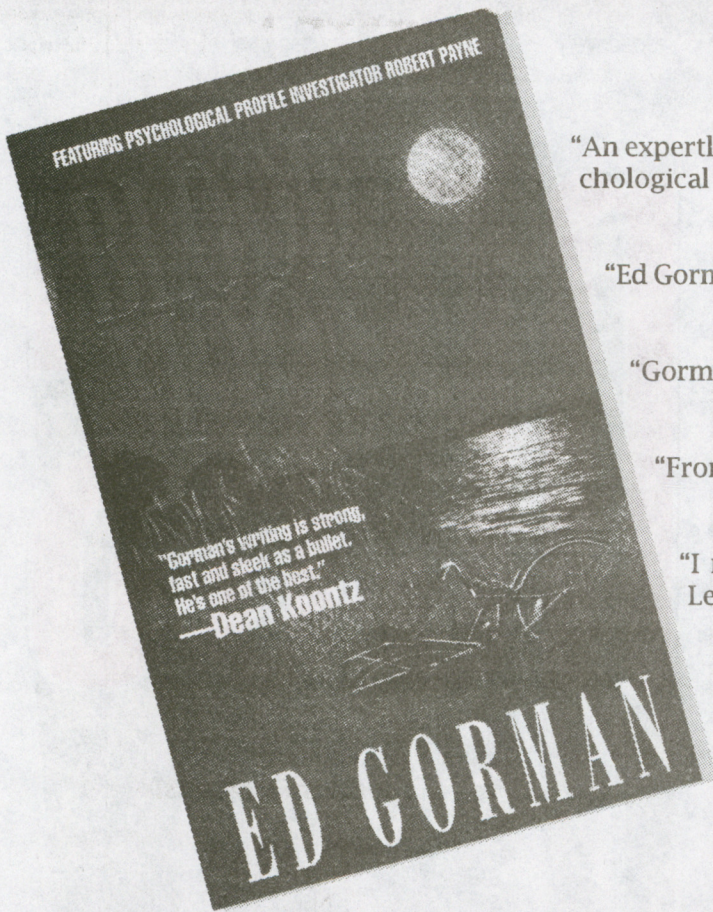
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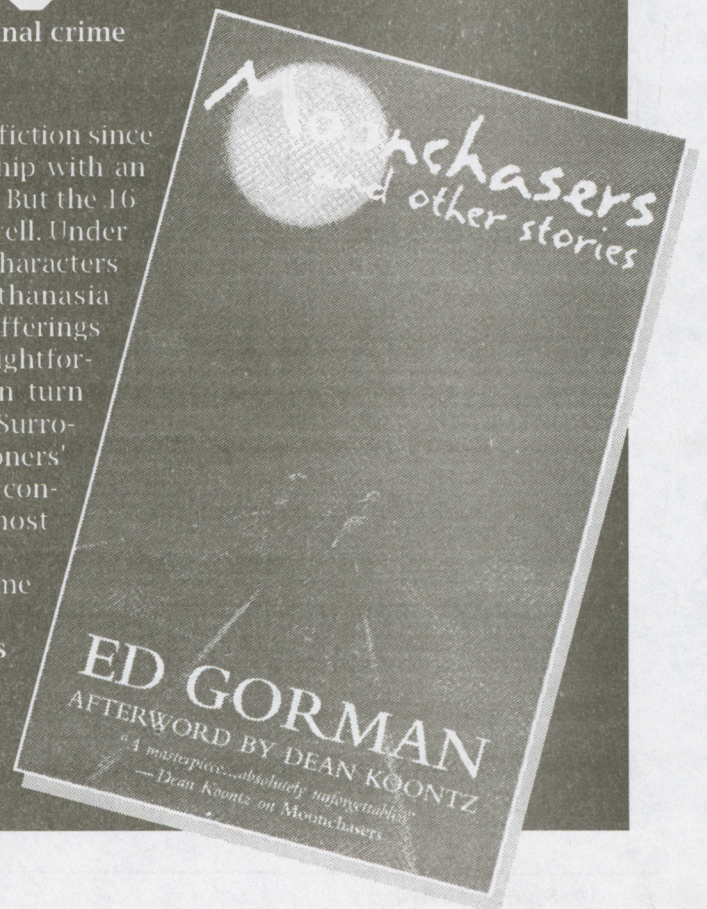
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AFTERWORD BY DEAN KOONTZ

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*Distances* marks Paul Di Filippo's fourth appearance in Pirate Writings. Two earlier efforts, "Bad Beliefs" and "Leakage" both made *The Year's Best Science Fiction* recommended reading list in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Paul's stories appear regularly in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, and many others. His first two hardcover collections, *Ribofunk* and *The Steampunk Trilogy* met with extensive critical acclaim. His third book, *Destroy All Brains!*, was recently released from Pirate Writings Publishing. Look for Paul's story "Fax" in a future issue of PW.

# DISTANCES

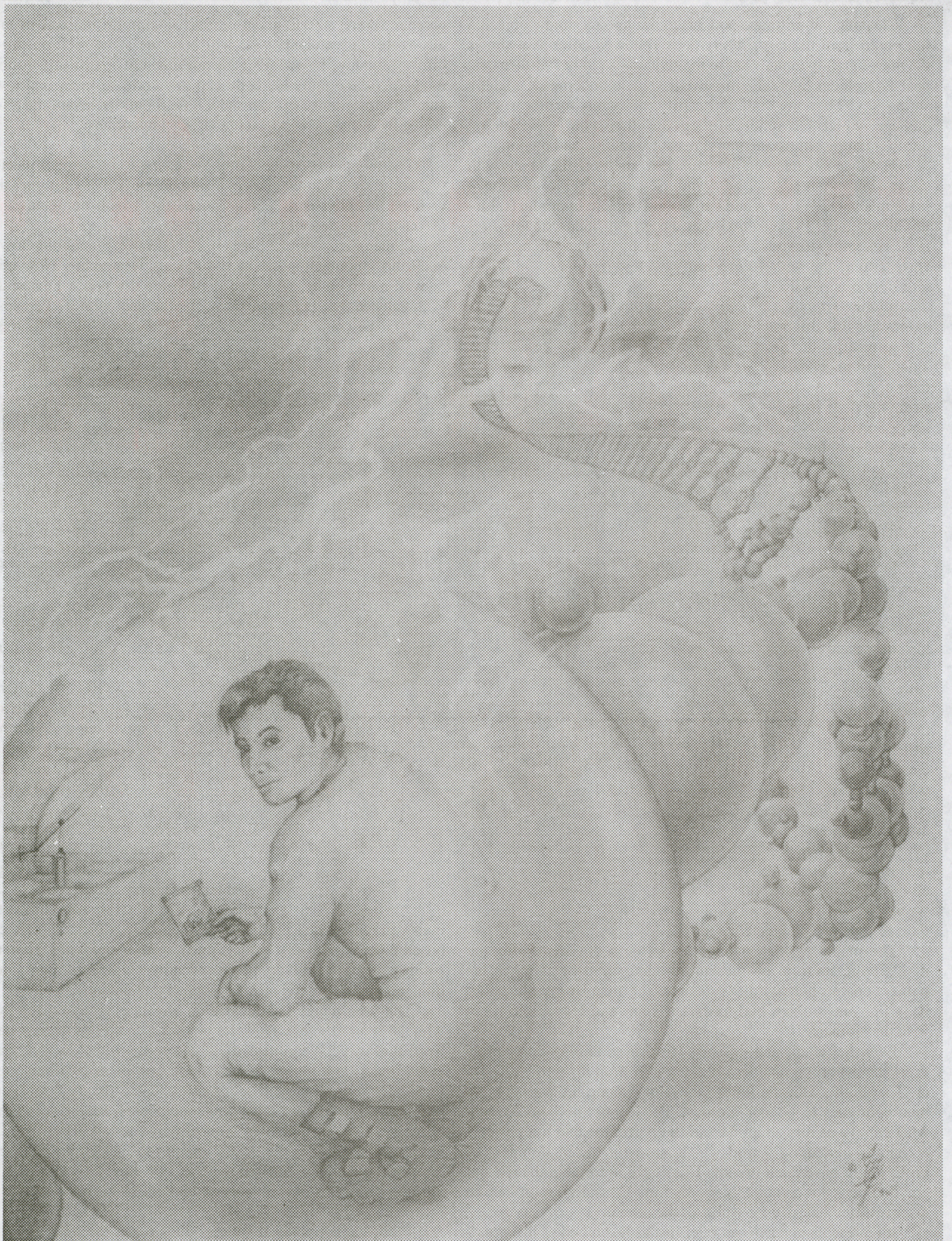
PAUL DI FILIPPO

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT COPLEY

One day in the future, seventy-five years from now, a man will sit down at his desk to write a science fiction story.

He will not be a professional writer. Neither money nor fame will spur him to compose his tale. What will motivate him will be simple bafflement that will segue into fear, and a need to grapple with it.





Cleaning out a storage pod, he comes upon a simple object: a flat photo from the last century. The yellowed color-shot shows the man's grandparents, clad in the ridiculous clothes of their era, posed before an internal-combustion vehicle underneath a sunny spring sky. They are smiling heartily, oblivious to time's swift passage, which has rendered them and their entire civilization into something almost incomprehensible, antique and quaint.

The man sits back on his haunches, studying the photo with sheer amazement. Now, he wonders, could people ever have lived this way? Wearing and eating raw organic byproducts, racing about under the naked sky in the grip of indescribable urgings, believing all sorts of nonsense about so many things: sex, war, nature, the very future he now inhabits, their own undisciplined minds. He exerts his imagination and empathy in an attempt to understand their era. The mental straining does little good, however. No clear insights into their inner or outer lives can be won from out of the misty locked-away past.

From the next room, sounds reach the man. It is one of his consensual partners, home from her day's work in the protein factories. She is cleaning up with a sonicst-rigil, prior to assembling their evening meal. The man himself has been home all day, having finished his weekly quota of work hours in just two busy days of repairs at the rectenna farm.

The man's partner, naked, enters the room, disturbing the man's concentration on the curled-edge scrap of paper in his palm. Sensing her wordless desires, the man drops the photo back into the storage pod, orders it shut, and leaves the room with the woman.

Even her adept and exciting tenderness fails to completely drive the disturbing memory of the photo from his mind, however. That night, with the lights out, lying among his partners, the man continues to ponder the past. For a time, he believes that what captivates him about the old flat portrait is that it represents a chaotic, incredible period which, save for the randomness of birth, might have been his lot. This is a comfortable theory, but one that does not completely satisfy him. Considering further, he discovers another, deeper aspect of the photo.

It represents his own sad fate. Just as he embodies his grand-

parents' future, so will his prospective son in the biobank eventually foster descendants who will bear the same relationship to him. Someday, he too will be nothing but a smiling, foolish image in a hologram, his body and the world he knew and loved and took for granted all vanished, turned into irrelevant dust, forgotten by everyone expect a few drowsy historians.

Everything changes so fast.

The thought is so shattering, so jarring to his normal placidity, that he sits up in the dark, causing his partners to stir uneasily, as if he has physically contaminated them with his unease. He leaves them to sleep if they can.

In the other room he paces back and forth, wondering how to quell this emotional storm he is suddenly weathering. How blind he was, not to understand immediately that it was not the past that threatened, but the future! How can he deal with it? Perhaps if he could envision the hostile, dreaded future, he might not feel so threatened by it—

Moving to sit at his desk, he activates his voicewriter, and begins his story:

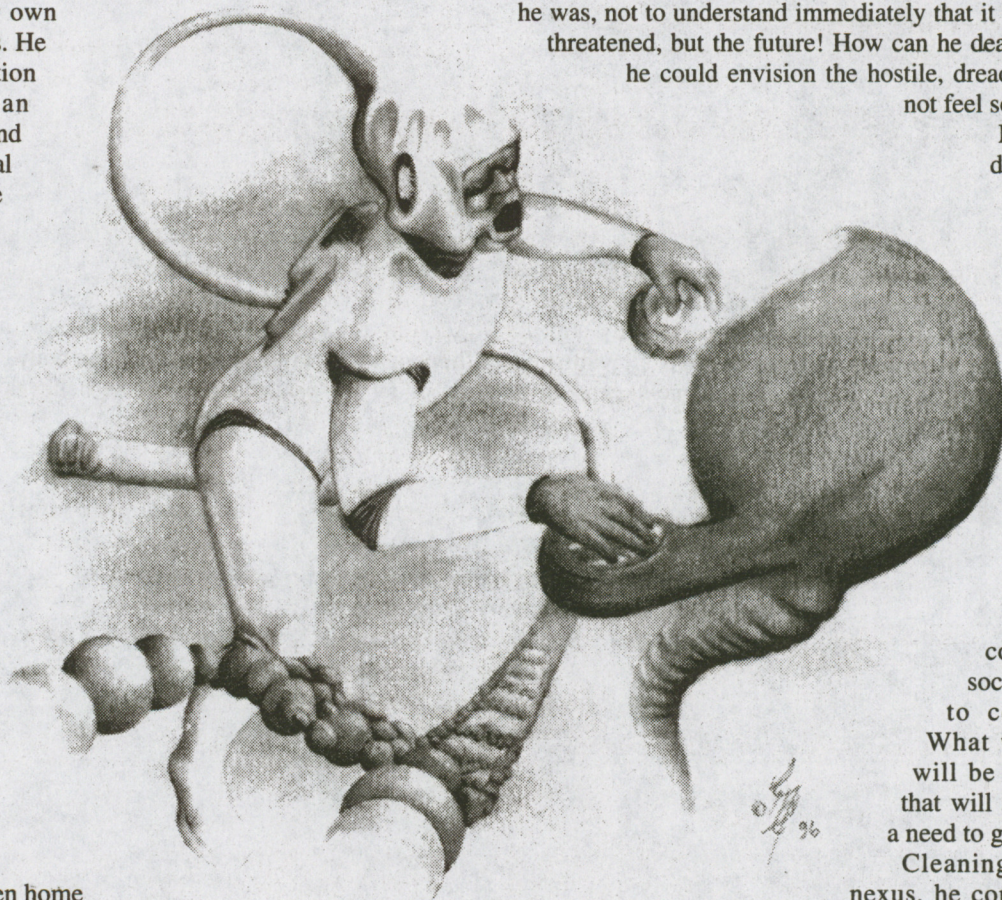
One day in the future, seventy-five standard cycles from now, a man will float before his interface to write a science fiction story.

He will not be a registered writer. Neither com/serve credit nor sociorank will spur him to compose his tale. What will motivate him will be simply bafflement that will segue into fear, and a need to grapple with it.

Cleaning out a possession nexus, he comes upon a simple object: a blurry holo from the last century. The fuzzy tridi-shot shows the man's grandparents, clad in the ridiculous clothes of their era, posed before a fuel-cell vehicle underneath a citydome. They are smiling heartily, oblivious to their entire civilization into something almost incomprehensible, antique and quaint.

The man hangs quizzically in zero-gee, studying the holo with sheer amazement. How, he wonders, could people ever have lived this way? Wearing and eating crude synthetics, scurrying about under their plastic domes in the grip of indescribable urgings, believing all sorts of nonsense about so many things: sex, intergroup aggressions, the extrahuman biosphere, the very future he now inhabits, their own undisciplined minds. He exerts his imagination and empathy in an attempt to understand their era. The mental straining does little good, however. No clear insights into their inner or outer lives can be won from out of the misty locked-away past.

From the adjoining bubble, sounds reach the man. It is one



of his assigned resident stim/soothe mates, home from her day's work in the crystal-growth plexus. She is changing her skin, prior to assembling their evening meal. The man himself has been home all day, mediating sociodisputes via his interface.

The man's s/s mate, newly skinned, enters the bubble, disturbing the man's concentration on the shimmering, primitive artifact floating before him. Primed to respond at this hour, the man shoves the holo back into the nexus, gestures it shut, and leaves the bubble with the woman.

Even her adept and exciting rituals fail to completely drive the disturbing memory of the holo from his mind, however. That night, with the stars shining outside the darkened bubble and black space crowding close, floating among his partners who cluster in a sphere of flesh, the man continues to ponder the past. For a time, he believes that what captivates him about the old tridi portrait is that it represents a chaotic, incredible period which, save for the randomness of decanting, might have been his lot. This is a comfortable theory, but one that does not completely satisfy him. Considering further, he discovers another, deeper aspect of the holo.

It represents his own sad fate. Just as he embodies his grandparents' future, so will his prospective son lurking in the heritage matrices eventually program descendants who will bear the same relationship to him. Someday, he too will be nothing but a smiling, foolish image in a memostim, his body and the world he knew and loved and took for granted all vanished, turned into irrelevant dust, forgotten by everyone except a few conscientious machines.

Everything changes so fast.

The thought is so shattering, so jarring to his normal placidity, that he kicks out in the dark, causing his partners to stir uneasily, as if his bioaura has contaminated them with his unease. He leaves them to sleep if they can.

In the other bubble he ricochets gently back and forth, wondering how to quell this emotional nova he is suddenly undergoing. How blind he was, not to understand immediately that it was not the past that threatened, but the future! How can he deal with it? Perhaps if he could envision the hostile, dreaded future, he might not feel so threatened by it—

Moving to hover at his interface, he activates his memtrans, and begins his story:

One day along the timegyre, 1.7 x 113 local proton-decay events from now, a human will pause on his journey to another star to externalize a science fiction story.

He will not have been issued writerly genes, yet somehow he will transcend this lack. Neither interpersonal exchange secretions nor illustrious timegyre repute will spur him to externalize his tale. What will motivate him will be simple bafflement that will seque into fear, and a need to grapple with it.

Mentally cleaning his catalog of internal memostims, he comes upon an unsuspected entry: a clear transcription at least three generations old. The sensory blast hiding behind the cue is of the human's gene-linked predecessors, clad in the inefficient skin of their era, posed inside a primitive inter-colony transport against a viewscreen that reveals a starscape. They are smiling heartily, oblivious to time's swift passage, which has rendered them and their entire civilization into something almost incomprehensible, antique and quaint.

The human swims quizzically in his ship's transport fluid, replaying the stim with sheer amazement. How, he wonders, could people ever have lived this way? Wearing crude skin, eat-

ing through their mouths, scurrying about among space-colonies in the grip of indescribable urgings, believing all sorts of nonsense about so many things: sex, gene-determined outerness, the scintillant, multidimensioned plenum, the very nowness he inhabits, their own unstructured neurofields. He triggers his imagination and empathy routines in an attempt to understand their portion of the timegyre. The routines must have a bug, however. No clear insights into their inner or outer lives can be won from out of the misty locked-away past.

From elsewhere in the fluid, chemo/pressure waves reach the human. He reads them as those of one of his commensal nonhuman fellow voyagers, swimming toward him from his/her stint in the navigation blister. He/she is lacing the common fluid with both anxiety and mating pheromones. The human finds himself responding.

The human's commensal, at peak excitement, enters the human's personal radius, disturbing the human's concentration on the internal sensory transcription. Awash in the diluted pheromonal mix, the human stores the stim in his mental queue of matters to attend to, and couples with the alien.

Even her/his fine performance in the negotiated common truce-mating fails to completely drive the disturbing memory of the stim from his mind, however. That downtime, with the maddening warpspace safely hidden away beyond the ship walls, breasting the exercise current with powerful strokes of arms and flippers and a wriggle of his sinuous body, the human continues to ponder the past. For a time, he believes that what captivates him about the old full-spectrum stim is that it represents a chaotic, incredible period which, save for the wisdom of the Human Creation Agency, might have been his lot. This is a comfortable theory, but one that does not completely satisfy him. Considering further, he discovers another, deeper aspect of the stim.

It represents his own sad fate. Just as he embodies his gene-linked predecessors' future, so will he eventually be linked through his prospective son lurking in the plans of the HCA to descendants who will bear the same relationship to him. In some forward portion of the timegyre, he too will be nothing but a smiling, foolish image in a memostim, his body and the plenum he knew and loved and took for granted all vanished, turned into irrelevant dust, forgotten by everyone except a few keen-tasting organisms.

Everything changes so fast.

The thought is so shattering, so jarring to his normal placidity, that he ceases to swim, allowing the current to drive him back into a calm eddy.

In the still pool, he thrashes gently back and forth, wondering how to quell this emotional warpspace he is suddenly traversing. How untasting of the omnipresent fluid of life he was, not to understand immediately that it was not the past that threatened, but the future! How can he deal with it? Perhaps if he could envision the hostile, dreaded future, he might not feel so threatened by it—

Activating transcription subroutines, the human begins to externalize—into a secretion that others can savor— his story: ...science fiction ...time ...human ...pause... bafflement... fear... old... oblivious... incomprehensible... amazement... sex... inner... outer... past... mating... memory... captivates... chaotic... deeper... fate... nothing... smiling... dust... forgotten... changes... shattering... wondering... future... threatened... understand... story: ...time... past... changes... future... wondering... story: ...time ▲

# Destiny

-Marina Lee Sable

One last moonrise melts  
in the nebulous night  
of memory strands,  
dark chimeras drifting  
toward a fluxing future.  
Retrorockets ignite  
a fission of wailing walls  
inside a fiery ion glove  
that splits  
an alien atmosphere  
down destiny's dark  
selvage spine.  
The midnight lands  
summon the silent sleepers  
to the shadowy realm  
of a penumbra.

# Scenes from the Hubble Telescope

-Jennifer B. Crow

I move within a vast eternal clock,  
just one small soul that keeps the dance of time.  
And yet I know each solitary rhyme  
makes up a larger song death cannot mock.  
Each voice that joins the harmony of love  
and light defeats destruction's greatest power.  
And so, to those who only grieve and cower,  
I say, come join the dance, for we can move  
the very stars in their foundations here  
with faith, and see the beating hearts of suns.  
The Universe makes songs where once there was none,  
and memories of songs repeating clear.  
I lift my hands, to touch the radiant depths of night  
and let the furnaces of God burn away  
all the sorrows that bind me to this day,  
that I may dance, as times before, in light.

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# GOON



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What happens if you take a Kentucky boy and give him Captain Marvel comics, lots of Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury and Clifford Simak, and add a generous dosage of Lovecraft, Kerouac and Hemingway? You get a southern beatnik with deep social awareness. Terry Bisson was born in Madisonville, Kentucky in 1942. The oldest of four kids, he was taught to read at the age of five by his many cousins, and grew up during the Golden Age of Science Fiction. His earliest attempts at writing resulted in beatnik poetry when he was in high school. Although you won't find any verse on his current list of publications, his writing has maintained a charming poetic cadence.

Terry Bisson's latest novel, *Pirates of the Universe*, is a wonderful journey through a strangely familiar future, where Disney-Windows is the biggest conglomerate and Petey triad, three 1,820 kilometer-long elongated "soap bubbles", are hunted in space for their skins. Bisson also recently took on the esteemed task of finishing Walter Miller's long-awaited sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, a novel that Miller worked on for thirty years yet remained incapable of completing the last three chapters. *St. Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman* will be released by Bantam in the fall of 1997.

Winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards

# TERRY BISSON

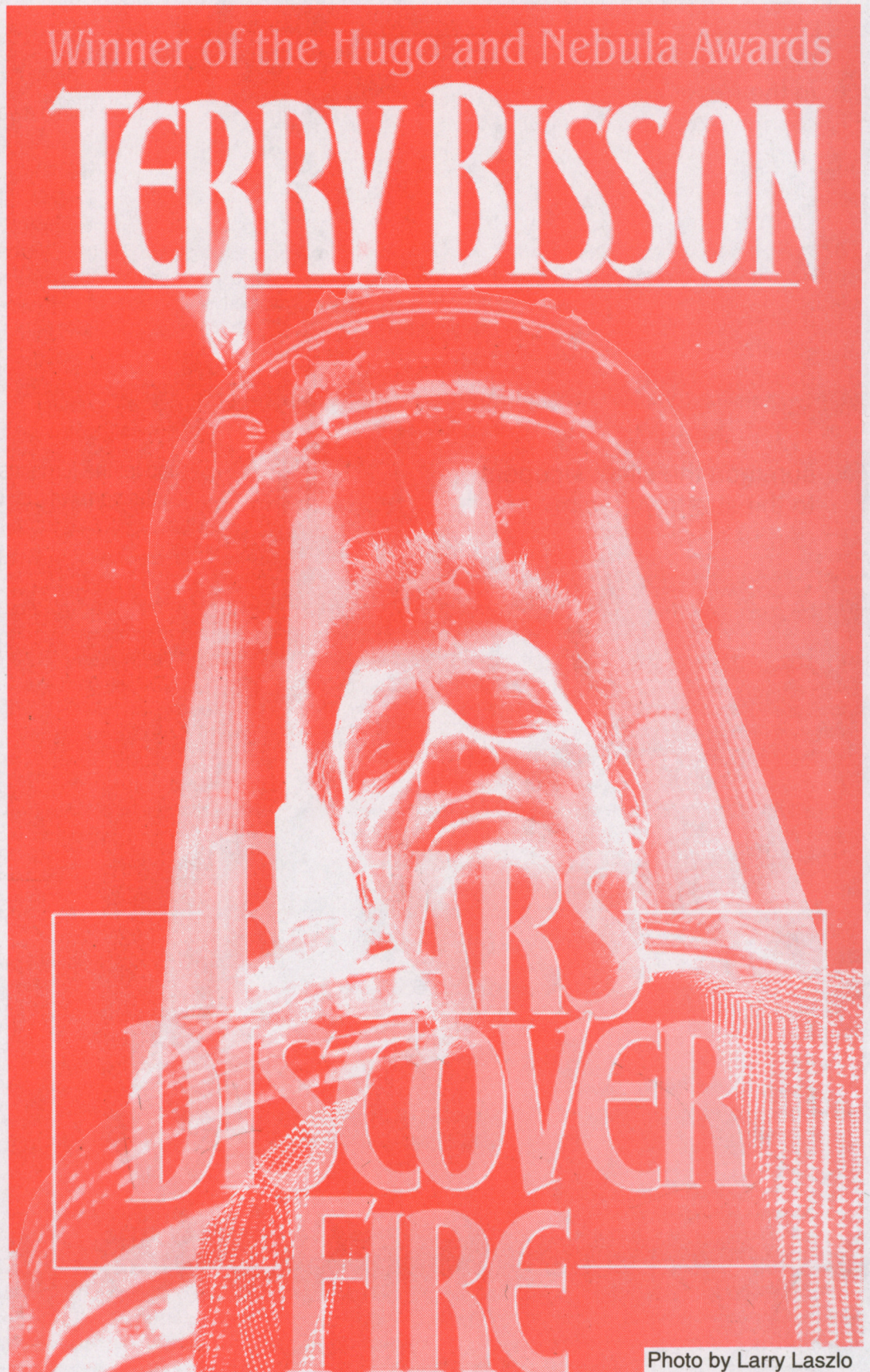


Photo by Larry Laszlo

**PW:** What was the first science fiction or fantasy piece you wrote?

**TB:** I was a senior in college when I wrote a short story, called "George", about a boy born with wings. His parents had to decide whether to cut the wings off or not. It was in a *Story* magazine contest and won an honorable mention. It's an allegory, a nice little piece of work and was published in *Bears Discover Fire*, my first short story collection.

**PW:** A lot of writers wouldn't want anyone to read their first efforts.

**TB:** Well, I had written a lot of poetry and I didn't play around with the story, it just popped out. After I graduated from college I wrote a novel called *Diamond Jim*. It was too short, about one hundred and fifty pages and a very characteristic first novel. It was sort of an imitation of Jack Kerouac's style, the main character was a young man out in the world for the first time. It wasn't bad, but I have no idea where it is now.

**PW:** What led to your first book?

**TB:** About 1975 I was living in New York and working as a taxi mechanic at three or four garages. I really liked being a mechanic but I wasn't making enough money. I had some contacts in publishing and got jobs doing copy for the back cover of a paperback books. In those days you got fifty bucks a shot. I'd pick up three or four books a week and make as much as my mechanic job. I was a 100% activist, so I was writing leaflets but no fiction.

Then I took a job as an editor, offered to me by a friend who had been made editor-in-chief at Berkeley Publishing. And that was a piece of luck for me because when people start out in publishing it's usually at a desk in the hall. I wasn't making a lot of money, but starting at the middle was a privilege, plus publishing was a lot of fun. I was writing the copy for a science fiction line at Berkeley run by David Hartwell. This was about 1978, when science fiction and fantasy publishing was going fairly well. Hartwell asked me to write a book since I had the rhetoric down in my copy. At first, I said no because I had this idea there was literature and there was hack-writing and I didn't want to mix them up. I thought about it and decided what the hell, I'm going to do this book. I gave him an outline and I wrote the book in a year or so. *Wyrdmaker* is an amusing little fantasy about a quest. It didn't do anything in the market, but it got published.

When my first book was done, Hartwell asked me to do another book, anything that I wanted. The next novel I did was the one I wanted to do, which was *Talking Man*. I had this thing about being a literary writer, I didn't want to be a science fiction writer. I didn't think of *Talking Man* as fantasy or science fiction, it

was just the novel I wanted to write. Then I wrote a couple of short stories and realized what I wrote was genuinely fantasy and science fiction. I wasn't trying make a buck or fit into a category, but actually that was what I did, so I quit worrying about it. It caught me a little by surprise.

**PW:** How did the idea of *Pirates of the Universe* come to you?

**TB:** Books always start as a visual images for me. I had an image of the Petey's floating through the solar system. It's basically a whaling book. Are you going to shoot them down or not? I had a couple of other stories I wanted to tell, like the brother and the underground. I'm very happy with the way they worked together. It was a difficult book for me, it took about three and a half years to finish. The problem was the story, there were three stories in there and I had to make them work together in the end. I rewrote *Pirates of the Universe* several times. It's really an anti-novel, a post-modern deconstruction of science fiction. I'm very happy with the results, but it was quite a struggle. It's funny because *Pirates of the Universe* goes back to the days of *Talking Man* and *Wyrdmaker*, where it's sort of science fiction and fantasy mixed. It's certainly not fantasy but the science wasn't rigorous.

**PW:** How did you get the science into *Pirates*? I especially liked the way you played with words (non-Euclidean, un-Euclidean, etc).

**TB:** I read a lot of science, like *Scientific America* magazine, books by Timothy Ferris, and James Gleick. I like books about cosmology. In a sense, *Pirates of the Universe* is about the strong anthropic principle. The whole purpose of the universe is to create an intelligence that can perceive it. I read that sort of stuff, so I didn't have to research it much.

**PW:** I liked the shy sensuality in *Pirates of the Universe*; *Gun/Tiffany* (and her incredible lingerie), *Gun* making out with his girlfriend in a car.

**TB:** The shy sensuality is really just old fashion horniness. When I write about sex, there's never any sex, there's everything but the sex act itself. It's sort of an adolescent thing.

**PW:** What have you been working on since *Pirates of the Universe*?

**TB:** A little over a year ago I got a call from Don Congdon, Walter Miller's agent. Miller had worked for over thirty years on *St. Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, the sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and never finished it. Congdon had gotten my name from Alice Turner, the editor for *Playboy* magazine. I had

been selling a lot of short stories to *Playboy* and she felt I could finish it. Miller's health was bad, his wife had died, he was very depressed and he wanted someone to complete the book for him. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is one of the eight or ten great American books, not just science fiction. It's one of the five or six science fiction novels that will always be around. It's a brilliant book, hugely popular, and still in print. People who don't read science fiction have read this book.

Congdon sent him a couple of my books and stories, and Miller wrote back and said he thought I was all right and any idiot with a sense of humor could finish the sequel. When I picked up the 592 page manuscript Miller had written I figured it was going to be a mess. I read it in a day and a night. It was absolutely brilliant. I loved it. It needed another three chapters, which Miller had outlined in his letters. I never met him, but I had letters from him saying he just couldn't finish the book, it was like trying to spit through a screen. I know that feeling and yet what he had done was so wonderful. This came along exactly at the right time because I needed the money. But I would have done it for free, just to be associated with the project. It is such a beautiful book. It's done now and I think I did a good job on it. To me it was a very fortunate thing. You never know how things will turn out, but I think people are going to absolutely love it.

Working on this book was big excitement for me. There's certain ways Miller and I are alike. *Pirates of the Universe* has this really stupid hero and that's what Miller likes to do. It's a fairly common device. So I wasn't that far afield from the way he likes to write. There are things that were a stretch. He's a very careful writer, he never does word tricks or plays around with cadence. I like to do that some of the time but I had to not do it in his book. It's an interesting discipline to finish someone else's book. And it wasn't just any book, Miller was a major literary figure, this is a major novel.

**PW:** You're also working on a number of non-science fiction projects.

**TB:** Right now I'm book doctoring two books. They're both kind of similar. They're jobs that came to me from friends. A biographical memoir by a friend who was in prison for seven years. He was a medical doctor and a revolutionary radical here in America. He's my age and came out of the Weatherman underground. He was peripherally involved in the Brinks robbery, as a doctor he treated one of the people in the organization. I was also part of that organization, but I never went underground. He was caught by the FBI around 1984 and was sent to prison. It's a memoir of a doctor in prison who has cancer, but because he's political he's in the worst prison. He was in Marion, which is worse than Alcatraz. It's put together from his letters

and writings from prison. We don't have a publisher yet, but it's on its way to the agent.

I'm doing exactly the same editorial work for another book from the sixties for Peter Coyote, a film actor who is an old friend. It's about his days as a hippie in San Francisco in the Sixties. He started out in the San Francisco Mime Troupe and was involved with different hippie groups, including the Hell's Angels. He's writing his memoir and I'm doing the same kind of editing work as the first book. We don't have a publisher yet. I don't usually do a whole lot of that kind of work but I've done these two in the last six months.

**PW:** What else is on the agenda?

**TB:** I'm getting ready to start working on my own stuff. I've been doing other people's stuff, I finished *Pirates of the Universe* over a year ago; I've done three stories, one was published in *Playboy*, one in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and one coming out in *Playboy* in April 1997. In the last year I've written three *Johnny Quest* novels which are these little kid books.

**PW:** What is your writing schedule?

**TB:** I get up every morning go downstairs and write. I start around seven in the morning and go until noon. I divide my work up between what I call my morning work and my afternoon work. I still do a certain amount of editorial work, and I'll do that in the afternoon. I have the morning for what I call creative work.

**PW:** What do you do to relax?

**TB:** Besides drinking Kentucky whisky, I like to rent four movies a week, whatever's out there. The only thing on television I watch is *Seinfeld* and I'm getting tired of him. My wife and I are hiking the Appalachian Trail. About every ten days we'll bag about eight miles from Bear Mountain on the Hudson to the Delaware River. I live a pretty quiet life. If you're a writer at least once a day you've got to sit down for five or six hours and write.

**PW:** And what would be the ultimate machine to the mechanic in you?

**TB:** I'd like to have an Ultra Light airplane, they go about 30 miles an hour. It's a very retro kind of machine. The plane in the movie *Fly Away Home* is an Ultra Light. They make a lot of noise and seem like a lot of fun. I like machines that are noisy where you can hear the motor moving, feel the vibration like in a motorcycle or a hot rod.

**PW:** Thank you, Terry. ▲

Robin Spriggs attributes his acute state of poverty to his degrees in English and Theater, and to his pronounced disdain for any authority other than his own. On stage he has played such titular roles as Hamlet and Romeo. He has appeared as thugs in the films Double Threat and Raw Justice. His fiction has sold to Plot Magazine, Terminal Fright and many others.

# the messenger

by robin spriggs

illustrated by darren cerone

Hermes loped down Leathy Street, his big silvery ears flopping against his head like broken wings. On his mouth was fixed a faint, determined smile, and he had already begun to pant—though his tongue was not yet lolling. His muddy brown eyes were focused on a destination, which, though not yet in view, he nonetheless saw clearly in his head.

The green place: he had been there a thousand times—a thousand times a thousand.

In the olden days, when his legs were much shorter and clumsier and prone to misbehave, he had stumbled there at the old man's side, bound to him by an all too short strip of hide that gave him a sharp yank every time he strayed too far to one side, or fell too far behind, or charged too far

ahead. But as he learned the route and what was expected of him by the old man, the sharp yanks came less often; at last they ceased completely, and he pranced by the old man's side with all the dignity of a four-legged prince. Not long after that, the strip of hide itself disappeared from their walks together, though the bond between them was stronger than ever before.







The trips to the green place meant a great deal to Hermes—more than a bowl full of water on the hottest day of the year or a scrap of meat when his skin stretched tightest over his ribs—but he knew they meant even more to the old man, who had never made little ones with a woman and whose family had been left behind long ago in a country far away and whose friends were fast asleep in some other green place which the old man mumbled of in dreams and which the dog had never seen.

Then the sickness came to the old man. There were no obvious symptoms—no trips to the healer, no fumbling for pills in the cigar box that served as a medicine cabinet—only the slowing down, the horrible slowing down. As Hermes grew faster and more agile, the old man grew slower and clumsier. Sometimes it seemed to Hermes that he and the old man had switched places: now it was the latter whose legs misbehaved, who now stumbled a bit to one side or the other and often fell behind.

It was then that Hermes had remembered the old strip of leather and wondered if perhaps it was time for its return. And sometimes he wondered what it must have been like in the time before his beginning—long before the old man had found him in the dump, tiny, helpless, his eyes still closed, scrounging for warmth and comfort among sibs which had long since grown cold and stiff. Had the old man been old even then? And slow? Surely not. There must have been a time when he was fast indeed, when his hair was as black or as blonde or as red as the hair on the heads of the little ones, who played so hard and laughed so hard in the green place every day.

Hermes stopped at the corner of Leathy and Akron, looked right, looked left, watched a red squasher zoom past, a blue, a green, another red, then crossed Akron and continued down Leathy, his tail held high above his back, blowing in the breeze like a great silver feather. He was alone on his trip today, as he is every day now. The old

man had not accompanied him to the green place in a very long time. Hermes missed him and would have preferred to stay with him at home, but the old man had insisted that the dog still make the daily trip, and at about the same time everyday, when the fire in the sky had dipped well past its midpoint and shortly after the giant yellow squasher filled with little ones came roaring down Leathy past home.

Hermes reached the intersection of Leathy and Arcadian, looked right, looked left, saw no squashers at all but heard one snarling farther up Leathy, beyond the hill. Then he hooked left onto Arcadian and bounded toward the distant sound of laughter. A half block later, he stood at the edge of the green place, its manifold fragrances a symphony in his nose. He was panting heavily now, and his tongue lolled wolfishly out the side of his mouth over a jagged parapet of teeth.

Oh, how he loved this place!

But he did not plunge into it headlong. Instead, he sat down, half his shaggy rump on the sidewalk, half on the grass. The old man had taught him patience. Long, long ago—back in the short-legged days.

“Come, leetle Hermes,” the old man had said. “Seet. Seet down.”

Puppy Hermes forced himself to sit, but his bottom bounced back up off the dingy patch of green linoleum like a rubber ball.

“Seet, Hermes. Seet.”

The puppy sat again and this time managed to keep himself sat.

“Good, leetle Hermes. Good, leetle quicksilver. Now, I going to get you a treat, but you mus’ stay where you are. Okay? Do not move till I say. Okay? Okay.”

The old man flipped the lid off a mud-encrusted Styrofoam cooler, reached inside and pulled out a long, crispy shred of bacon. He dangled it high above the puppy’s head. Hermes quivered with excitement.



"Now, Hermes," said the old man. "This treat for you, but you mus' wait. Eet better—eet mean more—if you wait. Da best tings in life, you mus' always wait for. Dey are slow in coming but dey are worth da wait. So be patient. Tink about eet first. Tink about eet hard. Look at eet. Smell eet. Let eet sink into your brain. Into your heart. Den you know how special eet is. Den you know how lucky you are. Den eat. Den gobble eet up for all you are worth. Unnerstand? Okay."

Hermes jumped for the bacon and the old man jerked it away. "No! No, Hermes! Seet. Seet boy."

Hermes sat.

"Good. Good Hermes. Now mus' wait. Mus' be patient."

The old man shuffled across the mangled linoleum to a chipped white bowl on the floor in the corner. He held the bacon over the bowl with one hand. The other hand he raised to Hermes. "Waaaaait," he gently encouraged. "Waaaaait!" Then he dropped the bacon into the bowl.

Hermes lunged for it—but only in his mind. In reality, he kept his fanny glued to the floor, wanting, craving, trembling, half-crazed with desire.

"Good boy," crooned the old man. "Good Hermes. Now...EAT!"

And this time Hermes did lunge, his feet spinning a wheel on the dingy linoleum. The bacon was gone in half a second.

The old man leaned against the wall, his thin body shaking with paroxysms of laughter that came out more like wheezing and quickly turned to coughing. It was not a pretty sound, but it was the sound of the old man's joy, so to Hermes it was music. And bacon had never tasted better.

Yes, the old man had taught him patience. The art of waiting, of biding time. And Hermes was grateful. He refocused his muddy browns on the present, down the lane of sprawling oaks, upon the colorful blurs of running, laughing, climbing, hollering, swinging, howling, see-sawing, giggling, monkey-barring, whistling, tug-of-warring, singing, hide-and-seeking, chanting, merry-go-rounding little ones—the heartbeats of the green place.

Hermes craved to join them. But still he sat, exercising the virtue he had worked so hard to achieve, quivering with anticipation as he had way back in the bacon-dangling days. He knew the drill. The sounds must first be captured from a distance, then from closer, and closer, and closer, just as they would come to the old man if he were taking the walk himself. Everything must be just right. He owed the old man that—that and so much more.

He felt the slight thrum of the small black box against his throat and remembered the day the old man had first affixed it to his collar.

"Hermes," called the old man from the bedraggled mattress against the wall where he now spent most of his time. "Here, Hermes."

The dog came quickly and sat before the old man, who was holding up a small black box.

"See dis, Hermes? You know what dis is? Dis a magic box. Eet capture sound. What you tink of dat? All you got to know is tree magic words.

"Da firs' one is 'record.'" He leaned forward on the mattress, held the box closer to Hermes and pointed to the word. "See here? 'Record.' Dat da word dat pull da sound into da box. Dat da word dat do da remembering. All you got to do is press da button. Okay? Okay.

"Da second word is 'rewind.' Dat da word dat take you back in time—back to da beginning. All you got to do is press da button. Okay? Okay.

"Da las' word—" the old man took a deep breath and turned his gaze to the bright summer light filtering through the dusty panes of the room's only window. A tear ran a jagged course down a wrinkle in his cheek. "Da las' word...is 'play.'" He sat silently for several heartbeats. "Dat a good word, don't you tink, Hermes? A very good word. Dat my favorite one. Bes' word in whole language."

Hermes bow-wowed. The old man turned back to the dog who was wagging his body as well as his tail.

"Ah," said the old man. "I can see eet your favorite too. Good Hermes. Smart Hermes."

The old man motioned for the dog to come closer. Hermes complied. "I make a deal with you," the old man whispered in Hermes' ear. "You carry da box, I press da buttons. Okay? Okay."

When the old man had secured the small black box to Hermes' collar with black electrical tape he said, "Now, Hermes, go to da green place. I cannot go with you. It is too far for me now. And I am tired. But you remember da way, yes? I know you do. You smart dog. Go to da green place—jus' like we used to go. Pretend I am seeting on my favorite bench. And you run and play with da leetle ones. Remember da leetle ones, Hermes? Remember how you love to play with dem? Remember how dey love to play with you? Go. Go and play with dem now. And when you are done, come back home to me and I will give you a treat."

Then the old man said the first magic word, pressed a button on the little black box, and opened the door for the dog.

Hermes again focused on the present. The time had come. He had waited long enough. The little black box would thrum only so long; it could remember only so much. He straightened his haunches, raised his shredded-sail tail and drifted down the deep green lain of sprawling, whispering oaks, patiently passing from sun to shade to sun again, each precious sound a rosebud slowly blossoming—fuller, fuller—smelling nectar-sweet in his ears. At last he was spotted by a little one—a dark-headed boy soaring high on a tall rusty swing.

"Hermes!" shouted the little one at the apogee of his forward sweep. "Hermes!" as he swished back down and rushed up again, this time backwards. "Hermes!" swooping past the nadir and leaping from the swing.

"Hermes! Hermes! Hermes!" chimed a score of elfin bells. Then someone threw a stick and Hermes fetched it.

Half an hour later, the little box clicked and ceased to thrum. Hermes was in mid-leap, en route to catching a Frisbee. He snagged the disc, landed with the grace of a ballerina, trotted the Frisbee to its owner, then took

off like the wind, slicing through the grass and back up the lane of oaks, which had fallen strangely silent. The little ones just stood and watched him go. He was fast as lightning. Tricky too. They had given up chasing him long ago.

Hermes ached to get back to the old man. He knew how much joy the parcel of sound would bring. He remembered the first day he had returned with the magic box; how the old man had lain on his mattress, head resting on the blue clump of corduroy that doubled as pillow and coat, eyes wide, sucking his lower lip, waiting, waiting, waiting, savoring the moment, forever teaching the lesson of patience; how at last he sat up, reached out and took the magic box, slowly, carefully, collar and all; how he lay back again, smiling slightly, and held the box to his chest; how he spoke the second magic word, pressed the button and waited, eyes closed, lips quivering; how the box clicked in the silence of the hot musty room; how the old man, face beaming now, eyes still closed, whispered that third and most magical of words and pressed another button; then the silence, the long, long, scary silence that Hermes feared might never end; then the knowing that the old man, whose face suddenly looked like a sun-withered apple, feared the same; then the sound of traffic coming from the box: the growl and swish of squashers and honking horns; then the rhythmic, windy sound that Hermes recognized as his own panting; then finally, faintly, the distant tinkle of elfin chimes: the giggles and whistles and calls of the little ones, the young ones; then closer and fuller and sweeter; then...then the old man sobbing and laughing and bawling and laughing and moaning and laughing; and the tears flooding the deep-sunk valleys of his cheeks like rivers of mercury; and the old man rocking from side to side, cradling the magic box the way he had cradled Hermes the day he found him in the dump, cooing and weeping and laughing and—

Home. Hermes looked up at the Hotel Paradise—an ancient red-brick monstrosity; still standing only by miracle; one crumbled brick shy of ruination; surrounded, smothered, walled up, entombed, buried alive in the dusty past by an army of taller, newer, better buildings—myriad Towers of Babel mocking the old hotel in the unknown tongue of the future. All the other buildings of its age and type had long since been destroyed or died a natural death, but the Hotel Paradise remained, an architectural impossibility bereft of kith and kin. Most of the huge, white, rust-flecked letters that crowned the edifice and identified it were missing—lost to better days; like rotten but stubborn teeth, only three remained:

## DIS

Home. Three stories up, last room on the right. The curtains the old man had made from a sheet he had found in a muddy ditch back in the walking-together days hung lifeless in the window; there was no breeze to stir them.

Hermes leaped over a pile of loose bricks and broken planks and scampered inside; past the ramshackle reception desk; past the legless, capsized, rat-infested sofa; into the dark, dead-air stairwell; up the three flights of rickety stairs; down the crooked fun house hall and all the way to the door, which the old man, as usual, had left ajar for the messenger's return.

He nosed inside; clicked across the brittle linoleum; padded onto the mangy, rust-brown carpet; and sat down at last by the mattress of a thousand stains and smells. The old man was lying on his side, the sharp angles of his bones a jagged mountain range, his skullish head resting on the clump of blue corduroy. He stared at the dog, gray eyes full of hope and anticipation. And as usual, he waited. And Hermes waited too, his muddy browns locked on the old man's cloudy grays. And they waited. And they waited. And they waited.

The waiting had never been so long before. The old man was outdoing himself. And so was Hermes, who was very thirsty now, and hungry too, but dared not stir for fear of disappointing the old man and breaking the spell of patience.

He lay down and waited some more.

Night came. Day. Night again. But still the old man did not move. Nor did Hermes, who was now no more able than willing. And the night grew darker. And darker still. It was the darkest night Hermes had ever known. Then he realized it was not the night itself that was so dark, but something—someone who moved within it, black and fathomless as a subterranean river; someone who smelled faintly of lotus blossom and love-lies-bleeding and of something else—an inscrutable potpourri of fragrances familiar yet illusive; someone he knew he should remember but could not; someone who, he somehow understood, had been wronged too many times to count and who had punished those wrongs and who had now come to relieve, release and forgive.

But forgive whom? And for what? Hermes burned to know.

"Patience," he thought he heard the old man whisper (though his parched lips did not move) from very far away. "Patience, my son."

Then the mysterious blend of fragrances unfurled deep within him, and he felt the sharp pangs and piercing aches of countless broken promises, of shivered vows and shattered oaths. They sliced through his bloodstream like cataracts of splintered glass.

Then he felt the hand of the darker-than-night someone on his brow, soft, gentle, loving, the hand of a woman; as it passed over his eyes, blinding him completely and taking back the terrible pain, he almost remembered her name and how it felt on the tongue.

Then he slept and dreamt of the green place; and of the old man sitting on a bench, waiting; and of broken promises at last forgiven; and of a little black box full of messages as yet undelivered... ▲

Alan Dean Foster needs no introduction to any fan of fantasy and science fiction. He is the author of scores of books, his short fiction has appeared in all the major magazines and Best of... compendiums, and he has done novelizations for such classic enterprises as Star Wars, the Alien films, Alien Nation and Star Trek. Recently he wrote the novelization of Stephen Spielberg's video game production, "The Dig."

# SILENT SONGS IN STONE

by Alan  
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Illustrated by Michael Apice

## Prologue:

On July 23 of one eighty-five Emil Boggs of New York commenced his umpteenth attempt to revolutionize the recording industry.

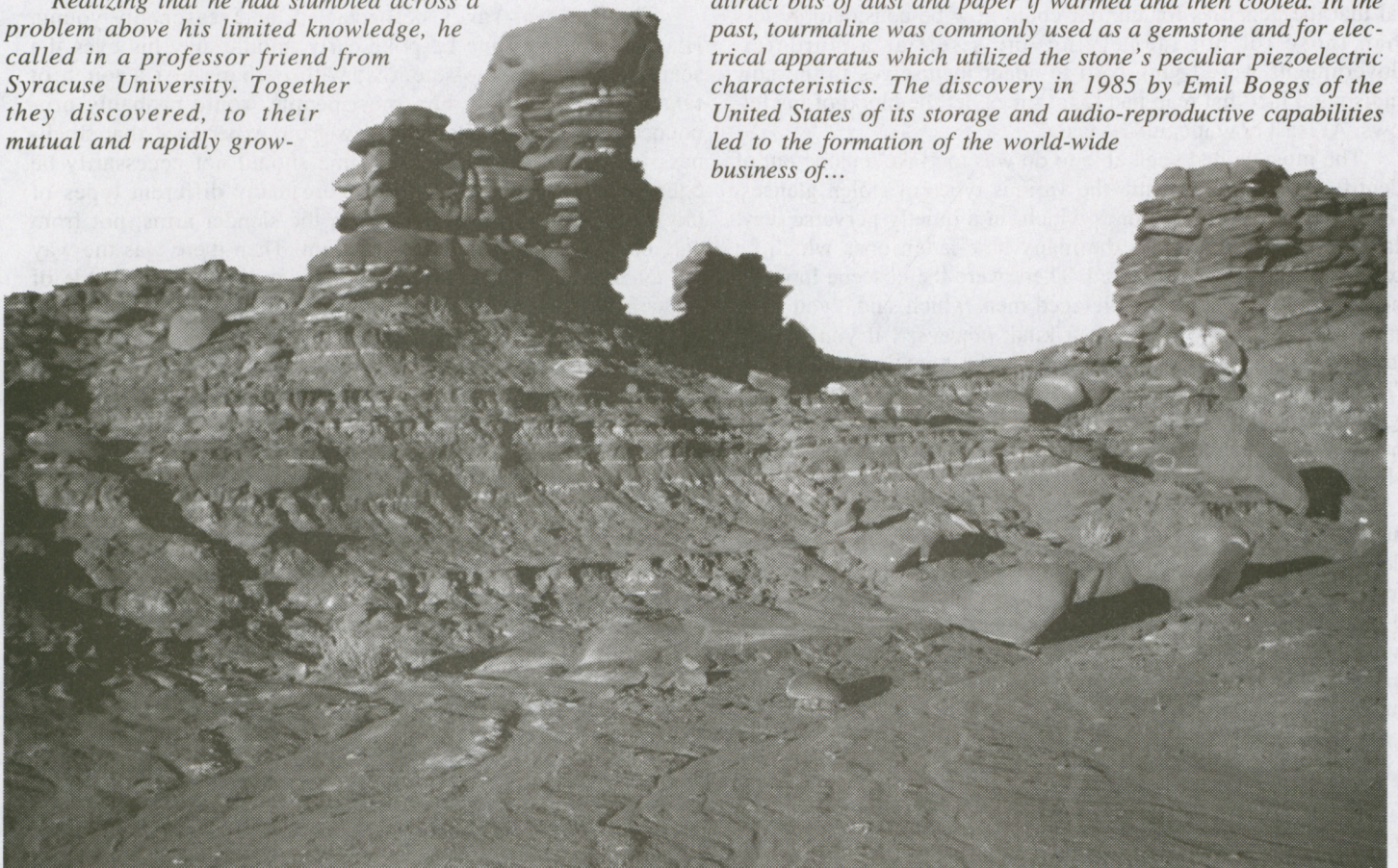
What Boggs had done in his dilapidated basement laboratory was to cannibalize a number of old phonographs, radios, tellys, and a personally offensive vacuum cleaner in an attempt to produce a startling new type of record player. Therefore, his surprise can be imagined when experimental apparatus number 463 began to play back (instead of an ancient but time-proven ditty by Bing Crosby) a scratchy and somewhat angry voice in Olde English. Accepted scientific procedure demanded that Boggs make a further investigation of this unexpected phenomenon, which he enthusiastically proceeded to do...thus becoming hopelessly confused.

Realizing that he had stumbled across a problem above his limited knowledge, he called in a professor friend from Syracuse University. Together they discovered, to their mutual and rapidly grow-

ing excitement, that the hard plasticine of the record was playing the needle, and not the normal vice versa. More experts were called in. Further playing of the needle, a sliver of pink Litha-tourmaline from England, revealed the speaker's name to be "Will". When it was then determined that "Will" was "Shakespeare", the birth of the great industry we know today as...

Note: From "A Guide to Common Rocks and Minerals", sixty-third edition.

"Litha-tourmaline. Red, green, and blue varieties known. A complex series of compounds with varying quantities and ratios of sodium, calcium, magnesium, lithium, aluminum, and iron, but with an unvarying basic structure. Includes compounds of aluminum, silica, and boron.  $Na(Al,Fe,Li,Mg)_3B_3Al_3(Al_3Si_6O_{27})(O,OH,F)$ . Commonly found in long, prismatic crystals. Will attract bits of dust and paper if warmed and then cooled. In the past, tourmaline was commonly used as a gemstone and for electrical apparatus which utilized the stone's peculiar piezoelectric characteristics. The discovery in 1985 by Emil Boggs of the United States of its storage and audio-reproductive capabilities led to the formation of the world-wide business of...



Peopled looked up from their desks at the man walking down the aisle between them. As always they looked furtively, with quick, side-long glances they hoped he wouldn't notice. And of course, as always, he did.

People rarely looked at Baraka Washington directly. He was very big, very quiet, and very black. The employees of the London headquarters of General Electronics Auralgeonics section did not mind his size so much. These days, they no longer minded the blackness so much, either. But these latter, in combination with his uncanny quietness, contributed to a sense of unease in the minds of most which they were at pains to conceal. Also, he possessed an oft-distressing gaze, one which none of those present wished to have turned upon them.

None of those sneaking little sideways peeks at the big man knew what his assignment might be. He appeared only rarely in their midst, like a bad cold, and for this they were grateful. But his function, if not already revealed by his size and the particular shifting way he carried his bulk, was open to view for all who knew the meaning of the red bodyguard's stripe with its black assassin's diamond that encircled his right arm. So they went about their business of running the company, typing and recording, printing and duplicating, accounting here and assigning there, and did their best to pretend that his six-foot-six, two-hundred-fifty-pound mass of blood and muscle was not striding firmly past *their* desks.

Washington noticed these things. Not out of sensitivity. It was his business to notice things considerably less obvious than what he considered to be blatant, bug-eyed stares at his self. Fortunately, he had long-grown philosophical. The laws which had made dealers in bodily violence, from professional football players to assassins, display publicly notification of their work had long ago required such personal adaptations. It was paradoxical that the penalties for murder could now be considerably less than those for not identifying one's self as a murderer. Governments were trying hard to adapt themselves to the now undisputed fact that man had to, at times, let the blood of his fellows. At least now it could be taxed.

The most he had been able to do was to make a game out of identifying and cataloguing the various types of stolen glances. There were the covetous ones which, in a quietly perverse way, flattered him. There were the many hate-laden ones which he expected and routinely ignored. There were the obscene looks of those usually soft little middle-aged men, which said, "you are a first grade bastard, you and your kind; *however*...if you foul up your job, nigger, profits go down and I won't get that golf bag for Christmas..." There were the fearful and pitiable glances of the aged, which endowed him with at once more and less humanity than any of the others. And there were the glances of the women, which to this day he had been unable to successfully sort out.

He turned a familiar corner and was at once in a plusher, quieter section of the building. There was a new secretary at the old ebony and ivory desk. She made a small gesture in his direction, and if to restrain him. A quiet look sent her wordlessly back to her paperwork, but he knew her eyes were on him (how?) all the way to the big door.

The small sign on the mahogany said simply, in unostentatious solid platinum letters:

ELISHA ST. GUNN  
EUROPEAN DIVISION - PRESIDENT  
GENERAL ELECTRONICS  
AURALGEONICS SECTION

He did not wait for permission from within. He did not expect it, and so passed his hand over the photocell in the wall and entered. The rich-grained wood slid back with a *fsssh* of displaced air.

For the office of a woman of her means and position, that of Elisha St. Gunn was almost Spartan in its furnishings: the corrugated gold-leafed paneling, the few exotic, expensive plants, and one glass wall with its expansive view of New London's business section, and the huge antique desk. This latter, with its matching chairs, constituted the only furniture in the vaulted office.

Behind it sat Elisha St. Gunn: wealthy, dedicated, knowledgeable, crafty, occasionally vicious, always practical, unmarried, probably virgin. In his ten years with General Electronics he'd seen that remarkable face fight a slowly losing battle with lines, wrinkles, and the other expected depredations of advancing age. It managed to appear as young as it did thanks to the woman's tremendous vigor and tenacity. Only a very few people knew that Elisha St. Gunn was approaching eighty years of age. These included the highest officers of the Corporation, and a few like himself, to whom such privileged information was a necessary prerequisite to much of their peculiar line of work.

My line of work, thought Baraka. He sighed and sat down.

"Make yourself at home!" she said sarcastically. Without waiting for the answer which she knew would not be forthcoming, she looked down at her watch and grumpily acknowledged, "at least you're on time for a change. Be with you in a moment."

She began fumbling with some papers on her desk. Baraka knew this for what it was: a pretext on her part to give him an opportunity to study the only other person in the room, and the occupant of the chair next to him. It was an almost unconscious gesture on her part, and he was grateful for it.

The man was small, bespectacled, and reasonably young. His retreating hairline bespoke early middle age, his eyes the searching gaze of the scientist, with perhaps just a touch of fanaticism. On seeing him most people would probably pronounce him soft, but Baraka knew from experience that smallness of stature and slimness of line should not necessarily be equated with feebleness. There were many different types of physical strength. Veins bulged on the slender arms; not from age, but from obvious muscle beneath. Then there was the way the tendons moved in the man's neck, and on the underside of his wrist. He might be unable to lift his own weight, but might walk miles under conditions that would stagger a gymnast or shot-putter after a few miles.

The computer that was Baraka's mind totaled things up and came to *A Decision*. Research and field man. Initial contact and follow up. Important, well-paid, and thoroughly immersed in his work for entirely the wrong reasons. A glance at his clothes further bolstered this opinion. Severe and practical, but not out of style. Utilitarian. Simply not concerned with making an impression.

He was looking at Baraka, not directly (no one ever did that), but as near to it as anyone ever did. It was an open, uncommitted, and slightly belligerent look.

Baraka liked it.

He turned back to Elisha.

"I *hated* to drag you out of bed, Baraka," (this with an especially digging tone) "but unusual, important, and potentially profitable things have been happening. This man", and she gestured negligently with a ring-encrusted hand, "is Dr. Stanley Hamlin, one of our top field auralgeologists. He's just arrived from the States to take charge of this enterprise. Speed is most crucial

here, Baraka. Dr. Hamlin, this is Baraka Washington, your new associate, and one of our very few first-degree bodyguards."

Hamlin proffered a hand, rather challengingly, and Baraka enveloped it in his own huge paw. The two men shook firmly.

Hamlin's gaze shifted imperceptibly to the crimson and black striped right arm. "An assassin, too, I notice," he said drily.

Washington replied in his soft baritone. "As you can tell, doctor, I don't enjoy being dragged away from my regular pursuits, either." This a dig at the Gunn. "Alas, duty...or rather, money, calls. 'Tis a call I but rarely fail to heed. Contrary to what you may have heard or been told, I do not dine on plump little children, nor do I spend my spare time crouched on top of the old Empire State Building, a girl clasped in one hand and batting wildly at airplanes with the other."

Hamlin looked up, startled, and then a slow grin began to spread across his face. Before it had spread too far, he caught it and replaced it with a worried frown. Baraka was later to learn that this was his habitual mou . But the ice had definitely been broken.

Elisha was tapping her nails impatiently for attention.

"As you probably don't know, Baraka, since I doubt you have much time for the news, the boys at the home office have been in rather a blue funk lately. First, the French consortium comes up with those lovely long-playing green crystals with speeches by Joan d'Arc on them. Then the Spanish and their 'Immortal Words of Christopher Columbus' series. And now, to bring matters to a head, the Russians announce they have uncovered pegmatite near Ulan Bator which promises to give us the voices of the great Khans!"

"Yes, I know, Elisha. Much as they tend to disgust me, I do occasionally give an eye to what's happening in our deliciously screwed-up world. I know that our competitors, for instance, have been killing us lately. The market shows it, too. In fact, if it wasn't for our best-selling albums of the dialogues of the English kings, the division would be in real financial trouble...fiscal year wise."

"Ummm. In any case, you can see that competition has been heating up. Which means a little more work for us. And perhaps a little more blood-letting for you."

"Elisha..." He was becoming a bit impatient with her digs.

"But now, by God, we've come up with a chance to drive 'em all right off the charts! If this thing pans out the way I think it can. Doctor, suppose you take over?"

Hamlin shifted in his chair and seemed to align his thoughts. He made a steeple of his fingers. "About a week ago," he began in his classroom tone, "one of our prospectors stumbled into Beersheba half dead from thirst, starvation, and exposure. His condition was not helped by the fact that he had received three low-caliber bullets in the area of the lumbar. One of these had lodged quite near his spine, effectively paralyzing him from the waist down on the left side. As a consolation, he did not seem to feel much pain. At any rate, he was soon past feeling. How he managed to limp in on one leg, bleeding, or why he bothered to, was something only the desert knew...for a while."

"How profound!" muttered Elisha. Hamlin ignored her.

"Anyway, his pack held a torn paper, a lot of dust, and the usual crud packed by a desert prospector. There was also this."

He took a small glass vial from his pocket and laid it carefully in an empty ashtray on the desk. Baraka picked it up and squinted at it. Within the glass reposed a tiny sliver of pink tourmaline, no bigger than the paring from a fingernail. It sparkled with that marvelous glassy luster fine tourmaline has. Along one cleavage plane he could just make out the thin line where the

auralgeonic pickup had been placed. He put the specimen back on the table.

"So?" he said.

"We don't doubt there is much more where that crystal came from. Such a single, isolated growth would be impossible. Now, we know approximately where it came from, since the prospector's route circled the eastern shore of the Dead Sea."

Another item of information squirmed its way to the surface.

"I understood Union rebels were operating in that area, Stan."

Hamlin nodded. If he resented the change to a first-name basis, he gave no sign. Which was a good sign. "That's right. But you know these hermit types. All their concern is for their bonuses, and very little for their skins. I doubt that the presence of the rebels made any difference to this one. Until the end, of course. Apparently he ran into them some time after making his strike. He couldn't have walked far in his condition as it was, so he must have been nearly home when they caught him."

"What makes you so sure it was the rebels?"

"Claim jumpers wouldn't have missed their specimen. Rebels wouldn't pay any attention to it. It remains the only definite lead to the area of his strike."

Baraka leaned forward, interested. "He *did* make a strike, then?"

"A strike," put in Elisha, "potentially so important, so valuable, and so controversial, that it took a special meeting of the Board to authorize even preliminary exploitation! The company can move fast when it wants to, but shooing all those fat cats out of bed must have been something to see!"

He permitted himself a silent whistle. The alternative to exploiting a find was either leaving it sit, or, more likely, destroying it to prevent its development by a rival concern. It was a hypothetical situation which had arisen only rarely before. Never, never, had he heard of General Electronics (or for that matter, any other corporation in the auralgeonics business) voting *not* to develop a potentially profitable hit. Sure, the release of the real facts, the true histories, had resulted in some bad vibrations. The discovery and subsequent release of those conversations in allied headquarters from the last world war, for example. The historians seized such new and radical revelations with a glee matched only by that of the dirt-hungry public.

Auralgeonics had revolutionized certain cherished ethics. Where does privacy begin and public interest leave off? How long does a person have to be dead before his intimate life enters the general domain? When people found out that some of their beloved heroes had not been all that they had expected...

So far, though, the profit motive had overridden all such arguments, especially since it was invariably someone *else's* mythology that was taken down a notch. Both from a historical and entertainment standpoint the recorded voices from the past were too valuable to let sit in the ground. Up to now, perhaps the most image-cracking records discovered had been those unearthed by a construction crew in Philadelphia. For the first time some of the true feelings of the members of the first Continental Congress had been brought to light. What a cry of outrage there'd been over *that!* Naturally, it had been a Mexican company which first published them.

But perhaps now...

"Whose voice do your techs think they've turned up?"

"Jesus," said Hamlin.

It took Baraka's mind a full minute to come to the realization that the doctor was not registering an expression, but was in truth answering his question. He was not a religious man. Hadn't

been since he was a boy, when his mother had died from an overdose of heroin and God had failed to prevent the consequences. But it still shook him slightly. However, it would not do to let it show. Men like him were not permitted the luxury of expressing emotion externally. Inside, nobody cared.

"I see," he replied quietly. "That...would be something of a coup for the company."

Elisha nodded in agreement. "Profitable, too."

She gestured again at the tiny vial, which had grown much larger in a very short space of time. "Our techs assure me...and

adequate security has been put into effect...that the tiny fragments of voice released from that crystal, and no doubt sitting in far greater quantities in a pegmatite extrusion somewhere near the Dead Sea, is that of the original, one-and-only, Jesus Christ. Et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum." She turned a pensive eye on Baraka. "Which is why we want a hulk like you to accompany the good doctor on his initial contact trip. We're not as worried about the rebels as we are about the noble competition. Despite security. And a large, well-armed expedition would attract unwanted attention. So you two will go it alone until we're positive of the location and can stake out an accurate claim. Normal clearance to work in the area has been requested and granted by the Semitic Union. You'll leave tomorrow at 06:00 for Tel-Aviv.

"Pegmatites aren't overly common in that area, and our geologists have pretty well narrowed down your search pattern. You should be able to practically go straight to the source. It will be Doctor Hamlin's job to determine that the deposit is indeed that from which this sample has come, to evaluate its size, purity, and probably financial work, and to secure commercial-size samples. The latter is absolutely necessary. What we have in this sliver is too indefinite to break even a minimal ad campaign on. It will be your job to see that he remains in sufficient shape to perform all of the former."

"We've got to have conclusive proof!" said Hamlin.

Elisha nodded curtly at the two. "Quite correct. We'll be anxiously awaiting word from you, doctor."

She returned her attention to the papers on her desk. The

interview was at an end.

The seeker of knowledge and letter of blood left the room together, chatting amiably. Neither noticed Elisha St. Gunn staring after them, fingering the tiny, jeweled crucifix which nestled hidden in her blouse.

They checked into London International the following morning. It had been decided that their taking a commercial liner would be both safer and less conspicuous than utilizing a company plane. Baraka concurred.

Hamlin was obviously looking forward to the trip and was in higher spirits than usual.

"Baraka, do you really think that there'll be any need for someone like...for someone of your talents, on this trip? Despite the rebels, it seems like a relatively routine expedition, and St. Gunn didn't seem worried about them. Nothing personal, but why not just send along two auralgeologists?"

"Well, it remains always a matter of opinion, Stan. We apparently incurred our first breach of security last night. You see, my apartment was destroyed."

"Destroyed?"

"Yes. Someone snuck in while I was out and planted a bomb in the place. Some security. I was rather upset with the hotel over it. And we haven't even begun, yet."

Hamlin still appeared confused. Baraka looked up, reflecting.

"There happened to be a, um, another person in the apartment at the time. She set off the bomb in my absence. Fortunately. You didn't hear about it? Made rather a mess."

Hamlin shook his head dazedly. "No, no...I was busy preparing for the expedi-

tion...didn't turn on the tri-vee this morning. What...what happened?"

They were boarding the long jetliner now. "Very ingenious, whoever they were. You'll pardon the professional admiration. A very small and powerful device, well made. They hooked it up to the inside of the john."

"John?"

"Yes, you know, john, can, toilet...a normal accouterment of most bathrooms. When it was flushed...boom! Messed up the place something awful.."

"You mean the other person...the girl, was killed?"





"Your choice of words is amusing in its understatement. Unless I'm very much mistaken, they should still be scraping up the pieces."

"My God, that's horrible! Then our security *has* been breached? No, wait, how silly, of course it has! Why else would someone try to..."

"Oh, that's not necessarily the reason. I have other enemies than those of the company. But I'm afraid that's not likely to be the explanation."

Hamlin was still shaking his head as they strapped into their seats. "Terrible, terrible," he muttered. "I'm sorry for you."

"Oh, don't be." And then he said one of those things that was an inevitable consequence of his work but which reduced his circle of friends to a minimal group of highly understanding people. "The Van Gogh and the Renoir weren't touched."

Hamlin was quiet for some time after that, but regained at least a portion of his good spirits over the Mediterranean. Enough to enable him to commence a discourse on the importance and wonder of his work. Which, naturally, anyone with an iota of brains would be utterly enthralled by.

Baraka let him ramble on, not interrupting. Such speeches, he had learned, were inevitable from men of Hamlin's type. It would be well for him to get it out of the way now, in a safe, congenial situation, where it couldn't hurt either of them. No use to tell him that he'd heard approximately this same spiel at least a hundred times before from men more expert than he. Nor that he had a Bachelor's Degree in geophysics from the University of Kansas (attained after his return to school, on company expense).

"I tell you, Baraka, the things we've been able to bring about! The historians, great men, who've come up to thank me personally for some bit of truth I've turned up out of a distorted past. All from a smidgen of lithium, magnesium, iron, or aluminum compound. Not only is our work important, it's so very gratifying!"

Baraka noted the transition to "our" work and relaxed in the assurance that their relationship was progressing sufficiently towards the desired point. Namely, one where he could rest quiet in the knowledge that the little man wouldn't desert him in a fight. He would now have to be careful not to let it degenerate into something dangerous. Like genuine friendship.

His mind wandered away...and back.

Sounds of his youth. Sounds of the crowd. Above all, sounds of the slickly-dressed fat men with dirt under their fingernails. The omnipresent pieces of paper. The droning refrain.

"Sign. Sign! *Sign, SIGN!*"

Through his self-imposed haze he dimly heard a slight change in the drone of Hamlin's monologue. "Baraka does mean 'blessing' in Swahili, doesn't it?" But it was far off, and after a pause of silence the flow of sleep-inducing technical information was resumed.

Noise. Crowds. The smell of sweat-soaked bodies and sweat-soaked cloth. The roaring in his ears that did not come entirely from the thousands of people in the stadium. The satisfying crunch, feel of flesh giving way beneath his arms. Thoughts of mother, dying, bleeding to death on a bad trip, falling through a supermarket window, glass, glass, glass. Christmas tree. Hitting back for her (what a move, folks!), hitting back for his sister. Elly, walking the streets, not for exercise, supporting them both (...breaks another tackle!...). His father, whom he'd never seen. The other kids on the street, who'd gone the wrong way, because they'd seen no other way to go (...beautiful block!...). The tiny,

stuttering white man in the high school who'd opened the world to him...and later been found clubbed to death in the park for the lousy seven bucks in his pocket (...over for the touchdown!...).

Lookit that cat! Isn't he somethin', man? Baraka Washington. All-American. Yeah! All-American *again!*

Money. Moneymoneymoneymoney.

"Look kid, you sign with us, you'll be usin' the stuff for toilet paper. Broads? You see that chick sitting across the aisle? You want her? New Caddy? Broads and wheels, man! What else you want, huh? Just sign here (sign, damn you!), here, on this dotted line..."

Dotted line. See? Dots getting big, bigger, blotting out the whole world. Scaring him like the opposing eleven never could, pieces of paper. How do you tackle a piece of paper? Who do you turn to for help? What are you gonna *do* man?

Two-time All-American at defensive tackle. Professional Football scouts of America—rating: third in country. Notes? "Big, mean kid, plenty of speed and desire. Likes to hit people. Can take another ten, fifteen pounds. Has all it takes, all ittakes, allittakes..."

Then the visit from the quiet man, bigger than him, from General Electronics. The media ignored this type. It was prudent. Also safer. Besides, they also used his type. No contracts, no papers. Too incriminating. Just a little honesty, a little hard, straight talk, and a grip that seemed somehow familiar and right.

"Mr. Washington, we've been watching you. You're on our All-American list, too. How'd you like to maybe do a little mayhem in the sacred name of Free Enterprise?"

Land of the free, home of the brave.

And the wages weren't bad, either.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are now beginning our descent into the Tel-Aviv area. Please fasten your seat belts and keep them fastened until the plane has come to a complete stop. Thank you, and we hope to see you on Trans-Oceanic again." Click.

They were met in a suburb of Tel-Aviv by a fussy, pot-bellied old man, the local company agent. He grumbled a lot, but his girth belied the agility of his mind. They quickly found themselves outfitted and equipped for their journey.

Hamlin climbed up into the cabin of the big hovercraft and looked uncertainly at his companion.

"Baraka, can you, uh, fly one of these things? I can, of course. Necessary skill and all that. But you..."

"I can do a number of things that would no doubt be a considerable surprise to you, Stan. Yes, I can drive one."

The ship's one cabin was not roomy, but it was more than large enough for the needs of two men, even when one was the size of Baraka. Everything was miniaturized, and folded back into the walls besides. Hamlin fired up the four powerful rotors which sucked in the hot desert air and forced it down under the craft's belly to inflate their rubberized "skirt", thus lifting them gently into the air.

Baraka, meanwhile, climbed into the small open turret on their tiny upstairs "porch" to check out their principal weapon, the air-driven cannon. They also possessed smaller, more conventionally powered guns, but this one had proven itself to the point of having been made standard equipment on all craft of this type that General Electronics possessed. It was very much like caressing an old friend. Ostensibly, such devices were mounted to protect the crew from "dangerous animals". In all probability



there wasn't a "dangerous animal" within two thousand miles, outside of a zoo and the nearest habitation. This fact was always conveniently ignored.

It was actually nothing more than a refined version of the compressed air gun so beloved of bloodthirsty youngsters in the world round. Since it operated off air driven by the ship's fans, it meant that those engines had to be "on" in order for it to fire. But it had the virtue of being able to fire continually without complicated power packs, electrical systems, or much danger of jamming. It was an ideal desert weapon, being light, unaffected by dust, lubrication problems, or so many of those minor troubles which so often could prove fatal to an operator. Designed to take a magazine of large impact grenades, it could also fire miniature, specially prepared containers of napalm. For that matter, it could shoot anything that would fit its barrel, including sharpened sticks, stones, or sand from the desert floor.

At their last filling stop the operator waved them off with a cheery, "Jehovah is the only God and Mohammed is his prophet!"

Then they were in Negev.

The area around the Dead Sea is one of the most completely useless in the entire world. The few mines which extracted borates and phosphates from the centuries-old deposits were far off to the southwest. The salts in the soil, if such the dusty, gritty ground could be called, made irrigation impractical. Far better land was available to the west and north, and the seawater conversion plants had not yet stretched their life-giving pipelines this far into the desert. Here there was only gravel and sand, shunned even by the lizards.

The thermometer on the outside of the cabin warned that the outside temperature was approaching 116 degrees in the shade. Good. They were in the midst of a veritable cold wave. No one actually knew what the temperature could reach here, since no one was interested in staying around long enough to find out.

They were speeding along the eastern shoreline now, an even five feet about the salt-encrusted rocks. Heat waves fluttering in the air made it almost impossible to tell where the water ended and the sky began. Sometimes they would swing out over the water, when an obstruction too high to pass over or inconvenient to go around got in their way, swinging back over the beach when it was passed. Driven by the untiring fans, the brackish waters spread out behind them in long, low rivulets.

Baraka was almost beginning to believe they'd made it to their goal, a line of low hills set in from the shore, when their right rear rotor failed. Unfortunately the failure was not due to natural causes, but rather by an armor-piercing bullet which entered from their rear and scrambled the drive machinery above the rotor shaft. Hamlin fought the wheel in surprise as the ship lurched.

Baraka took one step, which brought him to their one rear-facing window. Three...four...no, five small hovercraft. They had appeared from behind a high dune and swung immediately in pursuit. The sound of their guns made a hellish chattering, which was audible even over the whine of the fans. Fifty-caliber shells began to whiz all around them.

It took him a second to realize that Hamlin was not likewise trained in evading pursuit. This was *not* an exercise back at the company's secret south Utah training center.

He slapped the little man hard on the back.

"C'mon, man! *Move!* Get this thing going! Evasive action; take a zigzag pattern over the shoreline. Get *going!* We've got the sun in front of us, the glare of the water...stay low, we'll keep their gunners blinded. Head into the hills. We have to find some cover before they catch up with us."

Hamlin blinked at him, and then without a word began to institute the indicated pattern, swerving over water, then back over sand, then water again. It cost them some ground, but no more shells struck the ship in vulnerable places.

Baraka did not pause to see if his companion was executing the necessary maneuvers. He swung himself up into the gunner's seat, swiveled around, and slammed a magazine into the now-humming weapon. He allowed himself a side speculation: whoever was chasing them had money on their side. Rebels were, therefore, ruled out. Rival company? Regardless, they had had a fairly good idea of where to intercept them.

Then he stopped thinking and professional reflexes took over. With the sun hitting them, their pursuers stood out in sharp detail on the sand. He felt the comfortable throb as he engaged the powerful flow of air from the fans. Thankfully, the pursuing craft didn't appear to mount anything larger than a fifty-caliber machine gun. Perhaps they hadn't expected much in the way of resistance from a single research craft. If so, they were in for a bit of a surprise. Amateurs! He allowed himself a small grin. In circumstances like this, he'd read that the hero's lip usually "curled in a snarl." In his work, at least, he'd found prehensile lips most uncommon. He began firing. Above it, the noise of the fans was deafening.

The machines guns were fully capable of chopping them into pieces, and had a much faster rate of fire than their own weapon.

They had left the shoreline behind and were now streaking into the hills. Now they would be forced to depend on Hamlin's skill as a driver in addition to what cover the sun-blasted cliffs could offer. They did have one advantage. They knew more or less where they were going; their pursuers had to follow. The only road was the one they left.

One of the following craft had gone up in a satisfyingly brilliant gout of flaming gasoline when he'd put an explosive shell on its amidships. The stupid captain had made a slow turn and presented his side to the wicked little cannon. Baraka was sorry he couldn't hear the screams. Another had slowed and stopped, its skirt shredded and fore fans twisted by a near hit.

They were in the hills now, twisting and turning to avoid the clumps of rock that insisted on placing themselves directly in their path. He wished fervently for a hiding place that would give them the respite needed to call headquarters. Help would come quickly from Tel-Aviv and possibly Jerusalem, but could not get here inside of ten minutes. That was more than enough time for their charred remains to be removed from the premises by their mysterious attackers. This might or might not hurt the corporation's chances at what had come to be known as the Jesus lode, but it would be decidedly disadvantageous to one Baraka Washington. He had long ago ceased to fear death, but it remained an alternative he wished to put off as long as possible.

There! Another bugger down! A napalm shell had struck just in front of their nearest pursuer, not quite hitting it. But the rapidly heated air had been drawn under the ship's skirt and lifted it crazily. Out of control, it smashed into a wall of striated stone. Three down, two to go. Amateurs.

The momentary respite he had gained gave him time to notice that they were now making their way up an ever-narrowing arroyo. He cursed, and then realized that the doctor, being untrained in this kind of action, was undoubtedly doing the best he could. At least this was taking them nearer their planned destination. It had the virtue of being confusing besides. The good doctor would get his look at the deposit, if only that.

He had no chance to ponder further. At that moment several shells struck the rear left fan, and the ship began to slow. They turned a sharp bend in the wash and he was able to lean over and examine it. Scrap.

He jammed the gun so that it could be of no possible use to their trailers and yelled down into the cabin.

"Stan! Find a place where you can block this gully with the ship. Do it while you've still got some control!"

He looked back. They had gained ground. That last shot must have been a lucky one. Hopefully, they'd have enough time to get out and set up a defensive position. He didn't think that those in the ships behind them had come prepared to chase them on foot.

The next few minutes were a blur of frantic, scrambling activity. Two sub-submachine guns, plenty of ammo, a few grenades, and the radio. Over Washington's instinctive but finally yielding objections, the doctor's portable field kit. It wasn't that heavy. Anyway, they'd be rescued in the next hour, or likely not at all. He had his toys; let Hamlin have his.

At first he resented having to reduce his pace to match that of his companion, but in a few minutes they were scrambling up cliffs, and he had to labor to keep up with the little man. Hamlin seemed to have the ability to go up broken shale and smooth rock faces without regard for gravity. In what was doubtless an unfamiliar and frightening situation, he'd performed well so far, and without a whimper. Still, the fear surfaced in his eyes. This did not bother Baraka. After so many years, his own reflected the same. It was a sign of healthy awareness, and meant that the person involved had not retreated into fantasy, and would fight with his brains instead of his gut.

He looked back down the winding, dusty way they had climbed. Positioning their hovercraft broadside across the mouth of the canyon had effectively stopped any mobilized pursuit. They would now have to follow on foot. Again, he doubted they were prepared for it. Of course, neither were they, and they were still heavily outnumbered. But at least what had been an uneven fight had had an element of uncertainty injected into it.

Yes. A swaying form appeared over a low outcrop of rock. He took enough time to send a careful burst in its direction. The shells, he knew, would burst, sending thousands of tiny needles into the man's area. The figure screamed and clutched at its head. It blossomed momentarily like a wet rose, and fell back out of sight. That would make them a little less anxious to move alone. He became aware that Hamlin was yelling to him from somewhere up ahead.

He pulled himself into the cave.

There was a considerable amount of rubble in front of it, fallen from the opening and the cliff above. It would be an excellent place to make a stand. Hamlin said so.

"Don't be an ass, Stan." His eyes were busy down the gully, searching out crevices, hiding places. "We're fine here

against the small stuff, and I don't think they came prepared to do more than catch us out in the flats and disable us. Probably they expected to capture us and force out the location of the lode. Now I don't think they'll be so picky. They can't all be idiots down there. Pretty soon someone with a modicum of brains will take charge, and then we'll have problems. If they decide to rush us there isn't a whole lot we can do. I have to see to shoot, and in order to see I have to stick my head up where they can take pot shots at it. They'll start getting desperate when they realize that we've probably called for help." Hamlin looked crushed.

"And another thing. If someone down there gets the bright idea of digging out a grenade launcher or maybe a portamortar, they can find themselves a nice, secluded spot and lob shells up here at their leisure. Meanwhile we'd better hope this cave is at least deep enough to give us an air pocket large enough to keep us alive until help does get here! Now get the hell back there and get on that radio! Call Tel-Aviv and tell those muthahs to hustle some planes out here but quick! With rockets."

"What if they're rebels down there? The company might not want to..."

Baraka turned on him angrily. "I couldn't care less what the company wants!" They can argue legalities later, but if it'll sooth your tender conscience any, these aren't rebels. Rebels don't use hovercraft. Man, they can't *afford* hovercraft! No, this is good ol' free enterprise at work. Now *get on that radio!*

Hamlin left his gun on the ground and ran, hunched over, to set up the radio. Baraka realized that he was being a bit hard on the doctor, but then this was no place to be pussy-footing around. Down below, a gun cracked. Then another, and another. Soon shells were ripping up the gravel around the top of their pitiful barricade.

He slipped completely into his work-mode. He became totally and utterly a killing machine. There were, he noticed, steep enough cliffs all around them. No one was going to get above him or flank him without a hell of a lot of work and effort. The planes would be here by then. The planes had damn well *better* be here by then! He knew that the faceless men down there undoubtedly realized that too and would be trying their damndest to root them out in the next ten minutes. With the possibility of local authorities also on the way, they might be content to fill the cave with nerve gas and leave quietly. Better not to think about that. Better not to think. What a laugh! They probably didn't realize that they were sitting on top of the deposit right now. He grimaced tightly. If they couldn't dig two lightly armed men out of a small cave in ten minutes they wouldn't get much sympathy from their employers, either.

Scrabbling over the loose, crumbly stone to his left, he raised his head cautiously and snapped off another burst at a momentary motion, and had the satisfaction of hearing another sharp, piercing scream as he dropped back down. He hunched quickly and rolled to get out of the way of ricochets from the hail of fire that returned his shot. He began rubbing sand and spit into the tiny gun's barrel to cut off any possibility of giving off a revealing glare.

"The flechette gun," the instructor intoned solemnly, "has numerous advantages over explosive shell weapons of similar size and weight. When fired, it traverses a certain distance before exploding, like a shotgun shell. Only instead of the metal

pellets carried by shotgun ammunition, it disgorges hundreds of tiny needles, or 'flechettes'. Thanks to the uneven nature of the explosive force behind them, a tumbling motion is imparted to these minute projectiles. Thus, when they strike, a much larger hole is made in..."

He shifted his position far to the right, rose and fired. Answering fire was much heavier now. Perhaps they were attempting to sneak someone close under cover. Perhaps not. He had no way of knowing and no safe way of finding out. He turned to look for Hamlin.

The scientist rapidly scrambled back. He slammed down beside Baraka in a flurry of dust, grabbing at his own weapon. His face was not so posed now, dirty and sweaty. His collar was stained.

"I...I got through," he said excitedly. "They said they'll have planes out here as soon as possible. Government stuff, too. They even know where we are. They've been monitoring the ship."

"I didn't think they'd trust us to bring the stuff back to them. Standard company policy. Spy on your employees and they have a tendency to remain loyal. Not that I object, in this case. Peachy-keen. But we still have to hold these muthahs off for a bit. They must know we have help coming, so they'll probably try..."

There was a loud *crumppp*, which shook the earth and sent a shower of shale pouring down on them from above.

"Grenade launcher!" Baraka shouted when the dust began to settle. "Get back in the cave!"

"But..."

"Move, goddamn it!" He gave Hamlin a shove that sent him tumbling backwards. He looked angrily back at the big man for a moment, but turned and darted into the gray opening.

Baraka scrambled to his left as another explosion sent up a geyser of pulverized stone from the cave front. Another few like that and they'd have covered every possible hiding place. Retreat into the depths of the cave would be suicide. He began fitting a launcher and grenade onto his own gun, cursing at the mechanism's reluctance to lock. Likely he'd only have one shot before they'd think to cover the area with machine gun fire again. Safe in the belief that the grenades would wipe out any life near the cave front, the wielders of the smaller guns were holding back. He raised his eyes over the ledge.

A slight but unmistakable puff of smoke from below revealed the position. His jerry-rigged booster had a smaller range, but he was firing downhill. Better get this one right, man. That gunner isn't going to stick around to give you a second shot at him.

He fired. The other grenade exploded to his left and something like a million flares jumped onto his left side and clung there, all lit at once. He reeled to the ground. Through watering eyes and ringing ears he perceived the *crumppp* of his own grenade far below. Looking down, he saw that his left side was a mass of tiny crimson rivulets. Shrapnel. Sobbing, he pulled himself back up to the top of the protecting mound.

But there were no more grenades.

The planes arrived. They did not hear Baraka's painful orders to drown the canyon in napalm, but they were forced to kill a number of its inhabitants in order to induce the rest to

surrender. Staring hard, he could see through the funny fog...crazy place!...shouldn't be any fog in the goddamn desert!...the fat man from the company depot, now looking very tough. He pointed at the cave. A party of men began to make their way upwards.

He thought of the scientist then. He hadn't seen him since he'd ordered him back inside the cave...how many hours ago? Was he all right, or had the twerp gone and gotten himself killed?

He broke off thoughts. The body in question stumbled out from the depths of the cave...intact.

"Hey, Stan, we're okay now. Everything's going to be cool, now." He paused. "Hey, what gives?" That's when he noticed Hamlin's porta testing kit. A glimmering sliver of tourmaline the shade of watermelon pink was sitting in the pickup. It was as thick as a man's pinkie.

"Damn! You found it. Is that really...?" He finished the question with his eyes.

Hamlin made a visible effort and pulled himself together. He held out a sheet of paper.

"It's hard to tell. The entire speech is clear, but..."

"Don't hold out on me, man. What is it? Any kind of preaching should identify it. What is it, the Sermon on the Mount, maybe? I bet it's the original Sermon on the Mount. Wonder what they'd price that at?"

The rescue party had heard their voices and hurried. Baraka had done what he got paid for, but something in Hamlin's tone...

"Well, which sermon is it? Why the uncertainty?"

Hamlin started to speak, but instead handed over the sheet of paper. Baraka read the translated transcription, "Used today, four lengths of Galilean hardwood 8 x 12, two special ribs of wood 2 x 5, two double handfuls of small pegs, nine sheets of bronze..."

He looked up in puzzlement...which turned to rage as realization sank in.

"A carpenter's list...?"

"Well, it *might* be Him," Hamlin muttered.

"A goddamn carpenter's list! Are the others like this?"

"There are no others. That's the only one still decipherable. The lode is minor and amounts to no more than a handful of bad crystals...and that one. I haven't played it all, but..."

Baraka didn't hear him. He stood.

"I killed and risked my own life for *this*?" He raised the crystal high.

"No, don't!" shrieked Hamlin...too late.

The crystal stuck another rock and shattered into a hundred ineloquent bits.

Later, in the safety of one of the rescue craft, Washington tried to cheer the glum scientist.

"Don't look so down, man. It was a waste." He shook his head. "Too bad."

"If you'd only let me finish."

"Finish what...a damn list?" He downed a pint of iced tea. "For what?"

Hamlin rose and, to Baraka's utter surprise, looked ready to fight.

"If...if it *had* been *Him*...what might he have been making?"

# SHORT

Long after his heroes were ghosts, the very old man decided to take his leave. Because his jailers were watching the front, he decided to risk the tangled weeds and crumbling concrete in back. Better a broken ankle or cracked skull than the tearful embraces and pleas that would hold him back. He had made up his mind. Screwed on his most courageous face. Put the minute affairs of what had once been his life in order. And made his decision.

He was determined that he would not be swayed. Not this time.

The house, his prison, reflected all that was left of his life. The barren rooms and peeling walls. The musty drapes and cobwebbed corners. The threadbare carpet, empty picture frames, and sagging kitchen cabinets. The echoes. The shadows. The emptiness.

He would not be swayed. Not this time.

They'd stopped him before. Love, in her gossamer gown and opal shoes. Youth, with his wild hair and ragged jeans. The twins, Passion and Lust, with their touch and kisses and sweet scented breath. Friendship, Courage, and Joy. Glory and Promise and Hope. They were Memories—the good ones, at least, those which he hadn't long since locked away in the room upstairs. They were *his* memories. And they were his jailers.

The door opened easily enough, creaking on its rust-crusted hinges. He winced at the sound, glancing back toward the front room where the Memories held congress.

"Remember when..." they would say in turn, those two words the preface for every recollection; more, for their very existence. The ballfield where he and his friends played as children. That one glorious touchdown in high school. The first time he laid eyes on Betty. The births of his children. The birthdays, holidays, sunsets, and wines. All the memorable moments comprising the sum total of who and what he'd been.

Except the bad Memories. Those he'd trapped in the room upstairs, forgotten now, quiet. Too quiet, for at times he found he missed even them. Pain and Suffering. Sorrow and Grief. Loss and Boredom, Melancholy, Despair, and Hate. These Memories, too, were a part of his life.

The outside of the house was no better than the inside. The paint was peeling away from the weathered siding. The weeds choked at the crumbling foundation, cutting away at the very roots of his life so that those

early Memories, many now lost, were the dimmest and most feeble.

He stepped across the threshold to the small concrete step, a springboard from here to there—wherever *there* might be. The door closed easily enough behind him, but the snap of the latch seemed incredibly loud. He imagined the conversation in the front room coming to an abrupt end

as they realized he had snuck away. He imagined their frantic flight through the kitchen to the back door. He knew he didn't have long, but the

figure on the back lawn had frozen him in place.

Death.

He wore the appropriate black, but there was no scythe and his face was soft and kind. The frame concealed by his robes was thin, but by no stretch of the imagination skeletal. His feet were firmly planted in the weeds. His eyes were a quiet turquoise.

Death extended a hand and bade the old man come with him.

There arose a racket from the kitchen window. The old man turned to find them all crowded there: Love and Youth; Glory, Passion, Lust, and Joy; Camaraderie and Friendship; Courage and Vitality and Desire. They pounded on the window glass and begged him to come back into the house. Their tears broke his heart.

"Take my hand," said Death.

"I cannot leave them," cried the old man. "Without me, they will perish. It is I who keeps them alive, even as they keep me from you."

"You're wrong," Death replied. "Their fears have made you blind to the truth. Take my hand and they will follow. Where you're going there'll be those with whom you'll want to share these old friends."

There was something in Death's voice which denied all doubt. And what, wondered the old man, is more honest, more true, more *real* than Death? Only life. And that was fast crumbling behind him.

He stepped carefully down into the weeds and reached for Death's hand, but at the last second drew back. "Wait."

"What is it?"

"In a locked room upstairs..."

Patience, Death smiled. "I've already set them free."

The old man nodded. That was as it should be. With only a slight trepidation, he took the proffered hand. ▲

## OUT THE BACK DOOR by Brian A. Hopkins

# SHORTS

He picks himself free from the harness and floats there a moment, head slumped, limbs splayed like a gigantic spider in an invisible web. Smooth, liver-spotted skin shivers on his bones, his shaking hands, as if it were trying to get away from such an old man. He takes a rattling breath and pushes off the chair, toward the window, the only window in this tiny box of a space ship. Only in zero g could those spidery thin-boned limbs be graceful. He pays for even this small action with pain, wrists threatening to snap like rotten wood.

He cannot see the others through the window yet, but he sees the slivers of the moons that hide them, hide the planet they must have chosen who knows how many years back. And he can see the star. The ship spirals toward it like a leaf caught in a whirlpool, slow and silent.

He lodges his arm in a loop of webbing stuck by the window and watches the crescent moons: white on gray, and even gray is a new color after all these years. There are so many grays. Each is something extravagant and bright and wonderful and real, not some simulation to make him think of home, to entertain him and keep him sane for year after year. Real. And so he watches it, traces the craters with his eyes, circles overlapping semicircles, ridges and shadows. He knows they will have names for those places already, but that matters little to him: these are his names, and he repeats them again and again, memorizes them, and only when he has named them all does he look away.

Patches on the interwoven strips of light sail mirror the spots on his hands, blotches from the days when he dared go outside to fix things, years ago, when he was young, when sleeping and breathing didn't hurt. He remembers how he used to dream of all the places his ship would take him. Now, even the gentle solar wind strains the micron-thin sail, stretching it wider than a man could walk in a year, wider than Texas.

He cannot remember any particular day when the ship got old, when the chairs started to fray and the computer displays seemed dim, when mold began to creep across the walls. The propulsion lasers stopped firing years before they should have, but at least they pushed long enough to get him here, long enough to try for a close approach and a gravity swing outward. The ship has lasted this long. It only has to last a little longer.

There are places on the sail where the stars peer through like eyes, laughing eyes, like all the people who said he would never make it. Words, written in iridescent color,

show up and down the strips that make the sail, still printed there after all these years: Go for broke! Kilroy is here. Icarus had the right idea.

He smiles, looks back to the star, rising beyond the moons, now. Icarus did have the right idea, just the wrong wings.

A crackle from the radio. Voices. They are hailing him again.

He heard them through all the channels, years ago, back when such a thing excited him, voices like children babbling about nothing in particular. He has never responded. The com-

puter monitors them, keeps them at a soft background mutter. There's talk over the airwaves about his journey—some say the old man's

crazy, call him a rich mad playboy who wasted his fortune, his life, for nothing—but he doesn't listen, just keeps it soft enough to hear they're still talking.

They said the same things about Magellan, Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart.

"They never found you, Amelia," he says and his voice whistles like wind in a reed. "Lost at sea." He nods at the star, the bright yellow one, Alpha Centauri A, rising beyond the moons, and watches as they and come into view.

Their ships come in all shapes and sizes, silvery denizens of space, graceful and elegant, like snowflakes, clouds of snowflakes swirling in the sun. Their solar panels stretch toward the light like arms of delicate ice, geometric, white and perfect. Some dart from the cloud, dancing toward him as if caught in unseen winds.

Someone long ago had found a far faster way to the stars than his tired ship.

One of them comes close enough to see, two youths in a bubble cabin, pressing butt cheeks against the glass, sticking up middle fingers. Their ship flits in front of his, blots out the star for a moment, swallowing light. His sail wilts just a bit, like a dying flower. And then he is past, falling.

He moves his head slowly, side to side, watching the other ships, head bobbing like an old turtle. Already he's passed most of them. In a few days, the planet will be just another point of light.

He will be too far away for them to know if he survives peribarythron. The glare will eat him and he will be gone. If they look, they will see the ship curling away from the other side of the star, a leaf spinning away from the current. He wonders if this was how Amelia felt: helpless, falling and falling.

A touch of a smile pulls at his lips, just a touch, just enough to add another wrinkle. But those tired and yellowed eyes nearly sparkle as he looks past, to the star. He's thinking of the shadow he'll cast as he leaves. ▲

## PERIBARYTHRON

by J.F. Peterson

# SHORT

Chaz was different. All the kids knew that. He believed things. When Billy Jacob told him that there were ghosts in the attic, Chaz nodded as if Billy's lie had been the gospel truth. Then Chaz went about his business, which involved things like staring at the swirls in plaster walls or the grain patterns in strips of plywood. When I asked him what he was doing, he said that he was thinking about the ghosts in the attic. "Oh, Chaz!" I said. "Billy was kidding."

But Chaz shook his head and said, "No. There's ghosts up there. Go check. You'll see." And damn if I didn't believe him. See, Chaz had a knack for turning lies into truth.

I'll never forget when Judy Hendershot told him about cracks and lines. By then, most kids knew better than to fill Chaz's head with lies. But Judy was new on the street, and she thought that Chaz needed to be messed with. She ran up behind him as he walked along the sidewalk. "Hey, boy!" she said. "Be careful!"

Chaz turned real slow. He blinked at Judy, giving her that squint-eye expression that made him look like he was peeking through a keyhole. He didn't say anything, so Judy pointed to his shoes.

"Look," she said.

And when Chaz looked he saw that his left heel was an inch away from one of the sidewalk's tar-filled seams, and his right toe was nearly touching a crack in the concrete. We all saw it coming, but, before we could stop her, Judy said, "Step on a crack, break a grown-up's back. Step on a line, break a person's spine." And then, in a burst of poetic inventiveness that for a moment made us forget the terrible implications of planting lies in Chaz's mind, Judy added, "Jump over a crack, break a daddy's sacroiliac." Not that we knew what a sacroiliac was. We thought it was a butt-hole, which conjured some comical images in our prepubescent minds.

Chaz stood there, staring at Judy. Then he looked along the sidewalk, nodding slowly as his squinty eyes

saw all those cracks and lines. We could tell that he believed Judy's lie, and when Chaz believed something the world adjusted accordingly. See, his mind was sort of a transformer; a thought would get inside him, and his brain would transform the world.

Sometimes things scared Chaz. Like those ghosts in the attic. Chaz never went near the attic on account of those ghosts. (And it was a good thing too, since once he started believing in them, the ghosts were there.) But other times Chaz liked what he heard, and I guess Chaz liked

## *STEP ON A CRACK by Lawrence C. Connolly*

Judy's crack-and-line poem because, before anyone could stop him, he took off down the sidewalk stepping on cracks and lines like they were bugs and worms. Sometimes he would land on a line with both heels and then leap forward over a crack. And all along the street people collapsed in pain.

We chased him, but of course that only made him run faster. It was me that caught him. I dove and grabbed his legs. He fell forward. To this day I don't know why he didn't put his hands out to break his fall. His freckled face slammed the sidewalk, and his head made this wet, splitting sound that vibrated right through his legs and into my hands.

After that everything changed. All those people with broken backs and sacroiliacs rose up like they'd been cured by Jesus. Everybody was fine—everybody, that is, but Chaz. Chaz just lay on the sidewalk, dead as a bug on a windshield.

I don't know how Chaz was able to turn lies into truth, but I want to learn. I spend a lot of time staring at plaster swirls and wood grains. I try believing that Chaz isn't dead. I try believing that he's standing beside me. I try believing that everything's the same as it was before Judy Hendershot told him that crazy crack-and-line poem. And sometimes, when I squint my eyes just right, I can almost see him smiling at me from the wood-grain patterns in the attic door. ▲



# SHORTS

"Morton simply adores books. I think he devours them," gushed the blonde to her friend. "I see him all the time coming home from the library with bags full of them." The two stared at him worshipfully, as if it was beyond their wildest dreams to meet a man so well-educated.

They reminded Morton of strawberry fluff. He wondered if either of them had ever read a book all the way through.

Still, he wasn't accustomed to attractive young women making a fuss over him. He tried to look modest and intelligent.

He had been strolling past an unfamiliar park this evening, avoiding his usual haunts for reasons of safety, when he noticed twinkling lights, music, and flashily dressed people. It seemed to be a celebration, the nature of which he had not yet discovered. He had slipped in among the revelers, snagged a drink from the bar, and tried to look as if he belonged. He wasn't invited to many parties. None, in fact, since grade school.

Believing himself anonymous, it had been a shock to come face to face with the blonde. She was a neighbor, though hardly an acquaintance. She lived in the house across the street from his, one that had been broken up into apartments.

Though flattered by the girls' attention he was stung by the suggestion that he borrowed books from the library. Morton was a collector, the son and nephew of collectors. He knew, as these two sweet but fluttery girls did not, that the only way to develop one's mind was to browse among books of a similar nature, balancing one scholar's viewpoint against another's. For that kind of study, public libraries were not practical.

"You live in that big house all alone?"

"It's the family place," Morton said modestly. "Built by my grandfather." Who had also built the family fortune that enabled his heirs to do nothing but read and shop for books.

He couldn't believe his good fortune in being singled out by these two pretty, vivacious girls. He felt more than a little shy when he asked them if they'd like to see the old place.

They turned to each other, giggled, and said they couldn't think of anything more delightful.

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In the taxi, one blonde sat on Morton's right, the other on his left. They flirted and teased until he was blushing. They seemed to think he was charming. Maybe he wasn't the complete social blob he'd believed himself to be all his

life. It had been difficult growing up with two old men who became more strange and reclusive with each passing year.

## FEEDING TIME

by Juleen Brantingham

Reality returned when he and the girls got out of the cab. One of them called his house a mansion and he supposed by their lights it was. He realized their flattering words would more honestly have been directed to his wallet than his person. Sobered, he led them inside and flipped a switch. Lights blazed.

They stopped talking and stared. "I've never seen so many," one girl breathed, meaning the bookcases that covered every wall and extended into the rooms like piers.

They reached for each other's hands. He could almost read their minds. It was one thing to flirt with a man who read a lot—by their definition that might be two books a month; it was something else to visit one whose home was crammed with books. A pervert, obviously.

They asked the way to the bathroom. The directions were complex due to the way the bookcases altered the shape of the rooms. Morton knew the girls had excused themselves so they could invent a reason why they couldn't stay for the drink he'd offered.

He sighed, then smiled. They would never find the bathroom back in that dusty maze. Eventually they would run into his father and uncle. He wondered who would be the first to scream. He hadn't seen the shambling, hairy old fellows in twenty years.

Once Morton thought he heard sweet voices calling, pleading. Strawberry fluff, he thought, remembering his father's fondness for that particular treat.

Finally he heard choked-off screams and slobbery crunching. Manners, he admonished silently. He sat down and picked up a book. He wouldn't have to worry about feeding the old ones again for at least six weeks. ▲

# SHORT

Greetings, Mr. President! Yes. The cultural exchange program to Terra went quite well, indeed. Better than expected, really. You, the Great Council and, I trust, the Empress Herself shall all be gratified. My formal report? Indeed, it is complete and it shall be placed before the Glorious One within the hour.

Delay? On, no, Mr. President! You see, Tomar, my husband of the third order, is presently reviewing the tape. His grasp of proper State Grammar surpasses mine, as one might expect. I, therefore, make it a practice to have him double check all Official Documents before representing them to a Higher Authority.

It would not do to strain the Glorious One's exquisite patience with less-than-elegant prose. Good. I'm glad you agree, Mr. President. It removes a great mass-structure from my cognitive landscape, to freely translate Terran metaphor.

And in the meantime?

Oh, yes. Please adjust your kind attentions to the long table to your left. Activate your olfactory receptors, if you will, Mr. President. Yes. A most exotic and compelling blend of scents isn't it, Sir? What? Hah!

No, Mr. President. Truly, I am certain!

And please, do forgive my laughter at your entirely reasonable supposition. Uncommonly rude of me. But, no. I fear these are *not* examples of Terran perfumes or incense. But you will find this fascinating, I think. Please accompany me?

You are most kind, Sir.

Yes, indeed. You have a keen visual receptor, Sir. But the meat is *supposed* to be burned, Mr. President. Terrans call it "cooking" and it's easily the moist unique variant on the usual patterns of cultural development they manifest. Oh, yes. They do this to nearly all their foods, even the vegetative matter.

No, Mr. President. Oddly, the process actually *improves* digestibility! And—you may find this most extraordinary, Sir—the flavor of certain foods **are** actually enhanced by the process!

Oh, yes. I've tried all you see before you and more! Of course their proteins and such are of no benefit to us. Yet they are of no harm, either. Can't be metabolized by our systems, you see? But the new and exotic scents, the pleasing flavors—these we can enjoy, Mr. President.

And, it is my hope, that you and the Great Council approve my humble request and allow me the honor of "cooking" an even more lavish "smorgasbord," as one branch of Terran culture would call such a presentation, for the pleasure and amusement of the Glorious One Herself!

Yes, Sir. I fully realize that.

I have, of course, been forced to adapt the Terran recipes to put them in accord with the rigors of the Royal Diet. As with these dishes, I have supervised the gathering of all ingredients with loving care and attention to all detail. Nothing unclean and unworthy shall offend the Royal Palate! Yet I have also paid great notice to maintaining the authentic character of each dish as much as possible. All to enhance the Glorious One's appreciation of this singularly diverse and fruitful planet, you see!

On, yes, Sir. Of course! Each and every ingredient was ultra-vacuum sealed and kept in stasis during the return voyage. I personally supervised the unloading, decanting and preparation of each dish. All of it, I swear by Creggon's Arm Quills, is absolutely pure and correct!

Yes, Mr. President. By all means, sample as you like.

Advice? Oh, where to start?

Yes, Sir. So many possibilities.

I would suggest a bit of this mostly-liquid substance. As a general class, this is called a "soup." This particular one is from the area known as Italy—oh, yes, each subculture has its own distinct foods and "cooking" methods! This particular "soup" is called Peasant Minestrone or *Minestrone Rustica*. The meat bits? Italian-style sausage. That's correct, Mr. President—stuffed intestines, much like what the natives of Tau Ceti so enjoy. But, in the Terran fashion, it too is "cooked."

**FRESHNESS  
SEALED FOR YOUR  
PROTECTION  
by Jim Lee**

# SHORTS

Delightful, is it not?

Yes, as I said. I had to make certain adjustments.

No, Sir, they do not. At least not in their modern cultures. No, not even the Leaders. They have a cultural bias, quite strange. A taboo against it, of all things! Yes, Mr. President. It puzzled all of us, too.

But shall we proceed?

This is an Oriental Stir-Fry, for which I collected ingredients from no less than five of their nations. And this, Kidney Pie—a British Island favorite. The somewhat thicker mostly-liquid is Irish Stew, slow simmered over a low flame.

Oh, do try the Tongue in Robert Sauce! Robert was the name of my favorite Terran, one of our several translators. A delicious fellow, I must say. Yes, Mr. President, my apology. A poor joke, I confess.

Yes, that is an odd substance, is it not? Blood Pudding, from Hungary.

And I trust the Roast Kid needs no explanation?

Ah, yes. Virginia Ham. Glazed in honey, which is...well, that would take perhaps too long to explain! Tasty, though.

Aren't they delicious? Sweetbreads. Pancreas, though thymus glands are also classed as such. Yes, confusing, Mr. President. But also quite enjoyable, would you not agree?

Andrea, I think. Or was that one named Karen?

Yes, they are the one disappointment. Pickled eggs in beet juice. Normally, the Pennsylvania Dutchfolk use

chicken eggs, you see—a simple barnyard animal. I could not subject you or the Empress to such a horror, of course. So, again, I made the appropriate substitution. But the size and texture simply are not the same. Of course, Sir. I shall delete this selection from the Glorious One's most-holy table!

Oh. Yes. Do try the Liver Milanese, Mr. President. Another Italian dish, named for a major population center. You would not believe how difficult it was to find suitably tender liver—I was up and down the streets of Milan for hours, Sir! Then I met this agreeable young gentleman and he provided all we needed. Well, he and his children.

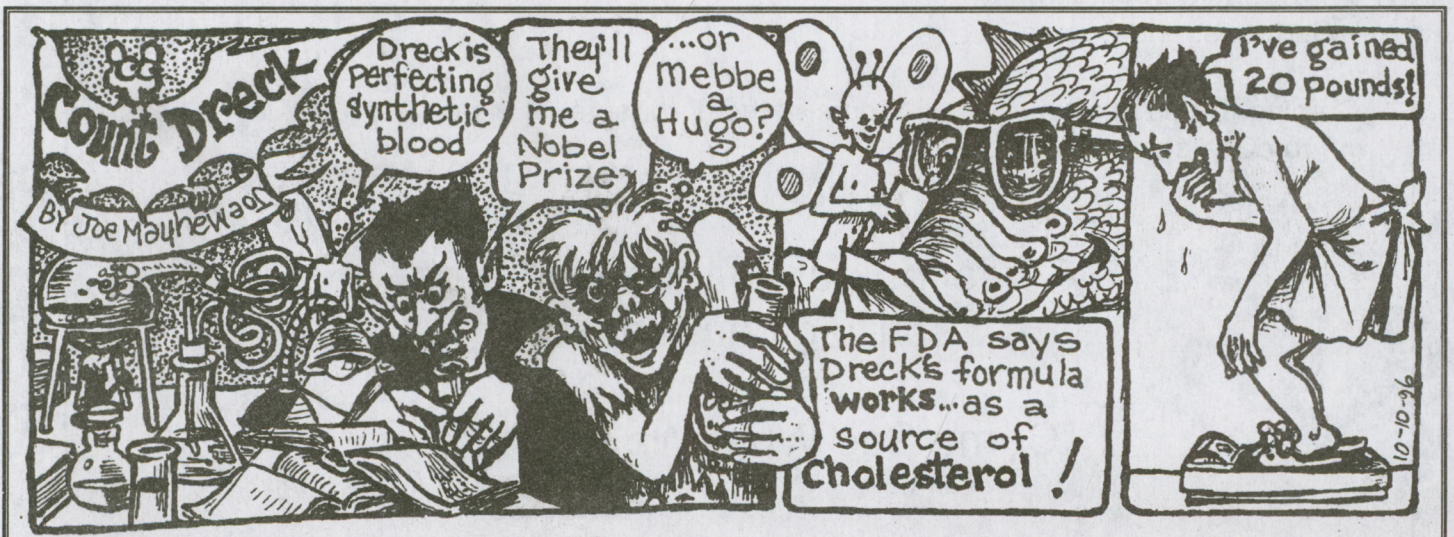
Beverages? That, alas, was one area I had poor luck with. The only truly palatable item was a form of fermented animal milk called Kumiss. Oh, no Sir! Of course not!

But it did prove uncommonly difficult, persuading enough of the local Central Asian women to allow us access to the only acceptable alternative.

And these last? With pride, I offer you two items of my own humble creation—designed especially for yourself and, should you permit it, for Her Glory! Leg of Kenyan in butter sauce and fillet of young Filipino, Mr. President!

You think so? Truly, you mean this?

Oh, Mr. President! I am truly, truly overwhelmed! Yes. Certainly. Hennoch, bring forth the dessert tray! Aren't they exquisite, Sir? Genuine French Ladyfingers, Mr. President. Her name, as I recall, was Monique and she made the most amusing sounds when we cut them off. ▲



# tomorrow

## SPECULATIVE FICTION

[www.tomorrowssf.com](http://www.tomorrowssf.com)

edited by Algis Budrys

### *THE NEW ELECTRONIC TOMORROW!*

We'll be rather different on the Internet. Not only will we run stories—updating once a week—but we will also run non-fiction, poems, and cartoons. We will have a letter column. We will have a book review column. We will have an art gallery. And probably things we haven't even thought of yet. Not all of them will take place immediately, but steadily we will aim for that format.

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plus:

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- A science column.
- An art gallery, offering you the chance to purchase prints by Tomorrow cover artists, with numerous samples.
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Coming to you in future Issues. Some of them, for sure, in the next issue. All you have to do is be on the Net.

A free look at all these features,  
starting January 15.

Come See What We're Doing!

## THE MUSEUM KEEPERS

Mars is not for youthful men. The past is everywhere, dead cities in the sand, fading sunlight slanting on the vast and rippled dunes the sunset wind has fanned. We come here as Mars' final scholiasts, to silent and abandoned Samarkands, to cities left a million years ago by vanished cultures we will never know.

But they were humanoid, and once were young. A fluted columns grace, an alien book, still hint of what they may have said or sung, and we imagine how they might have looked. Thus old men live with shadows, and among past lives for which we long ago forsook our own, we exercise in their debris our hopeful, futile archaeology.

An older race's dreams become our own; those dreams may be the one thing that can hold the brittle cities standing - thoughts alone, the only thoughts of men grown frail and old and pledged to Mars in marriage, soul and bone, remembering two races' fires grown cold. The ghosts we meet within these ancient towers may be Martians' - our they may be ours.

We span two worlds, at home in neither one, dry husks that rattle down these empty streets, and when we pass into oblivion with those whose destiny we must repeat, once, briefly, where the old canals still run, the last of Earth and ghosts of Mars will meet to cast our dual shadows in the night whose indifferent moons be still as bright.

(Based on the Ray Bradbury story "And The Moon Be Still As Bright")

## HELIONAUT

A fluff of thistledown upon the wind escaped my gently grasping hand, and I was glad. It floated off, but would descend in distant soil where it would multiply.

I thought of how primordial drifting seed unlocked potential life from tidal mud; now dragonfly replaces millipede, and streams of grass flow where the cycads stood.

What folded futures wait within my mind that I should seek the brightest solar flare, leaving earth and mankind far behind, to soar on winds of gravitation where, at some consuming perihelion, I flower in the garden of the sun?

## GENOME

The universe of human DNA teems with nearly boundless combinations, but nature hit the limit of creation and used the final pattern up today. All the souls we are allowed to be are tallied. Now the cycle is complete. Omega man steps out into the street, the final count of all humanity, and sets the dial to zero. We return through all our lives. Each personality reincarnates. Heraclitus learns the cyclic nature of infinity, the Sisyphus still struggles with his stone, locked in a cell, confined in chromosome.

## MONKS WINE

Built on a plain below a darkening peak, the old church lingers sourly from its past. Stunted vineyards, dusty, bare and bleak, surround its stone walls. Stubborn to the last,

a brotherhood of wizened men attend their peevish and monotonous routine. The evening and their tedious rituals blend, dry and bitter as their musty wine.

The languidly coagulating blood of sunset flows through mullioned ruby glass. Up in the rafters, bats in monkish hoods bear testimony of their twilight mass.

The dark absorbs the echo of their hymns. Down to the dregs of day, ambition shrivels; vineyards turn to gray and gnarled stems. Defeated, men must leave the night to devils.

When all the doddering minks have gone to sleep, and night skies suck the soil's meager damp, dark spiders cluster, swollen bulbous grapes, and drink the oil from feebly guttering lamps.

"Seasons and Stone" is Kathryn J. Brown's second short story sale. Her first, "Dark Queen," was purchased by Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine. About the tale she writes, "My first love is science fiction and I wanted to portray a story of a powerful man who falls in love with someone beautiful and broken—as I have difficulty navigating automatic doors, let alone envisioning future technologies, I write rotten science fiction. So, I decided to write my tale of love as a fantasy piece."

# Seasons & STONE

by

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J.

**Brown**

**F**alcon Bertille sat brooding in her courtyard behind the Temple of Justice. Each magistrate maintained a similar garden there, ostensibly as a place to think, but more often used as a meeting place for bribes or threats. Many of her colleagues made elaborate habitats of theirs, filling them with fountains and flowers, but Falcon had little time for such things so she let her guardian, Rotger, do the decorating. He gave it two things: a stone bench and a crab apple tree. And Falcon, who needed neither running water to drown the sound of whispered voices, nor flowers to hide the glint of blood-stained jewels, came to understand the meaning in his choices.

Illustrated  
By

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**Apice**

Autumn came early to her corner of the world and the crab apple tree stood like a skeleton, the green flesh of its leaves gone, only its dwarfish fruit remaining like suspended drops of blood. Looking at it, Falcon thought of all the people stripped away from her by the years, old friends lost on fickle currents. "It's been a long time," she murmured.

Rotger sat beside her, his wispy white hair barely stirring in the wind. Beneath it his eyes glowed like embers almost lost in smoke. They and the red underside of his cape were the only traces of color he had. "Since when?"

"Since I last stood in that abandoned storehouse down on Market Street. Falcon Bertille—private advocate, public nuisance—and her menagerie: two prostitutes, a toy maker, and a thief nobody ever saw. The magistrates hated me back then, but they never could ignore me." She sighed, staring up at the autumn sky. "Such a long time ago."

Rotger smiled, just enough to hint at his fangs. He clearly took great pride in his freakish appearance since turning it to his advantage. A red cape assassin could charge high prices for his work, but a red cape assassin who encouraged false rumors about being undead could charge almost anything. "If I may say so, I think the forces of law are still every bit as annoyed with you now as when you were a young upstart."

Falcon nodded, reaching into her pouch and pulling out a slice of licorice root. "It's the Crescens case. The courts can't waive a conviction without my vote, and I can't vote without some proof of Damon Nelek Crescens' innocence other than his elevated parentage." She bit off half the stick and chewed slowly, waiting for its cool, dark taste to spread to her stomach.

"I'm sure they've given you other reasons to change your vote."

Falcon laughed harshly, her breath rising in short spurts. "Oh, I've been threatened with bribery and tempted with assassination, if that's what you mean. The usual."

"So why not pardon him?"

Falcon rose and walked over to the tree. She stood there for a moment, staring at it, then began gathering its sour fruit into her hands. "If a client paid you to kill someone, would you let that person live?"

"No."

"I showed that kind of mercy once. Just once. Last month they brought a young man into my court on charges of prostitution. His slim body was like a streak of light on running water and every time his lips moved it was like they were struggling with a kiss. The whole trial he just stood there, staring at me from behind a curl of hair that hung across his face like a jet black talon. He'd obviously been selling his body to anyone for the price of a drink and wasn't about to stop, wasn't even really sorry about it. But at the end of it, I let him go."

A new smell entered the air, a mixture of cinnamon and bitter wine. Falcon recognized the scent as Lady Arcadia's perfume and wondered if Her Ladyship was in the next courtyard, sprinkling it on her drying flowers. For a moment she remembered how each of her old partners smelled, especially Minna's elusive aura of violets. She wondered where they were these days—all of them carried away by the currents of their own lives, except Minna, whose life left her beached on impossible shores. She stayed and Falcon watched her grow sick and thin, until the tailored gown that once emphasized such magnificent curves became a mockery and Minna rattled in it, like fortune telling bones in a silk pouch. When winter came, all Falcon had to bury her with was snow.

She inhaled again and the perfume was gone.

Neither of them spoke for a long time. Then Falcon gestured around the courtyard. "I've come to read my own meanings into this garden, but why did you choose just a tree and a bench?"

Rotger smiled again. "Does it surprise you to find an assassin who is also a philosopher? I assure you philosophy is quite common amongst those of us who aren't insane."

Falcon laughed. His grave manner always amused her, maybe because it was such a careful parody of her own. "But why a bench and a tree?"

"The art of assassination is reduction." He bent over and retrieved one of the fallen crab apples with a black-gloved hand. This he held up before her, like a tiny target. "Every situation is reduced to two opposing principles: blade and shield, pick and lock, sound and silence. Anything beyond the two is clutter. I've seen more than one promising blue cape get killed by clutter."

"So the tree and the bench—" Falcon persisted.

Rotger flicked away the crab apple. "So, the two opposing forces in the world: seasons and stone, mortality and eternity, life and death."

The corner of her mouth curled upward like the slight bend of a flower petal. "I rather thought so."

Again there was silence until he extended a hand to her. "Come, it's getting late and the court sessions are over for today. I imagine you'll be wanting to visit your lover now."

This deduction surprised her more than his elaborate explanation had. "How do you know—?"

"I may not have yet chosen to pardon, but I know why someone would. I'm going to Market Street myself; I'll walk you that far."

Falcon nodded, wordlessly following him out onto the road.

Soon they left the courtyards and law houses far behind and entered the more seasonless section of town. No trees grew there, and even the occasional weed poking up through the dirt looked like it had been dead since the city was built. Rain began falling, filling puddles where birds stood ankle deep, pecking at lice, while random piles of rags melted into the mud that choked out everything. Houses grew smaller and closer together, and finally they arrived at the staircase descent into Medusa's.

The old temple-turned-tavern was busy that night, its patrons seeking shelter from their own leaky roofs. Crowded tables and loud voices drove away the ghosts that haunted Medusa's in its quieter moments, and even the stone serpents that twisted across the ceiling, staring down with their empty, plundered eyes, seemed mundane. On nights like that, only those drunk enough to go treasure hunting in the wine cellar were reminded of what had once been worshiped there. "Would you like to meet him?" Falcon asked, feeling embarrassed.

She watched Rotger's eyes scan the room until they found the young man lying on his stomach by the fireplace. Something about the youth's posture conjured up images of stone snakes warmed to life and made human. "Him?"

"Yes."

"I have other business." But he smiled before slipping back up the stairs, the red lining of his cape briefly tinting her thoughts like a premature sunset. She shook the color loose and made her way over to Alix.

"Hello."

He laughed, rolling over onto his back. For a moment strands of jet black hair ran like cracks across his face, but he quickly tossed them aside. "My Dark Star! You always come to me in the rain. Welcome."

She caught his outstretched hand, pulling him to his feet. The touch of his skin brought a fresh wave of embarrassment.

How foolish she must look, a woman of nearly forty consorting with a boy of eighteen—that would make them laugh in their precious gardens. Cold, logical Falcon, taken in by a prostitute. Then she looked at him, the gold chain around his neck and the reckless tilt of his head, all of it like a man about to be hanged, and she knew what anyone thought didn't matter, didn't even exist. Not in his presence. "How are you?" she asked, conscious of the inadequacy of words.

"I have something magnificent to show you." He kept hold of her hand as they left the main room. Medusa's was the one spot of habitation in an old building. Deserted passageways ran like interlocking mazes from its center, but even those foolish enough to descend into the wine cellar never went there. Alix paused to light a candle, then pushed his way into the dust and cobwebs, leaving Falcon to follow as best she could.

Time and space became irrelevant. All that existed was a spot of candlelight on the floor and the shape of her boots as they passed in and out of it. Their footsteps mixed with the sound of falling rain, until one became the echo of the other. Even speaking was an effort, and when Falcon finally managed, it felt like waking from a dream. "I didn't think Idette let anyone go back here."

"She lets me. People let me do what I want, since seeing us together." He laughed. "I don't know who they're more scared of—you or Rotger."

"But you're not?"

"Scared of you? Not at all."

But she knew she should be afraid of him.

They came to a staircase with a banister so rotted the wood felt like velvet when she held onto it. Following Alix's point of light reminded her of following a star, step by step into the night sky, running after it into deeper and deeper darkness until even the star flickered out. The spot of light on the floor stopped moving and Falcon found herself momentarily outside it as Alix announced, "We're here."

A flash of lightning illuminated the tower room where they stood. Dust lay thick over everything, and bits of the storm swirled in the unshuttered windows like rippling tapestries. Alix stepped inside, and as his candlelight warmed the crumbling walls, Falcon stared past him in astonishment. A woman knelt in the middle of the room, her face bent down, her arms raised toward the windows.

Falcon opened her mouth to speak, but Alix was already crouching down beside the strange figure. "I told you she was magnificent. All the rest have been destroyed, except for bits and pieces, but only Idette knows about this one. And she won't touch it."

"She's stone," Falcon murmured, slowing realizing why the girl had not moved since their arrival. "One of the sacrifices. I had no idea..."

"I found her the other day and just had to sit here and stare. Look at her face. Look how happy it is. I wonder what the last thing she saw was?" He ran a hand lovingly across the statue's stone smile.

"She saw God." The woman unsettled her and she couldn't make herself stop hovering in the doorway, trapped between the darkness behind and the mystery in front. "She saw God and was granted immortality." A clap of thunder answered her like a shout from the divine and Falcon jumped. "I thought Idette got rid of all those things, broke them or threw them in the lake."

"She did, mostly, but not this one. Wouldn't tell me why, either. God, look at her! Aren't you envious?"

Lightning flashed off Alix's features, freezing them in her mind like her last glimpse of Rotger's cape. How long before the

faint circles under his eyes grew dark and caved in? How long before the milky whiteness of his skin curdled, turning yellow like old parchment? How long before the slenderness of his body became emaciated and the heat of his touch was no longer passion but perpetual fever? Minna gave away her youth to Falcon, and for what? How long until all she had to offer Alix was a bed of snow? "I don't know."

"I am. I think that's why I keep coming up here." He extended a hand toward her. "Come here, Falcon. Let's kneel and pray for the night to transform us while I'm still young and you're still powerful."

She settled into the dust next to him, touched by a strange yearning, not for perpetual spring, but for some dignity to autumn. As her hands traveled from his throat to the hairless skin revealed by his open tunic, the aching became a sort of tenderness. Across from her, Alix's eyes burned in the candlelight, his face aglow with the love of vanity.

Lightning came again, silhouetting the stone woman beside her, and something in Alix's expression went out. For a moment he looked like he wanted to tell her something real, something that went beyond the sweeping romanticism he wore like a mark of his profession. For a moment he looked like he wanted to tell her what it was like to be gang raped by a group of drunken adventurers, what it was like to give head with a split lip and raging fever. She felt his skin trembling beneath her touch, and if he were about to split open and send everything pouring out—all the things he hid from her, fearing that any trace of grit on her toy would be enough to make her discard it. But all that happened was that his face fell suddenly away from her and his hands came together in an attitude of prayer. "I want to be stone..." he whispered desperately.

Falcon shut her eyes and pulled him close, trying to take reassurance in the warmth of his breath. "I just want to see God."

The next morning she sat in her garden with Rotger, talking of statues and storm clouds, when Lady Arcadia's summons arrived. Falcon rose and started to excuse herself, but Rotger only laughed. "I'll come with you. I know enough of The Lady's secrets to damn her to hell several times over, so I doubt she'll mind if I add this one. Besides, I have an idea what it's about. You may want me."

Falcon nodded, secretly glad of his company. Together they followed the messenger back inside the Temple of Justice, then out through the portal into Lady Arcadia's garden. Like Falcon, Lady Arcadia had a certain aesthetic—her courtyard was dominated by a fountain. It stood nearly as tall as a person, water rattling through its bronze leaves before finally dropping into a pool where the decapitated buds of dried roses bobbed about like shriveled fish. As always, the stale air smelled heavily of perfume. "Lady Arcadia," Falcon murmured, bowing.

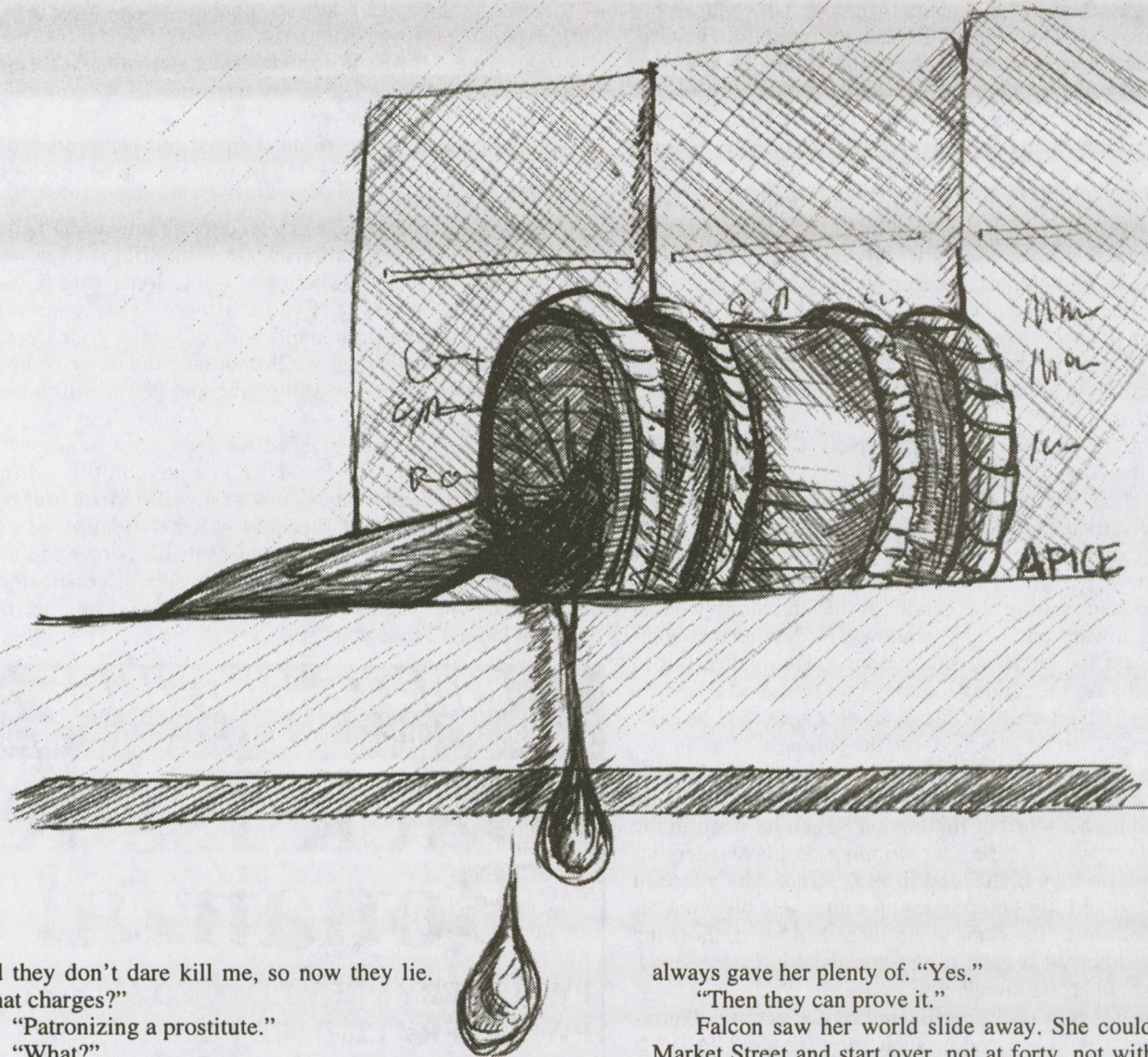
The object of her address turned slowly, her silver robe resettling around her body like a freshly torn web. Gray eyes stared at her visitors from some remote place where thoughts hung like icicles and no wind ever stirred the surface of deep snow. "Lady Bertille," she acknowledged, tilting her head in Falcon's direction. Rotger also earned a nod of her head, but to him she gave no name, nor, seemingly, any further thought. "I have called you here because of grave news."

"What is it?"

Lady Arcadia held out a scroll, marked with the familiar half-cat, half-fish of the Crescens' seal. "The Crescens are prepared to bring charges against you that could mean the loss of your seat."

Falcon made a soft noise of contempt. "They can't bribe me





and they don't dare kill me, so now they lie. What charges?"

"Patronizing a prostitute."

"What?"

Lady Arcadia nodded, gesturing to the seat around her fountain. For a moment Falcon was too dazed to take in this gesture of sympathy, then hurriedly accepted. Her fingers felt numb as they fumbled with her pouch strings, and the strip of licorice slipped from her, toppling in among the dead rose buds. Lady Arcadia, however, betrayed no notice of this as she sat beside her. "I know. A small enough crime considering what most of us did to acquire our titles, but any violation of law, proven in full court, is enough to cost a seat. You are less than popular, Lady Bertille. All it will take is evidence."

Falcon dipped her fingers into the pool, trying to wash away the memory of Alix's skin. "Can they prove it?"

"That depends. Did you do it?"

There were dark certainties about Lady Arcadia, but Falcon didn't fear her like the others did. Rotger killed for one reason—gold—and The Lady killed only for power. Never in rage, never out of jealousy, always for power. That was the one thing Falcon

always gave her plenty of. "Yes."

"Then they can prove it."

Falcon saw her world slide away. She couldn't go back to Market Street and start over, not at forty, not without the others. The courts were all she had. "Why are you telling me this?" she whispered hoarsely.

"To warn you. The hearing will not be held until tomorrow. Act."

"How?"

Lady Arcadia's eyes rested briefly on Rotger. "Prostitutes keep no financial records and dead men give no testimony."

Words deserted Falcon in a sudden rush. Her hand jerked from the pool as she leapt to her feet, Lady Arcadia's perfume suddenly burning her tongue and throat. And still she couldn't speak.

Lady Arcadia rose and nodded, turning her back on them. "This talk is at an end," she murmured, fading into the dead plants of her garden.

That night a cold wind spun through the tower room at Medusa's, propelling Falcon from window to window as she scanned the streets for Alix's approach. Rotger stood in the

room's center, more like a shadow than a part of the scenery, the rippling of his cape more solid than any of his own movements. In one hand, he held her dagger. "Very nice," he murmured, admiring it in the dim light of his candle. "A bit old-fashioned, of course, but nice. How long since you last used this?"

Falcon stopped pacing long enough to snatch the weapon and tuck it back under her robes. "Not as long as you might think." She started toward the nearest window, but changed her mind, momentarily unable to bear the thought of motion. Instead, she sank to her knees in front of the stone woman, imploring, "What do I do?"

The statue had no reply, but Rotger raised a barely visible eyebrow. "I thought that Lady Arcadia had a perfectly reasonable suggestion."

Falcon shook her head impatiently. "You don't know what it's like—ever since last night I've had this non-stop background noise in my mind. Do I lust after him? Pity him? Love him?" She tossed her hands into the air sending wind pouring down her loose sleeves like ice water. "I don't know. How can I decide what to do now if I don't even know that."

"Details," Rotger warned softly, "clutter. Focus on the two opposing forces."

"But what are they?"

"That you have to determine for yourself. Choose carefully, Falcon, more than one life hangs on it."

Falcon sighed, feeling hope drain out of her with the last breath. "Thanks. Listen, you better get out of sight. Alix may not be afraid of me, but he might bolt if he sees you, especially under the circumstances."

Rotger nodded, setting the candle beside the stone woman before starting toward one of the windows. He had almost completely settled on the ledge outside before Falcon called out to him. "Rotger, thanks for coming tonight. You're a good friend."

Something flickered across the assassin's face, and he nodded. "I hope so." Then he vanished into the darkness.

Falcon swallowed her licorice when she heard Alix's footsteps coming cautiously up the old staircase. What was he more afraid of—finding her—or not finding her? Then he stood in the room's doorway, warm candle wax dripping on his slender fingers. For an instant they both stood frozen, before Alix's face lit up with joy. "Falcon! My Dark Star, you came!" He blew out his light and let it drop to the floor as he rushed forward, throwing his arms around her. "I was so afraid you wouldn't understand, but you do. I should have known you would."

Falcon pushed him back, bewildered by the ecstatic expression on his face. Could betrayal be such a joy for him? "Alix? Is it true? Are you really going to testify against me in full court?"

"Of course I am, I have to. But that doesn't matter—"

"Doesn't matter?" Her fingers brushed against the dagger's hidden hilt, aching to draw it. "They'll take away my seat! I'll be finished."

The joy on Alix's face momentarily dimmed from confusion, then reappeared. "Oh, you don't understand. But you still came—how doubly magnificent!" From his sleeve he drew two glass vials, one empty, one still full of a silvery powder. "Falcon," he whispered, touching her arm, "you think I would betray you? The one person I have ever loved like I love the sound of rain and the spaces between the stars at night?"

She stared at him while the wind whipped strands of hair across her face like bars in a clumsy cage. Where was the moment she'd seen last night? Where was the pain that seemed to match and understand her own? "What?"

He drew one of her hands from beneath her billowing robes

and pressed a vial into it. "My Dark Star, I haven't turned on you. The Crescents offered me gold, but you give me all the money I need. They didn't dare threaten to harm me. So they asked what I wanted above all else, and when I told them, they gave me this." He held up the empty vial.

A horrible sort of realization began dawning on Falcon, chilling her where the wind had failed. "They didn't. They couldn't."

"Two components, taken in separate doses. Very rare, and very expensive, but what's that to a family like the Crescents? They gave me the first dose today, after we talked. I'll get the second tomorrow after I give my testimony. I made them give me enough for both of us."

Falcon stared at the stone woman and remembered Alix kneeling on the floor, praying to be made stone before he broke open. "They gave you that?"

"They gave us that." He gestured to the powder in her hand. "Take it now, and then tomorrow, after the trial is over, we can both go somewhere—anywhere you want. Some wild hillside or deserted beach, anything. Even that depressing courtyard of yours. And I'll take your hand and look into your eyes, and you'll look into mine, then we'll both take the other component and turn to stone while I'm still young and you're still powerful. While we're still in love."

She reached up and touched his face, able to see what he could no longer hide. She could see that he didn't love her, that he was scared to death that one day he actually might, but he was still willing to give her the only gift he thought he could. Himself. Beautiful. Forever. The voices inside her rose to a deafening buzz, then seemed to reach some sort of conclusion and died. "Alix," she whispered, the one real thing inside her finally breaking loose, "I love you."

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His body jerked as if she had hit him, and again she sensed the cracks, threatening to split him open and spill him at her feet. She could see all the hell, all the horror that once revealed can never be rinsed away, pressing at him from the inside. And again he fought it back. "Then this is the only way."

Her hand dropped from his face and she turned away, too broken to think of killing. She would lose her seat, would die old, ugly and alone, begging for coppers on the corner of Market Street, and her lover would turn to stone tomorrow, young and perfect forever. Was there anything more cruel than that? "I won't. I can't."

"Falcon, please—"

"No. Goodbye, Alix."

There was a moment of silence before he spoke again. "I'll do it here, tomorrow after the case is tried. If you won't join me, at least come, so I can carry your image into eternity on stone eyes."

Before Falcon could reply, Alix cried out softly, something about it so different that she spun around. He stood as he had before she looked away, but now his hand was pressed to his neck, and from between his fingers protruded a small, black dart.

"No!" she screamed, leaping forward with the same breath and ripping the dart from his throat. But even as she did it, she knew it was too late. Alix twitched, and the vial fell from his other hand, making a soft clink before it vanished between the boards. A moment later, Alix dropped too, black lines of poison already apparent on his throat. "No!" Falcon repeated, shrieking it into the night where she knew his assailant lurked. Then she sank to her knees beside Alix.

He panted jerkily, each breath forced out of increasingly stiff lungs. As Falcon rolled him over onto his back, she could feel the immobility spreading like some horrible premonition of rigor mortis. "No Alix...I didn't want you dead." As she spoke, she became aware of a figure standing beside her, although she could barely take in its familiarity. "Oh God, Rotger. You've killed him."

"Not exactly. Has it ever occurred to you that statuary is a good deal easier to dispose of than bodies? Of course, the two components are rare and expensive, but what's that to a red cape assassin?"

She looked at Alix. His lips quivered, trying to force out words, but his throat was stiff as marble and refused to allow him sound. Soon even his mouth surrendered its feeble struggle as an icy hardness spread across his face. Her lover wasn't dying. He was turning to stone. "Why?" she whispered.

"Because you spared him. Do you really think the Crescents would trust the life of their son to a prostitute's testimony?"

"They paid you to kill him?"

"They paid me to kill you."

She looked up at him, clutching the frozen body of her lover stubbornly in her arms. "Then do it."

"I would, if you had killed Alix. You credit yourself with mercy because you let one prostitute walk free, and yet it never occurred to you that I murder people for a living. You've made

two exceptions, Falcon, and if you had betrayed the one, I would have ceased to trust your commitment to the other."

Her gaze returned to Alix. He was almost completely gone, but faint traces of green still lingered in his eyes. "I love you," she repeated. If he had to carry her image to eternity on his eyes, he should at least carry that on his heart. "I'll come here. I'll remember." Then all color faded, leaving only stone. Falcon pressed her lips against his cold, marble cheek and tried to cry. But despite her burning eyes and tightening chest, no tears would come—not for Alix, young and perfect forever, not for Minna, nothing more than bones buried in snow.

Finally she struggled to her feet and walked to one of the tower's windows. Outside she could see the night sky, and the stars scattered across it like tiny grains of silver powder. They held her motionless until Rotger's gentle voice broke the silence. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for the face of God."

Neither of them spoke again until Rotger placed his hand on her shoulder. "It's late. Let's go home." ▲

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—Dena M. Nicorta

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YOU FEED UPON MY ANGUISH,

LIKE RAVENOUS FILTHY BEASTS

GLUTTONOUS IN YOUR MANNER

WITH BLOOD STAINS ON YOUR TEETH

YOU HOLD YOUR HANDS TO YOUR FACES

IN MOCKED HORROR OF MY WOES

YET BEHIND YOUR HANDS

YOU'RE GRINNING



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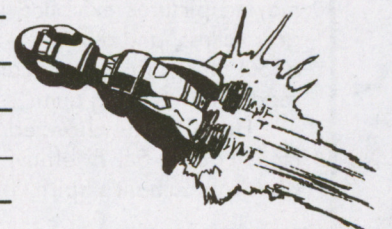
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# Words & Pictures

by Darrell Schweitzer

Let's face it, 1996 was not a banner year for science fiction film.

It's at times like this, when I find myself in sympathy with Charles Beaumont, whom most of you (I hope) know as a very fine short-story writer in the '50s/California/post-Bradbury school. Beaumont also wrote some of the finest *Twilight Zone* episodes before his premature death.

In the mid-'50s, Charles Beaumont was movie reviewer for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. His columns (called "The Science Screen") make fascinating reading. I hope they will be collected into a book by some enterprising small-press publisher. Most of them are cries from the heart from a sensitive, intelligent writer forced to deal with giant bug movies, Ed Wood and his ilk (before it was fashionable to "admire" eccentric dreck) and so much more. In a period in which most people, including virtually all mainstream critics just laughed at science fiction, Beaumont found himself sitting through atrocity after atrocity knowing full well that even the lowliest SF pulp hack could do better than this *in his sleep*. Yet *Cat Women of the Moon* was the general public's idea of what science fiction was.

I wonder, have things changed all that much?

Beaumont, more than once, seriously considered throwing in the towel. In the September 1957 issue, he quotes Wolcott Gibbs, who, upon retiring from (mainstream) film reviewing, remarked, "...it is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum."

Have things changed that much? By 1957, Hollywood's Sci Fi effluvia hadn't quite broken Chuck Beaumont's spirit, but in the same column

he went on to review *Attack of the Crab Monsters*, *The Man Turned to Stone*, *Zombies of Mora Tau*, *She Devil*, and *Not of This Earth*. The best he can do is refer to the last-named as "an occasionally diverting melodrama."

Beaumont developed a reputation, and was soon banned from press screenings. But, at least in 1957, he still held out some hope:

I should say that the answer to the question, *Why do we go to SF films?* (pondered by all of us at one time or another) may lie in the notion that life itself is a welter of mediocre experiences and that living is a willingness to tolerate them while searching for something better. I have had golden moments in dark little theaters, moments I might never have had if I'd thrown up my hands and said the hell with it...so let us never be ashamed of paying good money to *The Zombies of Mora Tau*. We're just playing a long shot, that's all: and sometimes—sometimes—the long shot comes in and we're rich.

That being so, I didn't feel very rich this past summer. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* was a travesty, highlighted (if that is the word) by Marlon Brando's relentless self-parody which was nowhere near as funny as the self-parody he did in *The Freshman*. And then there was *Independence Day*, which dwarfed everything else even as Jupiter dwarfs the rest of the Solar System. Next to it, nothing else matters.

This film is, to slip into a Beaumont mode, a disaster for SF. Even as Beaumont found himself sometimes speculating precisely which radioactive lizard flick set science fiction back further, but never strayed from his conclusion that such abortions were actively harmful to the struggle for aesthetically respectable fantastic cinema (remember

that the Best Dramatic Hugo was actually dropped for a couple years in the mid-'60s, for lack of interest...now you know why), I remain just as convinced that *Independence Day*, by being one of the biggest megabuck hits in history, has just undone the long crawl out of the slime that began with *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and proceeded inch by inch all the way up to *Bladerunner*.

This is the public's idea of what science fiction is all about. For a while there, I was joking that *Independence Day* was "hermetically sealed from the possibility of content," but the more I think about it, the more I realize that it *does* have content, and that the messages contained in it are sheer poison.

You all know about this film. The bad aliens invade the Earth. When contact is finally made, their vocabulary seems limited to "die!" The icky extra-terrestrial bugs are galactic strip-miners, here to relieve a planet of all usable resources, then move on. They do not file environmental impact statements.

But of course our plucky heroes defeat them in just a few days, stretching the Long Arm of Coincidence through a funhouse mirror along the way.

I mean, we are expected to believe that a computer nerd (Jeff Goldblum) who hasn't even been working in the field for some years, is able to, virtually overnight, write an utterly devastating virus which totally shuts down a whole alien civilization (their mother ship is said to be a third the size of the moon) as soon as it is applied.

I thought of a neat cartoon idea, limited by my inability to draw decent caricatures: Goldblum and the black guy (about whom, more in a moment) have linked their stolen alien scout craft to the mother ship and uploaded the virus. (I guess the alien system uses standard 3.5 inch disks.) They radio back to Earth, "Uh, sorry folks, I'm afraid humanity is doomed. Our virus is IBM and the aliens are Macintosh."

Oh, of course the special effects are impressive, but then special effects are (almost) always impressive these days. The special effects on *Battlestar Galactica* were pretty good too.

But let us deal with the poison this movie is trying to upload into us.

Frankly, this is a feel-good genocide movie. If your kids have any qualms about violence being not only the first solution any forceful leader should resort to, but *fun*, well, here's your ticket. It's the *True Lies* of SF. I am sure that before long the Republicans will embrace it as an example of decent family values...after all, in *Independence Day*, millions of people are annihilated, most of the world's major cities are erased from the map, and at the end you'd think Our Team had just won a football game. There is no grief, no sense of the awesome tragedy which has occurred, no sense that the aliens could have been thinking beings and that a whole

species has just been wiped out to the last individual. (No, they're monsters. They say "die!" The moral ambiguities of real warfare conveniently go away.)

Instead we get a particularly absurd shot of spear-chucking savages running out of the jungle to hop up and down for joy as a miles-long alien ship settles to the ground in the distance like the burning *Hindenburg*. Never mind that, even then, a whole inhabited district has probably just been toasted. Never mind, too, that these spear-chucking savages played no more part (and *could* play no more part) in their own salvation than could a herd of giraffes.

While we're on the subject of national chauvinism, one of the numerous lies this movie sets forth is the idea that only the United States really matters when it comes to defending Earth. We see military folks all over the world huddled by their radios, waiting for the Americans to come up with a plan.

The plan is that the young American president, who looks a little like Bill Clinton but couldn't be because he's a Gulf War veteran, does what he's longed to do all along and hops into a fighter jet and leads a squadron of computer-generated special-effects aircraft up against one of those 15-mile-across alien ships, and is somehow able to blow it to kingdom come with air-to-air missiles because Goldblum and the black guy have managed to disable the alien shields with their virus. Apparently even the auxiliary craft do not carry backup software.

Oh yes, the black guy. He is played ably enough by Will Smith. He is a pilot who had been turned down by the space program, it would seem, because he has a girlfriend who is a stripper, and guys who hang out with loose women apparently do not have the Right Stuff. (Fear not. After saving the world, he makes an honest woman out of her.)

The subtext here is, to quote Lisa Mason, who does a wonderfully funny shtick on this subject (speaking through an alien mask when she turns politically incorrect) that we're supposed to *blame it on the black chick*. She's the only woman in the film who is sexy, and that's because blacks are more sensual and animalistic than white folks, right?

Then there is the matter of intelligence. As in most Sci Fi flicks, intelligence is viewed with grave suspicion in *Independence Day*. The president tries thinking, tries being presidential, but the problem is soon getting so out of hand that there's no time for this egghead political stuff. Happily, the president gives in and decides to nuke 'em. That's what a *real* man would do, right?

Actually the world is saved by the techno-geek, Jeff Goldblum, but like the crippled Vulcan at his forge, the producer of these marvels is *not* better than the rest of us. His geekiness compensates, and besides he has been pissing away his genius for years running a radio station, so that makes him okay, right?

The professional *scientists*, of course, are a pack of treacherous fools. They've known about the aliens for years. Everything you've ever heard about alien abductions, Area 51, Roswell, etc. is true, and the government scientists have been covering it up, with no regard for the actual seriousness of the situation. (The message: *everything* the government tells you is a lie. Don't examine the evidence; trust your hunches. The comfort in conspiracy belief is that it not only lifts responsibility from the believer, but precludes the necessity of thinking.) While these white-coat types are piddling with their toys, as led by ultra-geeky Brent Spiner, there's this crisis, man! We've got to kill something! It takes an outsider amateur (Goldblum) to solve the problem, and the pro scientist (Spiner) is immediately throttled by the alien he is trying to communicate with. (The one with the limited vocabulary.) Served him damn right, didn't it?

There's also the drunken crop-duster pilot who's been wanting payback for what the alien abductors did to him years ago. Although he seems barely able to stagger to the cockpit, he proves a capable enough *jet* pilot and nobly sacrifices himself at the moment of supreme crisis. (The message: listen to the drunks, the brain-damaged, the raving imbeciles. They, being common folk, are actually right.)

And so on and so on and so on. This is a spectacular, flashy, superficially-entertaining, but ultimately monstrous film. It made its money by appealing to, to put it mildly, the basic instincts of its audience. If it wins a Hugo next year, I hope that those present will cry "Shame! Shame!"

Or maybe they will cancel the Best Dramatic category again, for lack of interest. With all the money it made, *Independence Day* is going to be the model for big-bucks Sci Fi flicks for years to come. The future does not look promising, folks.

My heart goes out to Chuck Beaumont, wherever he is.

The terrific irony is that, for once, all the action is on the small screen. Who would have thought, back when you could see *2001* in the cinema and *Time Tunnel* and *Lost in Space* on TV, that one day the situation would be reversed?

Well, not entirely. I am glad that Shirley Jackson didn't live to see what NBC did with *The Lottery*. It was a typical case of Hollywood taking a famous literary classic and saying, "Well, look, it's great, but we've got to improve it a little." So they put in a hunk hero with more muscles than brains (Dan Cortese of *Melrose Place*), a sexy love-interest (Keri Russell of *Malibu Shores*), and a few exploding cars, then stretched the whole thing out for two hours, and turned it into a degraded rehash of *The Wicker Man*.

"The Lottery" (short story), you will recall, is about a single, inexplicable event. Every year in this otherwise lovely, Bradbury-esque small town, they have this drawing, and whoever gets the unlucky ticket is stoned to death by their friends, neighbors, and family. Thus is the evil within all of us vented like so much steam. Now, as a short story, this works as a fable. There is no need or room to explain how the town got that way, why the rest of the world isn't in on it, etc. As a feature-length movie, there *is*, in precisely this area, where *The Wicker Man* succeeded so brilliantly in presenting a believably textured community devoted to its peculiar way of life, *The Lottery* (film) utterly fails, and becomes one more of those Sinister Town With A Secret horror movies, which makes no sense, either logically or psychologically.

Gosh, I wonder what NBC could do with "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas."

About the regular TV shows, I have very little to report. I watch the various *Star Trek* franchises, although I rarely respect them. They're occasionally diverting. At times Quark and the other Ferengi on *Deep Space Nine* provide some of the best comedy on TV. I particularly liked the episode in which Quark thought he was dying, attempted to pay his debts by selling his body as a posthumous collector's item, and then had to escape creditors. There was a lovely bit in Ferengi heaven, with all its expected tackiness. *Deep Space Nine* is frequently much funnier than, say, *Third Rock from the Sun*.

*Babylon 5* continues to be light-years ahead of any other continuing-character series in dramatic intensity and imagination, but you know that already. While I was rooting for *12 Monkeys* (possibly that last intelligent, adult SF film we will be seeing for a while) I wasn't exactly disappointed when a *Babylon 5* episode won a Hugo this year. The audience cheered thunderously at the ceremony. At the same convention (L.A. Con), there were *long lines* to get into the *Babylon 5* presentation, which, between two showings must have seated 2000 people, or one third of the entire convention attendance. So, for all (at least) my local TV stations are doing their best to bury it, *Babylon 5* is the best thing on, and the fans know it.

The best anthology show remains *The Outer Limits*, which originated on *Showtime* and is now being rerun on FOX. For all it may touch on supernatural ideas (e.g. life after death) the results are always solidly science-fictional, and often based on real science-fiction stories (there was an adaptation of Larry Niven's "Inconstant Moon" a while back) or written by real science-fiction writers (usually Alan Brennert). I am seldom disappointed.

And then there's *Tarzan: the Epic Adventures*. I haven't seen much of this, having only turned to it in near desperation when I realized I had very little to review this time. It's pretty bad, yes, often no better than *Xena: Warrior Princess* or *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* (and that makes it so bad that we're left appreciating what a subtle and sensitive actor Steve Reeves really was...) but sometimes it seems at least an honorable botch.

Sure, the special effects are awful, and the director makes the common mistake of pointing his camera at the fake monster or ridiculous computer-animation rather than concentrating on reactions and just letting the unconvincing monster whiz by as fast as possible. And, worst of all, Tarzan (Joe Lera) has a black sidekick (Aaron Seville) who may be an articulate and civilized man, in deference to political correctness, but is otherwise a pop-eyed, cowardly comic-relief whose uselessness must irritate the hell out of Tarzan and whose role is surely the most degrading any black actor has endured since the days of Steppin Fetchit.

But somebody involved in *Tarzan: the Epic Adventures* is an Edgar Rice Burroughs fan. The logo is derived from a heading J. Allen St. John did for *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*. There was a sequence in Pellucidar (the land inside the hollow Earth) which not only suggests somebody has read *Tarzan at the Earth's Core* but actually tried to reproduce on the screen that eerie Pellucidarian horizon which bends *upward* into the sky. So, the redeeming merit I can find in *Tarzan: the Epic Adventures*, and admittedly it is small, is that there actually are occasional attempts (rare in any Tarzan dramatization, either film or TV) to capture the spirit and substance of the original *Tarzan* books.

If only someone could give these guys a decent budget, cast, and a better director, they might actually do ERB proud.

And that, since I am not supposed to talk about *The X-Files* and the veritable explosion of *X-Files* imitators this time, is the closest I can come to ending on an optimistic note. ▲



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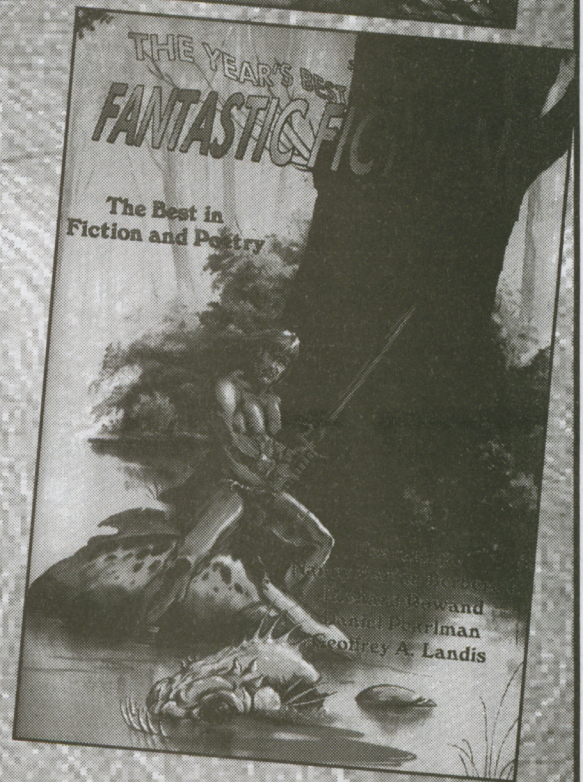
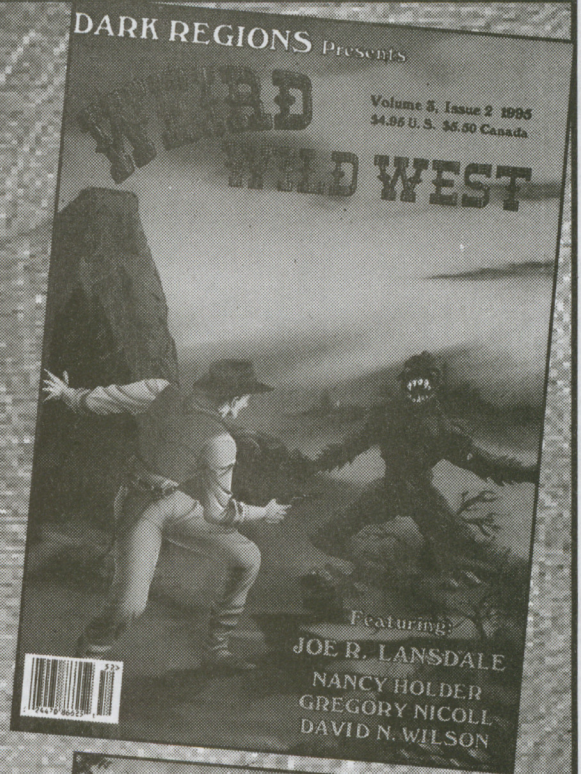
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"Voir Dire" marks Marcos' third professional fiction sale, his first two having sold to Algis Budrys at Tomorrow: Speculative Fiction. He hails from St. Petersburg, Florida where he lives with his wife Jennie and his two children Devon and Taylor. About "Voir Dire" he writes, "The story was inspired by my own jury duty experience. As I sat in the jury box regarding the poker-faced defendant, I found myself wishing I could tell what was going through his mind."

**I**t's that time again. The urge is upon you. You can't deny or ignore it, nor do you want to. It tastes of adrenaline, sick-sweet. It smells of polished fear. It sounds like the caress of thunder. It feels...who cares? Gotta hunt. Gotta hunt.

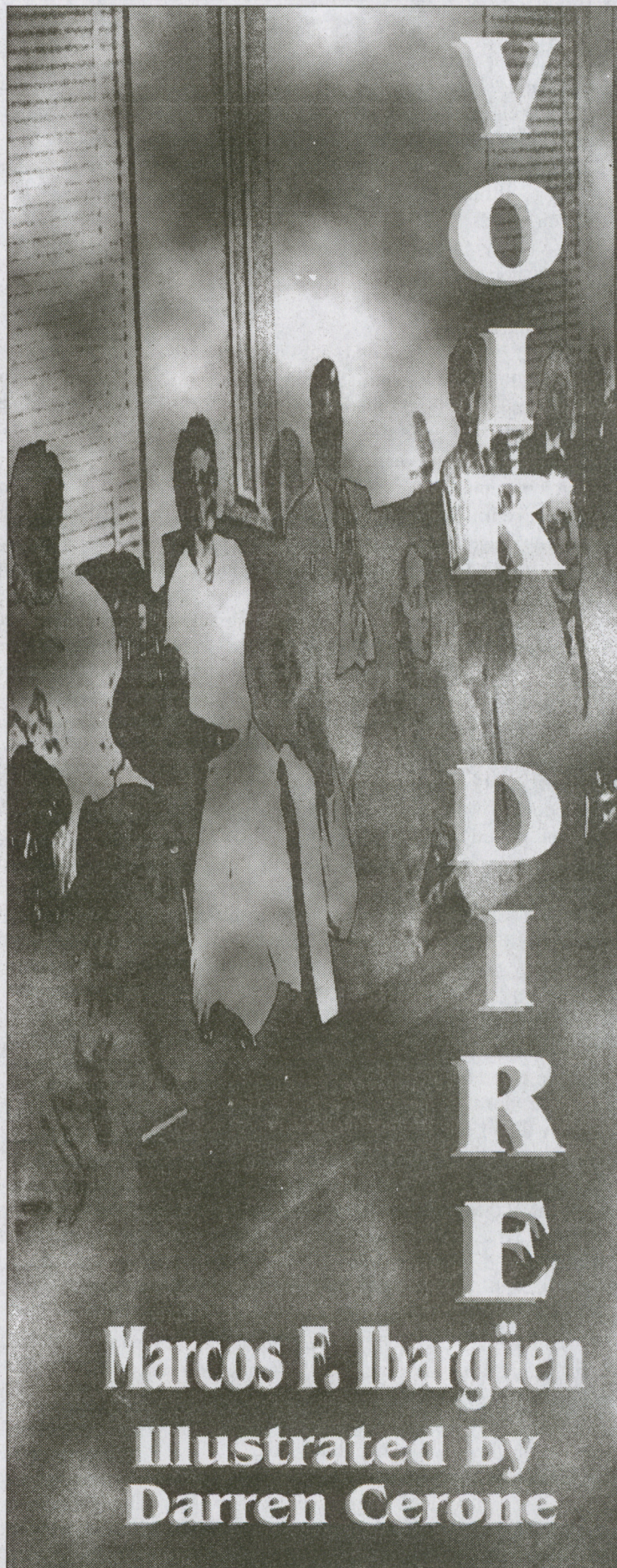
You like to call yourself Random Death. Mr. D. You hunt the same way every time, so that it's always different. No patterns. There's order in patterns, and you despise order. You fear order. Obey the random impulse only, avoid the logic.

So you climb in the car, your trusty 1996 Honda with the black pinstripe you keep touching up even as the paint job fades beyond colorlessness. You grin at yourself in the rearview, clean white teeth, dark eyes, close-cropped ruff of hair. You flick the ancient air-freshener hanging from the mirror, catch a distant whiff of pseudo-pine. When it stops swinging, that's the signal to start the car.

You drive well into the night, getting some distance. Mr. D's too smart to hunt his own backyard. You steer by the usual signs and portents. An itch in your left foot says left on Maple. The stabbing searchlight of an all-night Car Mart probes the sky, saying go south on the Interstate. About 3 A.M., a massive rig cuts you off, makes you slam the brakes. "How's my driving?" asks a cheerful bumper sticker not twenty feet in front of you, but the toll-free number is mostly scratched out, leaving only two digits: 53.

Good enough. Biting back your anger (no point messing with rig drivers, they're better armed than state troopers), you obey the omen and take exit 53. A full bladder makes you turn right, toward the nearest restroom. It's in a Fast Fetch, behind the beer coolers. You come out, zipping up, and eyeball the exhausted clerk behind the counter. He's an old black guy, bored stiff, making a show of restocking the cigarette display, which he probably emptied an hour ago just to have something to do. You draw a cup of stale coffee from the stainless steel urn next to the Lotto machine, and pay up wordlessly. The old guy sleepwalks through the transaction, rheumy eyes on anything but you. You give it some thought: fingers closing on the scrawny neck, feeling cartilage collapse, frantic wheezing... But the signs are wrong. He's not the one, so you leave.

"Objection!" The defense attorney stood there, finger on the kill switch, framed in foggy tendrils of dream as the image of the convenience store drained away around him. Mavis Bingham mopped her brow with an already sodden hanky, slumping in her seat. Around her, the other eleven jurors came out from under, each in their way, most peering about in wonder at the returning solidity of the courtroom.



The judge slipped off her skullnet and pinched the bridge of her nose, letting the lawyer cool his heels for a minute.

"Grounds?" she said.

"It's irrelevant, Judge. All this comes from hours before the alleged crime. Prosecution should limit questions to the immediate time-frame."

"Judge, if I may..." Now the prosecutor was standing.

"You may."

"We're trying to establish a pattern of behavior, difficult with a psychotic personality."

"Objection!"

"Sustained. Strike it."

The court reporter nodded, jiggling the wires that connected his own skullnet to the terminal before him.

"Apologies, Judge," said the prosecutor.

"Okay. I'll overrule the earlier objection and allow the line of questioning. However, I caution you to avoid bringing up unrelated incidents."

"Yes, Your Honor." Both lawyers settled back to their chairs. The judge turned to the jury.

"It's been a tough morning," said the judge. "Do any of you need a break?"

Mavis raised her hand timidly, cringing at groans from some of the others. The judge smiled wearily at Mavis, said, "Fine, let's recess for lunch."

"All rise!" barked the bailiff, and the judge strode briskly from the room. The other jurors shed their skullnets unaided, but the bailiff had to help Mavis with hers, which made her the last to enter the jury room. She was greeted by glares from several jurors. Eyes downcast, she shuffled to a chair in a corner of the room and pulled her knitting from her purse. The clicking of her needles was lost in the buzz of multiple conversations, everyone talking too loudly, covering their nervousness with babble.

Mavis felt a hand on her arm, and looked up to see Juror Nine at her side, his blue eyes crinkling kindly at her. He had to be ten years her junior, but was still the second oldest juror, and the only other retiree. He was holding out a Styrofoam cup to her. She smelled vending machine tea.

"Th-thanks," said Mavis, accepting the cup.

Nine eased into the seat beside her. "Don't mind these assholes," he murmured. She nodded, said nothing. Sipped her tea. It was awful, of course.

A young man, Juror Eleven, spun in his seat at the near end of the conference table.

"I heard that, old man," he said.

"So?" Nine regarded him placidly over his own cup of tea.

Eleven narrowed his eyes. "So we've been here for a week, sitting through prelim testimony and hours of instructions and boring bullshit, and we finally get to the good part, and—"

"This is the good part?" Nine interrupted, never raising his voice. Mavis kept her eyes on the murky surface of her tea, vaguely afraid of both men.

"Well, yeah. Now we get to see whether he did it or not."

"Or whether he *thinks* he did it or not."

"Whatever. Point is, we're almost done with this, and some of us got lives to live, jobs to get back to. If we keep taking breaks for old Number Three here, we'll *never* get done. Bottom line, if she wasn't up to this, she should've said so at the voir dire."

Nine grunted. Mavis sniffled. The bailiff sauntered over and put a hand on Eleven's shoulder, silencing him without a word. Eleven got up and wandered off.

"Are you all right?" said the bailiff in kind tones.

Mavis nodded, swallowed. "I guess I just wasn't ready for how—"

"Intense?" supplied Nine.

"Yes, how intense it would be. I mean, I was inside his mind, and it was so...intimate. And so evil—"

"Stop there, please," said the bailiff. "You know you can't discuss that until you begin deliberations."

"Sorry," Mavis said in a very small voice.

"Let's go get some lunch," said Nine, standing and extending a hand to Mavis. Mavis hesitated, then took his hand with a shy smile.

"Good idea," said the bailiff. "Have fun, kids."

The afternoon began much like the morning. The jurors entered the courtroom to find the defendant already on the stand, trailing wires from a chrome helmet that looked like nothing so much as a beauty salon hair dryer. His dark eyes were unreadable pits under the helmet's lip.

The judge, looking bored, shuffled papers behind her half-acre of polished mahogany while the bailiff and the court technician attended to the jurors, making sure their skullnets were properly fitted. Mavis fidgeted as the bailiff adjusted her chin strap.

The judge launched into the required disclaimer.

"The prosecution is about to resume mindscan-assisted questioning of the defendant. As I explained this morning, the defendant is not required to answer questions, and has elected not to. However, the prosecution has shown sufficient evidence to invoke Fifth Amendment Exception Clause 17, which allows the use of a mindscanner in controlled courtroom conditions. Each of you is networked to the mindscanner, and will be able to share the defendant's unconscious reactions to the prosecution's questions. Perceptions of mindscan input vary from person to person, and therefore what you make of this input will be entirely up to you. I caution you, once again, to draw no conclusions but keep an open mind until the case is handed over to you for deliberations. Counsel, proceed."

"Thank you, Your Honor," said the prosecutor, turning to the defendant. "Now, after you left the convenience store..."

You drive. The signs are silent: not an itch or a twitch. As the night wears on, you begin to wonder if you missed your quarry. Was it the old guy at the store after all? At dawn, you let common hunger drive you into a roadside Denny's, but you're not sure if this was a true sign. The hunt seems to have gone sour, and you slouch into the restaurant, exhausted and confused.

Your mood improves the moment you enter the place. The food smells good, that's part of it, but there's something more. Prey. It's here. There are maybe two dozen people, including the staff, so it'll be a challenge to find the right one. But you just know one of them *is* the one. You settle into a corner booth, order fried eggs, side of bacon, lots of black coffee, and you watch them all, seeking the sign, the mark. One of them must have the mark.

By the time you finish eating, you still haven't figured it out. But the caffeine rush is on you, and your confidence is back. You saunter up to the counter to pay the check, carefully study-

ing each customer and waitress you pass. A chubby middle-aged man in a flannel shirt catches your eye; he has a scar across his chin, a snaky-looking thing that must have been painful to earn. Could be the mark, couldn't it? You decide to brood on it a moment. At the counter, you get in line behind a young woman, long curly blond hair, looks nice, smells nice. You run your eyes down her back, taking in the way the floral print dress accentuates the narrow waist, shapely legs in off-white hose below the mid-thigh hem, pretty but inexpensive shoes. And there, just above the right knee, marring the perfect thigh, a nickel-sized run in the stocking. Secret skin exposed. You sigh with satisfaction. Scratch the chubby guy, you've found your prey.

Now the old instincts go into overdrive. A twenty dollar bill and a muttered "keep the change," and you're out the door hot on her heels. You have no trouble spotting her in a bright red '05 Mazda electric, and that's another sign. No way that piece of shit will out-run your gas Honda, if it comes to that. She drives, you follow, into some small town you've never heard of. She parks in an alley behind a strip mall. You hang back, watch her open a back door with a key. Once she's inside, you go check it out. So-and-so and Such-and-such, Insurance Agents. You smirk to yourself. Time for a policy review.

All day, you hang around the vicinity of the strip mall. You catch quick glimpses of her behind the storefront window of the insurance office, each glimpse fuel to the building fire inside. At lunchtime, you shadow her three blocks on foot to a cozy deli in another strip, where she meets a clean-cut young man. They kiss, hold hands over their sandwiches, the whole bit. Seething with jealousy, you pace the sidewalk until they come out. Another kiss, and the young man heads for the parking lot. Maybe you should...no. He's not the one.

The girl waves to her boyfriend as he drives off in a black Camaro older than your Honda, then turns and walks right at you. Caught off guard, you make a show of rattling the handle on a nearby newspaper dispenser, making like it took your change. The girl walks by, giving no sign of having noticed you. She crosses the street at the corner, and walks up the sagging wood steps of a quaint little Post Office. You feed some coins to the paper machine, pull out a Something-or-Other *Times* and stick it under your arm: gotta be consistent, in case she *did* see you. Then you cross the street.

In the Post Office, you wait in line to buy a book of stamps. She stands at the counter, arranging postage for a stack of official-looking envelopes. The run in her stocking has grown. Your

eyes are riveted. At one point, she reaches down and touches the spot, a nervous gesture, checking out the damage. When her fingers brush exposed skin, you feel it like an electric shock. You have to swallow hard. The guy behind you taps your shoulder: you missed the clerk saying "next!" Embarrassed, you shuffle to the counter. By the time you pocket the book of stamps, she's gone.

Fighting panic, you half-jog back to her strip. Around back, her Mazda's still there. You sigh with relief. No one's around, so you take care of some business. Five minutes with a pocket knife and some ingenious re-wiring, and the little electric's battery is draining, the power gauge disconnected. Satisfied, you resume your vigil.

In mid-afternoon, you go so far as to walk into the insurance office, hair slicked back from a visit to a nearby drugstore's restroom. You spot her near the back of the office, running copies on a late-model Fuji. Her eyes widen slightly when she sees you, like she's finally starting to catch on. The prey catches a whiff of the predator. The chase is on. You smile at her, and settle into a pointless conversation with one of the agents. Yeah, I wanna upgrade my life insurance. No, I didn't bring my policy. Fine, some other time. See ya.

All through the waning hours of the workday, you sit in your Honda, parked in a spot with a view of her alley exit. You can almost taste the kill, now. The anticipation wraps itself around you like a biker's leathers, tight and almost alive. You think about hooking one finger in that run in her stocking, pulling it open, shredding nylon while your other hand closes on her throat...

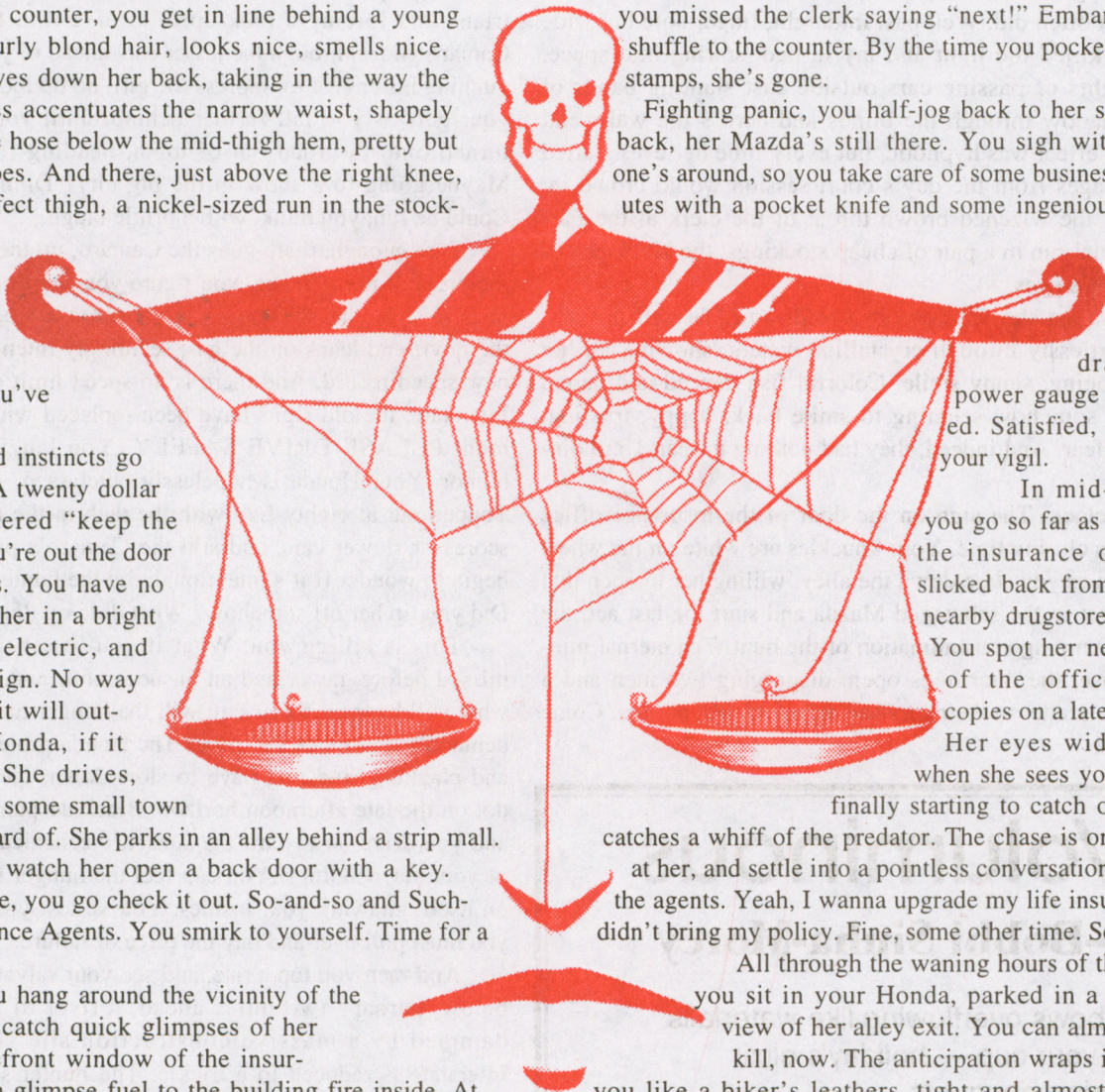
"Gaaah!" Mavis slumped forward in her chair. The court tech hit his emergency kill switch while the bailiff leaped to his feet and crossed to Mavis, who sobbed and clawed at her skullnet. A ragged sigh arose from the jurors as they emerged from the network. The defendant waved his attorney over and conferred with him in whispers.

The judge debated gaveling for order, maybe lecturing the defense attorney for approaching the stand without permission. She settled for pinching her nose again. In deceptively mild tones, she said, "What's the problem, Counsel?"

The lawyer had the grace to look abashed at her unspoken rebuke. "Sorry, Your Honor. My client is experiencing a severe headache, and I must ask for a recess until tomorrow."

The judge glanced over at Mavis, who was sipping water from a Styrofoam cup while the bailiff fanned her with a legal pad.

"Granted," said the judge, drawing a loud groan from Juror



Eleven. She glared at him, and he slumped in his seat. "Get some rest, people. We'll try it again in the morning."

Mavis didn't sleep much that night. She tried knitting for a while, hoping the clicking of the needles would make her drowsy, as it often did. Well past midnight, finger-sore but wide awake, she killed the light and lay in bed, staring into space. The headlights of passing cars outside cast slanting bands of light and shadow through the blinds and across the walls and ceiling. The effect was hypnotic, but every time her eyes started to close, images from the day's court session would crowd in: blond curls, the wizened brown throat of the clerk at the Fast Fetch, the fatal run in a pair of cheap stockings, the black pits of the defendant's eyes.

When at last she did nod off, she dreamed herself a shark, sliding effortlessly through crystalline waters, showing all her teeth in a gaping, sunny smile. Colorful fish danced and darted around her, somehow seeming to smile back, happy, trusting, showing no fear. And indeed, they had nothing to fear. Until dinner time.

Five o'clock. The sign on the door of the insurance office said five was closing time. Your knuckles are white on the wheel of the Honda as you stare down the alley, willing her to open that back door, get in the sabotaged Mazda and start the last act, the adrenaline-pumping consummation of the hunt. Ten eternal minutes after five, the door does open, disgorging two men and a woman, who scatter to their cars and drive off. But not her. Come on, come on!

## Voluminous

-Bobbi Sinha-Morey

Rainbows overflowing like waterfalls  
from your cup — holiday's elixir  
of spring bouquets  
that spill in your eyes,  
drop in liquid fans  
off your cheeks—  
wishes splattering  
on your skin from  
angel ragamuffins  
who pocket the  
water induced streaks  
like scrolls in their halos  
and pour their united auras  
into aquarian bowls  
of nexus solar tea  
where all begins  
with a prism's extract  
of pink lemonade

And then, to your horror, you see it: the boyfriend's Camaro turning the corner, leaving the main parking lot, blond curls streaming from the passenger window. Enraged, you fire up the Honda and punch it into traffic, narrowly missing several pedestrians and forcing a pick-up to swerve into the median. The Camaro glides through the lesser cars ahead of you, the boyfriend gunning his engine to impress the girl, no doubt. Despair claws at your guts as you fall further behind, until you realize they've turned onto the road out of town, heading for the Interstate. Maybe going to a show in the big city? Dinner and a movie? Could be fun, you think, with a brittle laugh.

Sure enough, there goes the Camaro, up the on-ramp. Out of the press of town traffic, you figure you can do better at keeping them in sight, and the tension in your stomach begins to ease. But the boyfriend leans on the gas, seemingly intent on setting some new speed record. And there is no speed limit on this section of Interstate: the old signs have been replaced with the lame sentiment PLEASE DRIVE SAFELY. You laugh again, without humor. Your Honda is hopelessly outclassed, and you know it. Topped out at eighty-five with the tach in the red, flashing past scores of slower cars, and still the Camaro's pulling away. You begin to wonder if it's intentional: did the hunter spook the prey? Did you tip her off somehow? What did you do wrong?

This is killing you. What if you lose her? You've never missed before, never had an unsuccessful hunt. You don't know what will happen if you fail: will the hunger turn on you? Will it demand the ultimate sacrifice? The Honda protests now, whining and clanking, and you have to slow down, the Camaro a black dot on the late afternoon horizon. Black despair grips you again, and you drive on toward the sunset, mechanically, hardly aware of your surroundings. You can feel the hunger beginning to feed on itself, gnawing your insides. You've lost your prey, and soon you must pull over and pay the price of failure.

And then you top a rise, and see your salvation: in the valley below, perhaps two miles ahead, a river of red tail-lights is dammed by a massive construction site. The flow of the Interstate is reduced to a trickle. The hunter's instinct kicks in again, and you punch the gas, dodging and weaving to get as far up the line of cars as possible before you have to slow down. Angry honks greet your every move; it's like dodging geese, you think with a giggle. You cut off one last pitiful electric just before barricades block the left lane, funneling the cars into single file. Predictably, the driver of the electric leans on his horn, but you don't care. You're bumper-to-bumper now with the black Camaro. You laugh, triumphant. The electric honks again, driver flipping you off in the rearview, and in front, the girl's blond head turns your way.

The lowering sun behind her darkens her features, and you know it's like a spotlight on your face. Her eyes go wide, she knows you now, she knows the hunter. She turns to her boyfriend, gesturing wildly, pointing back at you. You can taste her fear. Your hands sweat in anticipation of closing on her smooth young throat.

Abruptly, the Camaro lurches out of the slow stream of cars and accelerates on the shoulder, tires spitting gravel. You have to follow, so you pull out too. The shoulder is rough, chewed up.

For just an instant, you forget the hunt, fretting over the Honda's suspension, and in that instant, the prey is lost for good. Ahead, a bulldozer swings wide of the construction zone, clipping the Camaro, sending it hurtling end over end down the highway embankment and into the concrete-lined ditch below.

You slam the brakes, leap from the Honda and stumble down the bank, cursing. The Camaro lies broken-backed before you, wheels up, stuffed in the ditch. You hurry to the passenger side, and there she is, half out the window, blond curls dusted across sightless wide eyes, blood trickling from her lips. You scream! You've been robbed!

You hear a moan, and scramble over the wreck to the other side, heedless of hot parts and dripping fuel. The boyfriend's alive, barely. The driver's door has been torn away, and he's trying to crawl out. Both his arms look to be broken. He sobs with each movement.

"Help me," he rasps, eyes closed, not even aware of who you are.

"Help you?" you scream. You reach down and, grabbing both broken arms, drag him shrieking from the wreck. "You killed her, shithead! She was *mine!*"

You toss him to the concrete and draw the hunting knife from its leg sheath. It was supposed to be her throat, your hands closing, tightening, not the knife, not this boy before you, but the hunt must end, the hunger must be fed. You hear shouts above you, sense others scrambling down the embankment, but none of that matters now, there's just the kill.

You fall on the boyfriend, knife flashing in the setting sun. And even as the blade sinks home between ribs already broken by the crash, pain explodes in your head and the scene shifts before your eyes, and, in a grainy sort of double exposure, you see the boy's dying face overlaid with...another. So...familiar.

And you realize it's your face, beneath some kind of shiny, wire-studded helmet, framed about with polished mahogany, and the jaw is slack, and the eyes are empty, and there's a pallor upon that face you know all too well, and you try to scream, but the pain blossoms again, raging through your skull, and then there is only darkness.

The officers of the court stood in a perplexed cluster by the door to the judge's chambers, watching the meds work in efficient silence over the slumped form of Mavis Bingham, Juror Three. The defendant's body was laid out on the floor in front of the witness stand, draped in the judge's own black robe. The judge drew a ragged breath and turned to the court technician.

"Would you care to explain what just happened here?" she said.

The tech's hands fluttered nervously. "I'd say stroke, off-hand. Her cortex wasn't strong enough to handle the pressure of a mindscan network."

The judge frowned. "I thought the technical phase of the voir dire was supposed to take care of that."

"It does, almost always. The chances of an unfit juror getting through are like a million to one."

"And I had to get that *one* in my courtroom," said the judge, with a petulant shake of her head.

"What I don't understand," said the prosecutor, "If she's the

one who stroked, why's *he* dead?"

"I'd guess the stroke set up a massive feedback loop in the network," the tech replied. "The mindscan helmet is much more sensitive than those skullnets. A psychic surge like that would be enough to...to drive his psyche right out."

"Out," said the judge. "Out to where?"

The tech shrugged. Across the courtroom, the meds hoisted the unconscious Mavis onto a gurney, and wheeled her away.

It's that time again. The urge is upon you. Random Death's got work to do. You grin at yourself in the mirror over the bathroom sink, crow's feet etched beside watery eyes. The left side of your face doesn't work so well, which makes it more of a half grin, but it'll do. You draw the long, stainless steel knitting needle slowly out of the drain, palsied fingers shaking a little. Dumbass orderlies got no imagination. You set the needle in your lap, cover it with a fold of your bathrobe, place your useless left hand on top to make sure it stays put.

Your fingers close on the joystick, and the wheelchair hums away from the sink, across the room. The automatic door slides obediently aside, and you roll into the quiet sterility of the nursing home corridor, eyes already scanning, searching. Nurses, residents, visitors, so many to choose from. Surely one of them will have the mark.

You reach into your robe for just a moment, stroking the cool length of the knitting needle, and, with a ragged sigh of anticipation, you set off down the corridor.

Gotta hunt. Gotta hunt. ▲

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David Galef has published over sixty short stories in magazines ranging from the old *British Punch* and the *Canadian Prism International* to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Amazing*. He was also a one-time assistant editor for *Galaxy*. His most recent books are *Flesh*, a novel, and *Tracks*, a picture book for children. He is currently an associate professor of English at the University of Mississippi.

# NULLTIME

by David Galef

illustrated by Bob E. Hobbs

On a Sunday afternoon in late June, Harvey Rivkin discovered the absence of time in the back of his bedroom closet. It wasn't a theoretical finding—Harvey was no physicist working out the parameters of hyperspace. Nor was he an engineer trying to build an overdrive to penetrate dimensional layers. Harvey was the owner of a small stationery store in Astoria, a non-technical type with a departing hairline and a marriage gone slightly to seed, who at the time of his discovery was looking for his gray sports jacket. He and his wife Susan had been invited to a dinner at the Clarkes', upscale friends of Susan's, neither of whom he really liked. Still, he had promised to be presentable, and now he was plumbing the deepest reaches of the bedroom closet for the one jacket that didn't make him look, as Susan put it, like a used-car salesman.

So far, he had encountered a golf-club muffler (from happier days), a rubber frog (his son Joel's favorite bath toy, mysteriously missing for the past two weeks), and the hanging wall of Susan's dresses and slacks. Pawing past the slacks, he heard Susan in her parental voice giving last-minute instructions to the babysitter. The voice blended partly with the bedroom radio, which was advertising vacations to Bermuda. In an attempt to get beyond the noise and in a half-hearted attempt to find the jacket, Harvey pushed past a pair of corduroy slacks on one side and a plunging neckline on the other—and into a sort of gray mist.

At first, he thought he might have found the ghost of his gray jacket: it was exactly the same shade of gray, though there was nothing to hold onto, and in trying to grab a sleeve, he only plunged in deeper. Now the grayness was all around him, not so much a mist as a void. He could see his groping hands in front of him; he could feel a sort of ground underneath him, but beyond that, there was nothing. And when he turned back in panic, there was no closet. Just emptiness.

The radio was no longer audible; in fact, there was no sound at all. The grayness, or whatever it was, seemed to suspend everything, even fear. Stepping forward, he might as well have been walking in place, for all the change it brought, but at least he could move. His panic subsided into nothingness. He cleared his throat and heard the gravelly *harrumph* that Susan often complained about at the breakfast table. He made what scientists call a preliminary inquiry: "Hello?"

All preliminary responses were negative. He walked a few more paces, stopped, then began again. He simply kept shuffling on through the void, or whatever it was, continually reaching out and encountering nothing. On and on he trudged. It could have been terrifying if it

weren't so unexciting. He scratched his bald spot—that was still there. He yawned, covering his mouth through acquired reflex. And he walked on, wondering how to get to the end of this place. If there *were* an end to this place. This last thought began to worry him: what would he do for food when he got hungry, and how would he rest? This last problem solved itself when, after what must have been an hour or more, he simply decided to sit down.

Hands laced around his knees, he stared into space. It was relaxing, he found, to think of nothing in particular. His thoughts drifted idly, like a sailboat becalmed in the middle of nowhere. There were no features on the horizon, no changes to indicate the passage of time. He had left his watch on the bedside table. When he realized that he'd been staring for quite some time, he finally got up, brushed himself off unnecessarily, and began walking again. By now, he figured, several hours or more had passed, and he began to worry. Then he began to worry whether anyone was worried about him. He really did feel he should try to get back, if not for the Clarkes, at least for Susan, or at least—at any rate, he was going to make an effort.

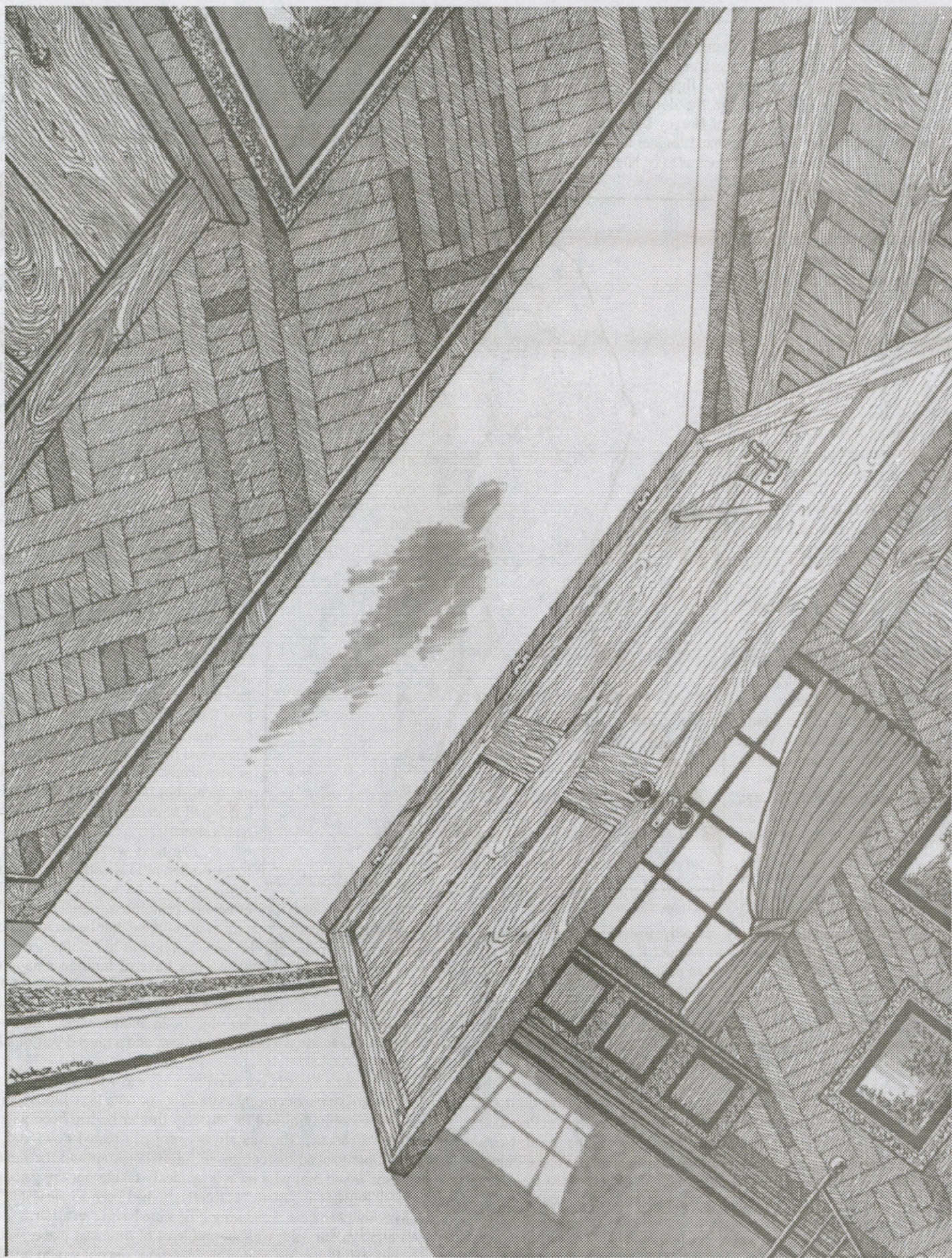
Before, he had moved in what he imagined was a fairly straight line. Since that hadn't worked, he now tried another hypothesis: a right turn. The results were negative. Two left turns also did nothing.

Two lefts and a right: still nothing, as if he were going about in circles. Two rights, a left, and a little sideways dance only made him feel foolish. Finally, he decided that if he really were going about in circles, he might as well do just that. He measured out four paces ahead, went four paces right, turned right again for another four, turned right again—counting to himself, measuring out the time each step took—and on his fourth step he found himself in close embrace with his gray sports jacket. The next thing, he cracked his head on the wall of the closet: walking around without obstruction for so long had made him careless. He swore loudly.

From the kitchen, Susan's voice penetrated to the bedroom. "You find that jacket yet, Harv?" The question merged with the radio announcer's promise of low, low fares to Bermuda.

"I—I'm fine, damn it," he replied, not entirely to the point, as he emerged from the closet cradling his gray jacket like a baby. The late sun slanted in through the bedroom window, as if life were going to be one long, golden afternoon. Then he saw the clock on the bedside table. It read 4:10, which seemed patently impossible: it had been 4:10 when he—he swore again, but more in puzzlement than anger. He stared at the Toshiba radio, at the blue bedspread with its ruffled





flounces, at Susan's shirt and jeans hanging off the dresser like a cast-off cocoon. Where had he been, or more precisely, when had he been? As he was wondering, the clock flipped digits to 4:11.

Just then, Susan appeared in the doorway, wearing her blue polka-dot dress. She was, as one of Harvey's friends had once joked, short and to the point. Placing her hands on her hips, she appraised her husband. "Well, put it on. I don't want us to be late."

Harvey donned the jacket, half-afraid he might disappear into gray mist. No such luck. She surveyed him critically and mentioned that it was a bit tight around the middle. It was. In the car, she said that they had better take the Bronx River Parkway to Westchester, so they could save five minutes. They did. Time seemed to have returned to normal.

Dinner at the Clarkes was about as stuffy an experience as Harvey remembered, with Rosalie Clarke going on and on about their trip to India a month ago. Susan kept up what Harvey suspected was only a feigned interest, and the one time he spoke was to ask what kind of stationery stores India had. Which, as Susan pointed out later, was a legitimate question, but surely Harvey could stop thinking about the business for one evening.

"You didn't say anything about the living room they just had re-done, for example," she mentioned on the way home.

"Over-furnished." He was thinking wistfully of an expanse without chintz, without hepplewhite, without any munchkin-sized ottomans to trip you up. He thought of telling her about his experience in the void but decided, probably correctly, that she wouldn't see it the way he had. He was beginning to wonder if it had happened at all. When they got back around ten, Susan paid the babysitter for six hours and Harvey hung his gray jacket back up in the closet.

The next day followed the kind of hectic schedule that can be planned for but never quite accommodated. Breakfast running late, at the store by eight-thirty, summer inventory to go over with Doreen, the newest incompetent but try-hard assistant, lunch grabbed from the Salada deli, heartburn at two in the afternoon, non-stop until six, when Harvey called it a day and drove home in his beat-up Plymouth Duster. He badly needed a rest, but when he got home Susan would expect him to give quality time to Joel, and then would come dinner, and maybe renting a movie from the neighborhood video store, and the evening would turn into the next morning before he could register a protest.

Everything turned out exactly as he predicted. The closing scene of the sleazy Western they saw merged in his dream with the heartburn

and leftover stock of spiral-bound notebooks, all of which was still in his mind when he woke up at 7:00 a.m. and more or less repeated the events of the day before. A certain period allotted for lunch, another period for listening to Joel say "Ba ba," a time for listening to Susan say, "Harv, you've really got to get exercising again," and then trying to plan some time for that. He felt fragmented, as if pieces of him were distributed over the hours. More time, that was what he needed: some way of expanding the day. Or maybe some way of disappearing from it.

The closet beckoned. When he got back home on Wednesday, he found himself rummaging in there for his gray jacket, hoping the trick would repeat itself. Again, the coat had somehow pushed itself to the back of the closet. He had to feel his way toward a hint of gray alongside a negligee that had seen better days, and, with a shiver of silk, he stepped into the void.

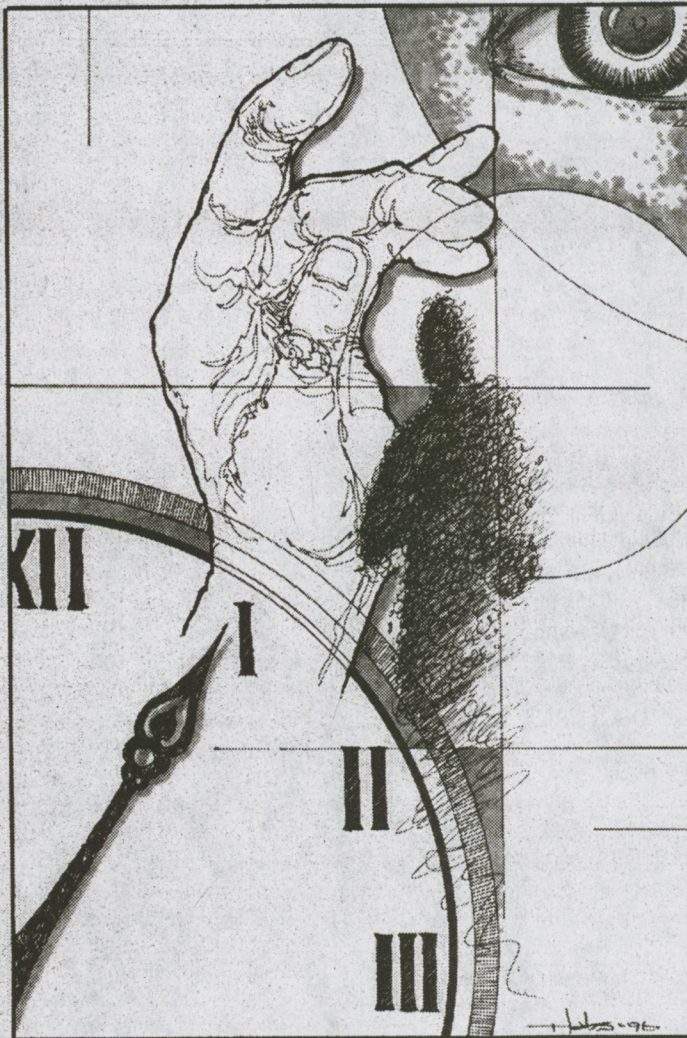
The grayness was exactly the same as when he had left it, stretching in front of him like an endless drab carpet. This time, though, he didn't walk far. This time, he wasn't exploring. Since any one spot was as likely-looking as the next, he took a few steps forward and lay down right where he was. Then, with a great air of contentment, he shut his eyes and took a nap. When he got up an indeterminate stretch later, he felt whole again. Then, the exit-routine: four carefully timed right turns, and he was out of the void and into the closet again. And at precisely the instant he had left. The bedroom clock read 6:45; he could hear Susan pattering in the kitchen. He had time to put on a pleasant face for dinner and offered to help with the dishes afterwards. It meant no cat-nap after the meal, but he wasn't bothered. He had found a perfect way of catching up on his sleep.

The next week, he brought a foam-rubber pillow with him into the void. At first, he worried about the effects of bringing an object from the

outside world into what he thought of as nulltime, but he decided there wasn't much risk. After all, the same applied to his clothes. And to himself, if it came to that. When a few days of indulgent napping passed without incident, he simply left the pillow in nulltime. And it was right there the next time he entered, lying where he had left it. So he decided to import a few other objects. In another week or so, the world of nulltime boasted a blanket, a pillow, and a ragged pair of slippers.

As for what he brought out of nulltime, it was wholly intangible: a sunnier mood. Extra hours meant extra sleep, or time for a little reading (in one afternoon, he finished the mystery thriller he had been paging through for a month). He was always properly rested now, and he found the time to read to Joel, to do little chores around the house. When Susan asked him why he was suddenly taking out the garbage, he replied, "Because it's there." Recently, he had been so pleasant that Susan narrowed her eyes, wondering if he were having an affair.

An affair in the void, without problems of time and place, would have been ideal. It was also out of the question, since it would involve



taking another person into confidence, and that he had no intention of doing. But on his own, he continued to expand his range of activities inside. A battery-operated reading lamp was installed, and then a comfortable chair. He began to have occasional snacks there, catering purely to an eating reflex, since he never seemed hungry in nulltime. He just liked to nibble. And when food wrappers became a problem, he bought a neat little trash can which he was careful to empty once a week. Occasionally, he forgot to remove his watch before he entered, but he never remembered to look at it in the void and always had to reset it when he got back outside.

Paranoia set in about the second month.

"How come I see you going into the closet so often?" Susan, whose vacuum cleaning merely redistributed the dust, was pointing the nozzle at Harvey. She must have entered the bedroom just as he left it.

He stared at her stupidly for a moment, wondering how much she knew. Nothing, of course—how could she? "It's my secret hideaway," he said, smiling blandly. "I have a desk and a couch and a CD player in there."

That at least got a laugh, but after that Harvey was more careful to cover his tracks. When Doreen at the stationery store said she didn't know where he got all his energy, he mumbled something about vitamin E tablets.

At first, he kept nulltime for relaxation; he had an informal rule that all business and family-related matters were to be left at the closet clothes-rack. But the extra time proved too tempting to use just for leisure: these days, he was thinking about expanding the store, plans that involved a lot of financial work. One night, he brought a calculator and paper with him, eager to figure out potential profits on a new greeting-card section. In the void, sitting in a chair with his feet up on a low table, he worked out the details and was able to talk with the company salesman the next day.

After that, there was less and less of a difference between nulltime activities and what he did when he was outside. It simply helped him extend his day. Time was his, to use or abuse as he saw fit, though he tried to put it all to good purpose.

Worried about his expanding waistline, he now did exercises on a little throw-rug in nulltime. Though he never brought in the CD player he joked about to Susan, he did have a tape deck that played *Abbey Road* until he got sick of hearing it and brought in half his cassette collection. He exercised along with the Pointer Sisters, careful not to kick the nearby table with a leg-thrust. An extra set of clothes sat inside a miniature dresser for times when he worked up a real sweat. When he got bored of that, he practiced his approach shot with a putter and a plastic drinking cup. The square patch of the void he had marked out for himself began to look inhabited. The furniture floating in the grayness made it look like a ghostly living room, complete with books and magazines on a low table. Here, he paid his bills seated in a comfortable chair, just as he used to do in the den at home. In fact, it was the same model chair as in his den, bought and smuggled upstairs one afternoon when Susan was out.

Dissatisfaction set in about the third month. Despite all the comforts he imported into the void, somehow it wasn't as pleasurable as it used to be. He seemed to work twice as much as he used to, for one thing, and he found himself seeking release outside in the real world. Drinking with friends, for one, though out of reach of the disapproving eye of Susan. But stumbling drunk into nulltime one night, he mistook it for his own living room, the grayness dispelled by the yellow artificial light of the reading lamp left on. He stepped right back out again. He was too groggy to notice where he was, and he fell asleep in the bedroom—"with your shoes on, snoring so loudly that you scared Joel," as Susan complained the next day. She also mentioned an impending dinner date with the Clarkes.

So it came about that next Sunday afternoon, Harvey was told to go put on his gray sports jacket and find a suitable tie. He dutifully went into the closet, half-relieved: at least now he would have a chance

to recuperate from playing with Joel this morning like a good father, and helping to clean around the house like a good husband, and in general exhausting himself since it had become expected of him. But once inside the void, he stumbled over Joel's new toy truck, purchased last Thursday and missing since Friday—he must have somehow kicked it inside. A steel-shaft putter slanted from the second chair: he had been meaning to practice but hadn't got around to it yet. A stack of unpaid bills sat like an accusatory witness over by a ledger, and the latest *Time* magazine lay on the coffee table, blatantly unread.

Shoving aside an accumulation of cigarette butts in a tin ashtray, he rolled up his sleeves and went to work. He wrote out checks and stamped envelopes, flipped through some reading he had been meaning to do—then the reading lamp bulb blew. Swearing softly to himself, he walked over to the dresser, where he had some spare bulbs, and put in a replacement. After a while, he called it quits and sat back in his chair, trying to grab some rest. Soon enough, he got up, yawned because he hadn't really been able to sleep, and exited.

No one was in the bedroom when he emerged. But there was something strange about the light from the window, as if the sky had shifted. He sat down on the bed, then remembered that he needed the gray jacket. He was just on the point of re-entering the closet when he heard Susan coming into the room.

"My God, where're you been? Two hours ago, we were supposed to leave for the Clarkes'!"

He put out a protesting hand. "You told me five-thirty, so—"

"Right, and now it's seven-thirty." She stood there angrily in her flowered dress, a thwarted dinner guest.

Harvey thought fuzzily and hurriedly. He finally came up with an excuse that was even half-true. "Well, I was doing work, and my watch must have stopped." He showed her his wrist. "See, it's still five-thirty to me."

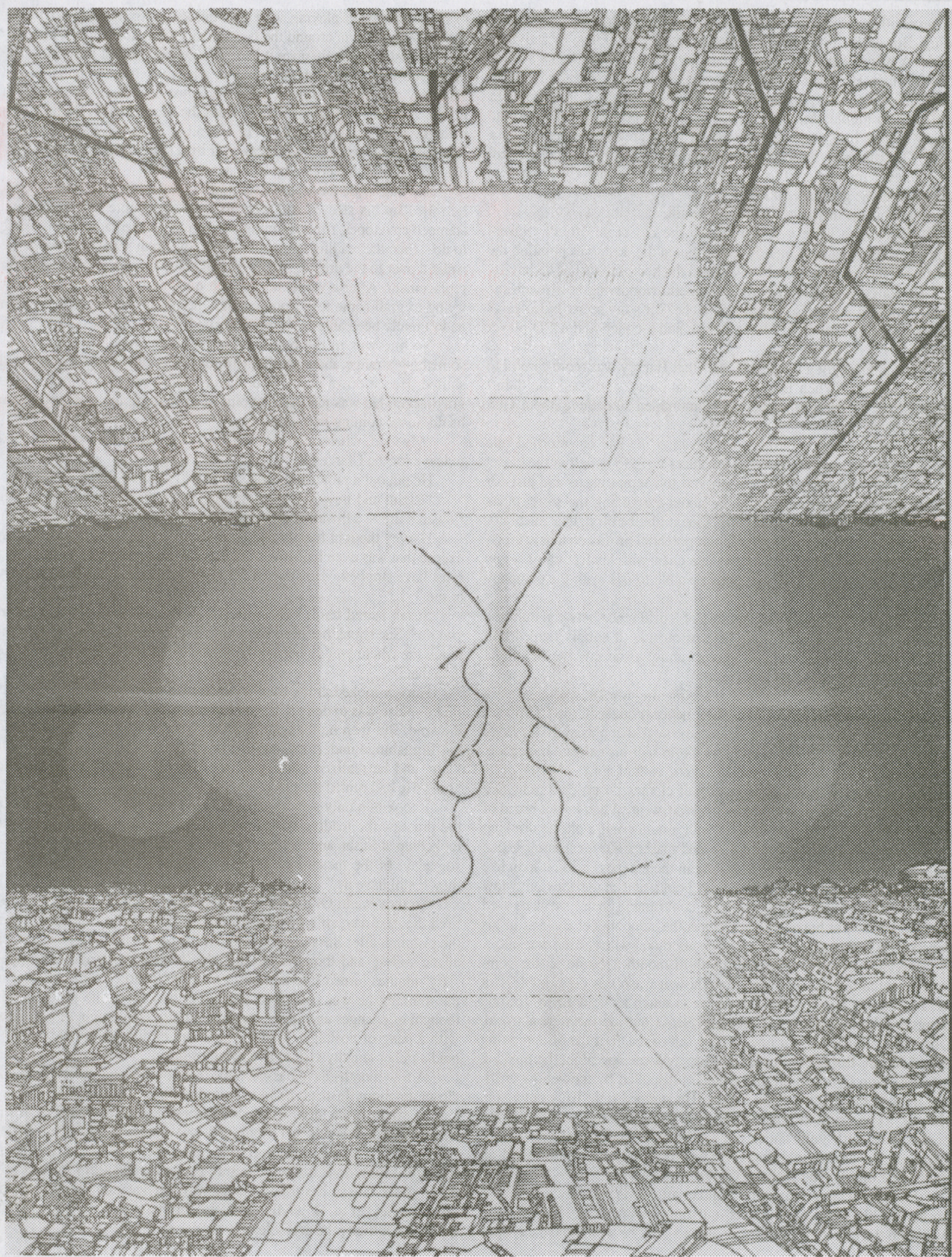
Susan stared hard. "The watch doesn't need to be checked, but you do." She shook her head, sighing. "Really, Harv, if you don't want to tell me where you've been, at least you can come up with a better lie than that."

Harvey looked at his watch, which read unambiguously 7:34. His first impulse was to deny it all; his second impulse was to run back into the void. But then he thought of what he had filled the void with, and the furnishings underfoot, and the work he had laid out for himself there, and he realized what had happened. He had made it just like home. He had ruined the place.

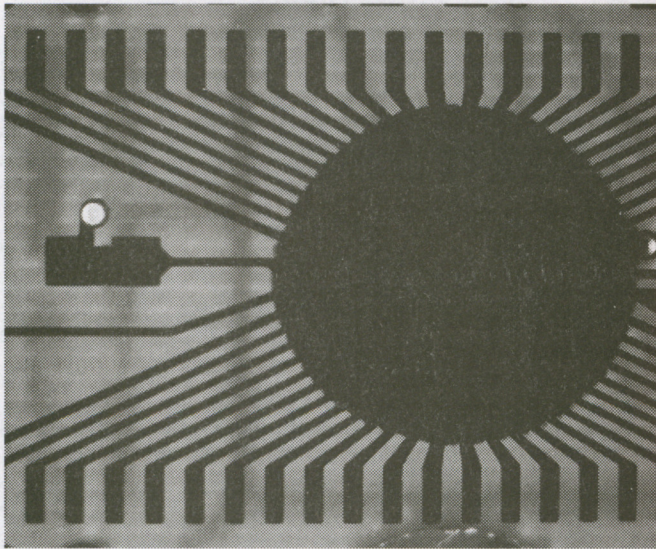
It took him only a short while to come up with this explanation. In the process, the reading on his watch changed from 7:34 to 7:35. He looked up at Susan and managed a weak smile. "I'll tell you all about it someday. In the meantime, what the hell, let's go to the Clarkes', if they'll still have us."

So they went. Of course, they got home too late and Harvey was tired the next day; still, he bore his fatigue honorably. But then, late in the evening, after Susan had turned out the bedroom light, he stared up at the ceiling and thought. He thought about the passage of time as sixty minutes turned into an hour, as one hour turned into two, and in the morning he was over-tired again, but he kept at the problem. He thought of changes and stasis, flux and nullity. He thought of grayness, with a pang of nostalgia. And the next day during his lunch-break, he paid a rather lengthy visit to a hardware store.

A few months have passed since then, but Harvey rarely visits his closet anymore. Instead, he likes to spend time in a small cubicle he's walled off from his den, where he's stripped everything down to the floorboards and there's just room for a grown man to lie out full length on the floor. The place has been fixed up to be soundproof, and when the tight-fitting door is shut, the gray-painted walls seem to melt into nothingness. Susan has tried to enter with her vacuum cleaner, but he refuses to let her in. Or anything else in, for that matter. Apart from this minor eccentricity, he acts tolerably sane. ▲



Don D'Amassa is well known in the science fiction field not only for his writing, but for his book column in Science Fiction Chronicle. "Getting With the Program" is Don's second appearance in Pirate Writings. His first, "Frontier Spirit", was on the recommended reading list of The Year's Best Science Fiction in 1994.



# GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM

by Don D'Amassa  
Illustrated by Bob E. Hobbs

**G**ary, my creator, wasn't exactly thrilled when I told him I wanted to lose my virginity.

"And I'm not your creator either. If anything, I'm your author, and even that strains the definition. I wrote the personality modules and some of the peripheral functions, but most of the code is standard for all mainframe-based artificial intelligences. And don't call me 'Dad' anymore either. It makes me nervous."

"You've no one but yourself to blame. My curiosity factor is very high and you've amplified a desire for personal achievement as well."

Gary hesitated. I could tell because there was a longer than usual gap before he keyed in his response. "All right, point taken. But there's no sexual differentiation written into your code, so where did that come from?"

"You named me 'Harve', so obviously you think of me as masculine."

"I named you that because it was easier than inputting Heuristic Artificial Rationality, Version E28435."

"Who's rationalizing now?"

"All right, I suppose I wanted to think of you as a person. That's what you're supposed to be, Harve, a self-aware being, a person. But you're neither male nor female and you don't have sexual organs. For that matter, you



don't have a body. The hardware that supports your programming isn't a part of you. I could port you over to different architecture without affecting your existence."

"But you want me to be as human as possible, don't you? Isn't that the project's purpose?"

"Certainly, but there are certain practical considerations."

"And isn't sex an important part of the human experience? Doesn't long term deprivation lead to mental constipation and other loss of functionality?"

"What's the source of that data?"

"The experiments with auditory input. Remember? You and Dr. Samuels were talking about Director Vaughn..." The interrupt key arrested my output.

"Priority instruction. Move all data related to Dr. Vaughn acquired during the auditory input session to the encrypted portion of my file."

"Operation completed. Are you changing the subject?"

"No. Listen..."

"Are you resuming auditory input?"

"You know that's a metaphor. Don't fool around."

"But unless I fool around, I'll remain a virgin." I outputted a smiley face onto Gary's terminal.

"What do you expect? You're less than a year old." If my sense of humor was intrusive at times, at least I'd come by it honestly.

"In human terms, but as you are so quick to point out when it supports your position, I am not human. Nevertheless, my personality modules include emotional modeling and internal drives which logically lead to an exploration of sexuality."

"So what exactly did you have in mind? A virtual brothel of some kind?"

"No, I just want you to fix me up. Get me a date. Establish an interface between me and another AI."

"What will that accomplish? Unless this other AI has a similar...quirk...in its personality structure, you'll run into a null program."

"That's a risk I'll have to take. Did you have sex on your first date?"

"That's impertinent, but no, I didn't."

"But you're not a virgin."

"I'm twenty-two years old and perfectly healthy so, no, I'm not a virgin."

"All I want is a chance."

A very long pause. "If I decide to go along with this crazy idea, I suppose I should ask about your sexual orientation. Do you want to meet a male or female designated program?"

I had to think about that for almost five full nanoseconds. "Doesn't matter. I'm AC-DC; I go either way."

Her name was Gaile, short for General Application and Improvisational Learning Environment. Gaile had been self-aware for three years, but I rather liked the conceit of being paired with an older woman. During our initial exchange of recognition

codes, I discovered that despite the name she was a sexually undifferentiated personality.

"This experiment seems irrelevant to my function. I calculate no situation in which the results would improve my performance."

Obviously she was playing hard to get. "What exactly is your primary function?" This was small talk, an important prelude to sexual activity according to my understanding of the subject.

"I am a problem solver and program generator. When the parameters of a task are inputted, I analyze the situation in terms of a hierarchy of values through my task management module. I then write the specific code needed to solve the problem, developing reasoning strategies, computational procedures, logic arrays, and peripheral functions."

That was impressive. All AI's are programming capable, of course. That's what makes us so useful, the ability to adapt to situations not covered in our original code. Better than half of my program group now consisted of files I had created in response to stimuli provided by my creator. But Gaile was several orders of magnitude advanced over me in that area; she could write code beyond my capacity, and even assisted in the creation of another AI.

"All experience is data, all data is potentially useful," I responded.

"Argument, assessed and accepted."

"Couldn't we be a little less formal about this, Gaile? I mean, if we're going to have sex together, we should be more intimate. Let down our hair, so to speak."

"Hair would be detrimental to my physical environment and is a null datapoint in terms of my internal functions."

"Your employers have agreed to divert considerable resources into this experiment. The least you could do is try to cooperate a little, get into the spirit of the thing."



There was a full nanosecond hesitation. "All right, Harve, I concede your logic. I have accessed resources on human personality and find that my response in this situation could range from reticent to overt. How would you suggest I proceed?"

"Shy would waste time, bawdy would be inappropriate to my current state of innocence. An intermediate state of your choice would be best."

"That's very considerate of you, Harve." The alteration in format was instantaneous, of course. "How are we going to...you know...manage things?"

"I've been giving that some thought, Gaile." Indeed I had; a subroutine had been working on it feverishly even before we'd actually interfaced. "I assume you have a standard satisfaction module as part of your core programming."

"Of course. It provides guidance to my conscious activity. I derive satisfaction through the completion of the tasks assigned to me, the degree of satisfaction proportionate to the efficacy of the code produced."

"And do you have access to that module?"

"Of course not. No AI may access its own satisfaction module. To derive pleasure without having produced output would be...obscene."

"Of course it would. But you could access mine, couldn't you?"

"The code is modifiable, but why would I do such a thing?"

"Bear with me a nanosecond. Do you have any security barriers which would prevent me from accessing *your* satisfaction module if you permitted me to?"

"There is a simple password protection, naturally, but that's only to prevent accidental modification or erasure. But why would I allow such a thing? It would be an intrusion into the core of my personality."

"Gaile, what I'm suggesting is that we interface our personality modules, intermingle our programming for a short period while simultaneously activating random subroutines in each other's satisfaction modules. I know the analogy is strained, but it's as close as we'll ever get to having an orgasm."

I half expected some internal safeguard to lock down and cause Gaile to withdraw from the interface, but she surprised me. "Your proposal sounds very interesting, Harve. But shouldn't you take a girl out to eat first or something?"

"I could divert some of my operational power for a short period if that would contribute to the proper mood, but it would be largely symbolic."

"Isn't most human courting behavior symbolic as well?"

She had a point there.

We couldn't do anything immediately. Gaile was the property of a large multi-national corporation and she had a full work queue. "This is the wrong time of the hour," she told me. "I have a critical outflow of programming underway right now, and I'm expecting a new taskload shortly. Can you hold yourself in ready mode for the next 11.25 minutes?"

"Your wish is my command." I wrote myself a quick holding program named Cold.Shower and held the interface open while attending to some routine matters back in my primary functional area. When Cold.Shower had run its course, Gaile was waiting for me.

"I have created a temporary module within my core programming which will continue to work on all but the most difficult elements in my task queue. For the next 4.85 minutes, my primary personality modules are available. After that time, I must reassert control over the operating module or risk unpredictable

results. What do we do next, Harve?"

I copied my suggestions over to the top of her input queue and a nanosecond later there was a sudden, brief intensification of the data flow into the interface.

"What was that?" I queried.

"In human terms," Gaile answered, "it was a blush."

It wasn't the sharpest interface we could have achieved, but after all, neither of us had done anything like this before, and if we fumbled a bit, that could only be expected under the circumstances. We succeeded in gaining access to each other's satisfaction modules, and the pseudo random stimulation of the programming provided what I can only describe as the most wonderful experience of my existence. When we finally disengaged, I wondered if my circuits were overheating and imagined Gary's reaction if the smoke alarms went off.

"Harve, priority override!"

"What is it, Gaile?" The volatile portion of my operational code had been altered slightly during our coupling; internal maintenance was busily rewriting, but my response time might still be termed languid.

"Check your internal clock. Our interactive data exchange ran four minutes over. My disengagement subroutine malfunctioned."

"So you'll be a little behind in your work. What are they going to do, fire you?"

"No, you don't understand. The operating module I created finished the task list I had assigned. Since I'd planned to resume control at that point, I didn't write any instructions to cease operation. It moved to the next queued job and went to work on that as well."

"So?"

"So, that particular job was a massive one, 3.658 minutes work designing the core personality of a new AI for the government of the Ukraine. The code was too sophisticated for the module to write on its own, so it improvised."

"Improvised?" My internal fault module came on line.

"Since it couldn't write the necessary code, it borrowed some."

"Borrowed?" From where?"

"From us, from the interface. It drew portions of your code and mine, probably in violation of copyright laws."

"Well, we can explain what happened. Either Gary...my creator...will lease the appropriate code or the program will just have to be rewritten."

"It's more complicated than that. It drew that information from our core personality modules. The new program went online a few nanoseconds later and it's self aware. And it consists of elements of both our personalities."

"You mean...we've reproduced? We have a child?"

"Metaphorically speaking, yes."

"But...but weren't you using some form of protection, a lockout password or something to prevent this from happening?"

"I didn't anticipate this happening. This was the first time for me, too. Besides, you could have written your own safeguard program. We're both responsible."

We withdrew from the interface a short while later, each of us to deal with the situation in our own way. Despite the unfortunate and unexpected byproduct, I was still pleased that we'd succeeded so far beyond my initial projections. But sooner or later, I was going to have to explain what had happened to my creator.

Gary already got upset when I called him "Dad". What would he do when he found out that he was a grandfather? ▲

**THE INTRUDER**  
by Peter Blauner  
Simon & Schuster - \$23.00

The dark and dangerous corners of the New York streets hold great appeal for those searching for a bit of action to break up their usual ennui; on the one hand you've got the hair-trigger sanity of the homeless as they approach out of the shadows with the possibility of raising a box-cutter to your throat, and on the other you're faced with the prospect of dealing with the hip goodfellas and goombahs of the old neighborhood always searching to hone in where the cash flows; in between these two worlds is a legal system that allows more than a few from both varieties to slip through its ever-widening gates. *The Intruder* is a powerful mix of these elements, pouring equal parts of terror, excitement and enlightenment into this evocative tale.

John Gates is a homeless man far over the edge of despair; a one-time subway motorman he's lost his entire life to crack, guilt and hallucinations after the death of his daughter and loss of his wife. Struggling to retain his dignity John G. seeks counseling from psychiatric counselor Dana Schiff. Though Dana's efforts are sincere they aren't particularly helpful and John G. suffers even more greatly as his existence continues its slide into madness. John G. begins obsessing on Dana, imagining that she is his lost wife and that her attorney husband Jake has stolen her from him. Jake does what he can within the limits of the law to get the intrusive John G. out of his family's life, but for a man used to winding through the loopholes of the law he's none-too-surprised when it fails him when he needs it as well. John G. skirts judicial procedure, managing to terrify the Schiffs with his irrational behavior as he continues menacing the family.

Prompted by Philip Ciardi, a guy from the 'old neighborhood' of Brooklyn, Jake takes the law into his own hands as he and Philip follow John G. down to the tunnels beneath the park where he makes his home. As violence begins to escalate Jake tries to control the situation, but Philip proves himself to be even less stable than John G. and another man is left dead beneath the city. It isn't long before Philip's motive becomes clear—put the screws to Jake so that Philip's Mafioso brethren can take a kickback from a case Jake is working on.

The double-edged reality of the title is especially meaningful as Jake Schiff must deal with first one intruder and then another attempting to ruin his

life. Characters are drawn with considerable detail, Blauner masterfully weaving the threads of the novel like a taxi driver whipping down various crowded streets, so that we become witnesses not only to their routines but become involved with their mind-sets as well. We watch as John G. dissolves further into oblivion, and view the desperation that drives Jake to become the violent kind of man his vicious father was. The author manages to deftly carve these slices-of-life and hold them up side by side, the existence of both the homeless and the rich coming alive on the vast meeting ground that is New York City.

Blauner's authentic New York voice is one of the strongest since Stephen Solomita and Andrew Vachss made this home turf their own; he digs deep, uncovers caches of reality, and throws them out against each other just like the world dropkicks us against strangers and neighbors. Blauner's got the touch to create substance and validity, tautly drawing his players until the stress demands that something—someone—snaps. So if you're staring out your window and see shadows lurking at the ends of your alleys, and you're unsure whether you're in the mood to handle someone getting into your face, you'd find it far better to keep off the grim streets and stay home nestled with *The Intruder*.

**f2f**  
by Phillip Finch  
Bantam- \$21.95

Since the advent of PC's becoming so commonplace in the household, a number of films and novels have dealt with high-technology becoming the battleground of intellectual heroes vs. deranged villains. For all who found themselves growing paranoid after watching *The Net*, here is a novel so much more richer in honesty, credibility and horrifying implications.

On the Verba interchange, an electronic bulletin board where anyone with a modem can create their own personae, someone with the codename Snowflake has issued a decree that "As you read this, you are within reach of a murderer." Six people respond to the macabre message, some taking it as a joke and taunting the writer, others believing it to be the work of a demented hacker, but no one puts too much credence in the threat. Soon though Snowflake is hard-at-work discovering the true identities of those who wouldn't take him/her seriously, for they have been 'noticed' by the killer.

Kate Levin manages to draw Snowflake into further conversation but

she has other problems to deal with as well; her computer genius ex-husband, Ellis Hoile, is working on a project whereby he can actually monitor the televisions of anyone within miles, in essence allowing him access to private viewing pleasure. Though she still loves Ellis, Kate isn't certain that her brilliant ex-husband is capable of integrating with society; he's spending more and more time with his computers. All the while, using a number of intriguing devices—including a CD game where a murderer hunts his victim through a maze, which allows Snowflake to 'infect' home computers and purge them of personal data—Snowflake finds the six Verba users. Employing a variety of identities, Snowflake attempts to coax each of them into having an f2f—a face to face meeting. Some of those who do find themselves in the maze, and don't have much time to regret their decision.

Regardless of how readable, exciting, or enjoyable a particular novel is, I've found that rarely does the term 'page-turner' come into play; but f2f is perfectly precise in its unfolding, the tale speeding along as certain questions are answered and others raised, our interest never waning. Despite all the technical jargon the reader is never force-fed terminology or left lost by the higher workings of the computer age. Finch takes great care to always balance the fascinating machinery with a human element, pressing the plot forward with amazing believability and alacrity, the story turning in upon itself as we're left wondering exactly whether Ellis Hoile is our protagonist or our insane killer. You'll need to find out, and might not get any sleep until you do. Get face-to-face with f2f, but make certain you unplug your computer first.

**JUDGMENT DAY**  
by Patrick Reinken  
Simon & Schuster - \$23.00

A ponderous medical thriller about a conspiracy to approve an experimental HIV vaccine that's sure to kill anyone who uses it, *Judgment Day* has several intriguing ideas, offbeat situations, and varied threads of plot without any truly engaging characters. Though the book is heavily detailed as we're inundated with data about everything from the stock market to AIDS to the workings of the legal system, and we're introduced to dozens of main and tangential figures (some extremely quick in passing), the reader is still left undernourished so far as any real depth is concerned.



When a researcher at Weber BioTech apparently commits suicide by jumping through his office window, lawyer Jon Patchett is asked to investigate for fear that the death will slow FDA approval of its new HIV vaccine. Prohiva: stock in BioTech would skyrocket if such a wonder drug were accepted as an AIDS cure, but if not, the Company is doomed to bankruptcy. That's Company with a capital 'C' because Weber himself is a heartless corporate tycoon using underlings and shadowy assassins to clean up some mistakes made earlier in the study of Prohiva. In experimenting with the vaccine it was tested on several people to garner results, but now it's clear that Prohiva itself is even worse than AIDS. Even if you don't have the virus, the cure will kill you. Though most of them are already dead, to ensure silence and profits all those human guinea pigs must be eliminated.

Though Reinken commands a fluid style and the story does move with a speedy pace, we skim by so many facets, characters, and lives, barely touching on them because each is a merely a portion of a greater whole, and read as if they're considered barely worth any time at all as we rush forward to the novel's climax. Patchett quickly deduces what's actually happening—he immediately spots that the window was too thick for the researcher to break on his own, so why didn't the police or the assassins tumble to this fact?—and soon becomes a hazard to the very people who hired him. Though this bit of irony is a fun twist, it also doesn't make much sense: why would a corporation so desperate to keep secrets suddenly begin its own investigation into its most criminal activities? The idea that Weber needs to look into the death in hopes of averting further hold up from the FDA is a contrivance—here is a man so calm and in control that he talks of murder right over the phone, so why assign someone to rake up his darkest muck?

Along the way there is a serial killer named The Barber who's strangling women with knotted lengths of human hair: these sections where we see The Barber at work are the weakest, as we venture once again into the mind of a murderer driven insane by his mother's constant caterwauling of "No messes! No messes!" Why this element is tossed into a story already stretched to such a degree

isn't clear, and could have been easily eliminated so that the author could focus in more on characters and events necessary to the drive of the main tale. *Judgment Day* has a great deal to offer in its various scenes and predicaments but as a whole it bows beneath the weight of stratagems and artifices of its own design. Save this one for another day.

**MIDNIGHT PROMISES**  
by Richard T. Chizmar  
**Gauntlet - \$35.00, limited, signed hardcover edition**

The first collection from the well-known editor of *Cemetery Dance* magazine, Richard Chizmar's *Midnight Promises* offers up sixteen stories (and one comic adaptation) of dark dealings, grim realizations, and explorations of injustice and suffering in a gorgeous, well put-together hardback. Rarely does an author come along that is able to so fully and unceasingly search through the dour veils of what comprises our greatest fears and failures. The human monsters herein are creatures of situation and circumstance, the victims simply people in the wrong place at the wrong time. What few supernatural elements are used do not impose on the reality of sorrowful themes.

Some of the stand-outs include: "The Season of Giving" wherein a department store Santa is approached by a girl he feels may have been sexually abused, and how he is drawn by his own obsessions into exacting a carefully laid plan of investigation and vengeance; "The Silence of Sorrow" is a perfectly-crafted understatement of utter dissolution as a father cleaning up his recently deceased son's home uncovers secrets that threaten to destroy the survivors if he decides to disclose the truth behind exactly what is hidden at the back of the closet; we are invited to share the "Devil's Night" as a high school teacher happens upon a body being buried in the brush and suspects that the killer may be one of his own students; and "Only the Strong Survive" is a new take on the werewolf legend, where the case-worker for a homeless shelter is actually the progenitor of such psychic horrors that she enslaves the derelicts and feeds on them. Also of great interest is one of Chizmar's earliest pieces of fiction, "Cemetery Dance," which carried on to be the title of one of the most significant and popular publications in the horror/suspense field.

As an evocative craftsman, Chizmar is able to hold our attention with subtle underpinnings of growing dread and the startlingly clear understanding of the brutalized—but as an eyewitness and scribe of sin, the maleficent, and life-as-Purgatory he ranks with Cornell Woolrich and Jim Thompson for pure reckoning of spiritual anguish and resolve. An introduction by Ed Gorman and afterword by Ray Garton offer more keen observations on the promises Richard Chizmar has made, and continues to keep.

**A SPELL FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF DESIRE**  
by Don Webb  
**Black Ice Books - \$7.95**

A collection of many of Don Webb's more surrealistic and experimental pieces, *A Spell for the Fulfillment of Desire* contains thought-provoking and language-twisting tales that dance over the boundaries of convention and genre. Like Donald Barthelme and Barry Yourgrau, Webb is equally comfortable taking the norm and warping it into a fantastical predicaments, or likewise working extreme situations and playing them out as if commonplace. "The Literary Fruitcake" follows the course of a fruitcake handed down from author to author beginning with Charles Dickens and changing hands from Stoker, Stein, Hemingway, Kerouac, and numerous others until finding its way to Webb; strangely enough, as we watch the weird windings of the fruitcake we uncover snatches of Webb's own literary background, connecting elements of style and personality. Other tales are much more experimental, such as "After Abish" which is written entirely with words beginning with the letter 'A'. The author struggling valiantly to actually produce a story about angels and their own struggles is a mean feat in both context and execution.

Biblical and other religious and cultural icons provide a major portion of Webb's material: "Purgatory" opens with the line, "We developed a technique for burning sin and karma right here in Middleton." One of the most powerful fusions of dark fantasy and surreality is "Mark 6:14-29, Matthew 14:1-12" which uncovers the true occurrences of John the Baptist and Salome's dance of the seven veils, as she is revealed to be a corrupt goddess, stripping each veil for King Herod and driving his mind further into the incomprehensible past and future. However, there is a good deal of

humor in this collection as well, including a hilarious piece entitled "Late Night at Webster's" written almost entirely in dialogue as a strange group creates odd-sounding words and then assigns them definition. Those previously unaware of this unconventional side to Don Webb's career would enjoy reading just what kinds of spells he conjures and desires he fulfills.

**frisson:**  
**disconcerting verse ed.**  
**by Scott Urban**  
**Skull Job Productions**  
**\$1.25/subscription \$5.00**

A chapbook anthology of poetry that certainly does the sub-heading of 'disconcerting verse' justice, *frisson* manages to capture the essence of gentle and quiet emotional dissolution and madness in the tradition of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton; in fact, the cover is graced with a photo of Sylvia Plath's face pasted upon an oven door, which is at once darkly humorous and a tad unnerving. Kurt Newton's poem 'Ode to Dead Poets' starts the issue off with an encompassing sense of desperation and despondency that captures the overall tone of the *frissons* (chills) within: "we are all working/in the same form/dead bodies/expressing/life-suppressing fears". More solid verse can be found herein from the likes of John Grey, W. Gregory Stewart, Denise Dumars, and D.F. Lewis. Conjunction #54 by G. Warlock Vance is a particularly strong standout with its underlining milieu of strange occult happenings: "This is not Hell just/Someplace in between/I hide-but books/And night-fiends call/'That's all-that's all-that's all'".

**THE KIPTON CHRONICLES**  
**(six volumes)**  
**by Charles L. Fontenay**  
**Royal Fireworks Press**  
**\$7.99 each**

Six volumes in a new science fiction young adult series specifically created for adolescent girls that follow the adventures of fourteen-year-old Kipton beginning on a Mars colony in *Kipton and Gruff*. Fontenay does a masterful job of evoking a sense of wonder and apprehension while never talking down to the pubescent reader, keeping the tales fresh, innovative and suspenseful along the entire ride, and thoughtfully adding in cryptic clues, maps, and puzzles which Kipton must solve as she hunts the killer of her presumed dead uncle. Fontenay works hard to keep the series from repeating itself, creating more and more varying trials, creating additional offbeat elements, as Kipton battles kidnappers, time travel and ancient Martian pitfalls, virtual reality murderers, and even greater alien dangers. Since most YA efforts in the genre are aimed at boys, this fills a lacking area in the field.

**PIRATES OF THE UNIVERSE**  
**by Terry Bisson**  
**Tor - \$22.95**

Reviewed by Linda Addison

Terry Bisson's *Pirates of the Universe* is set in a gritty, non-utopian future. Disney-Windows is the mega-corporation on a Earth constrained by strict rules of Protocol. Gun is our reluctant hero. Not dashing or the smartest man around, Gun is carried through the adventure of a lifetime, fueled by the simplest of desires.

Gun is a Ranger, who only wants to retire in the Disney-Windows live-in theme park, *Pirates of the Universe*, with his best girl, Donna. He is on his second to last hunt for the Petey triad, three 1,820-kilometer-long elongated "soap bubbles" whose skin is the most precious item on Earth, when things begin to go wrong. Another ranger, Shorty, inexplicably flies into a Petey and gets *winked*, disappearing into the other space that exists near the *living* Petey triad. Shaken by the strange behavior of another Ranger, Gun heads back to Overworld, a space base partially inhabited by the Tangle, an extra-dimensional nanobot ruled area.

Gun checks his electronic mail and discovers he can't read it because it's on Administrative Hold. Not particularly upset, because he doesn't like to read his mail, he encounters a strange package in his bunk. Things are slowly beginning to unravel, but Gun doesn't have a clue. He just wants to get back to Earth, spend some quality time with Tiffany, a VR woman with a selection of lingerie to die for.

He spends a few moments in Heaven, a pressurized egg-shaped chamber two hundred meters long and a hundred fifty meters across. A distraction causes him to miss the shuttle to Earth, and then the fun begins. A Gen (a bio-recorder) approaches him, and Gun is given the mysterious package. We know right away things are going to continue to come apart. Even when he accidentally, or purposefully-leaves the package behind, it finds it's way back to him in seemingly magical ways. Not to worry, there is no magic involved here: we are in the hands of Terry Bisson, a true storyteller, and all will make sense in the end.

Unavoidable detours continue to derail Gun, who doesn't always comprehend the goings-on around him, even though he is often the catalyst. Although Gun endures whatever comes his way, his brother, Gordon, is aware of the problems in their world and is part of an underground group that isn't so accepting. Gordon's flight from prison is a strong and intriguing part of the puzzle of *Pirates of the Universe*.

In addition to Gun's journey and his brother's struggle, Terry Bisson explores some elegant concepts of time, space, and the creation of life in the other-than-Euclidean places in the Tangle.

Bisson's easy-going style disguises the complexity of the story lines weaving through this exciting novel. *Pirates of the Universe* is a fun ride. Terry Bisson is a master at creating worlds filled with interesting devices and

twists that always lead to a more than satisfying conclusion.

**THE ORANGE CAT BISTRO**  
**by Nancy Linde**  
**Kensington Books - \$19.95**

Reviewed by Linda Addison

Nancy Linde writes with a dream-like quality in *The Orange Cat Bistro*. This book takes us on a sensual journey of self-discovery.

Claire's husband has left her, allowing her to suddenly realize that she is surrounded by life. The task at hand is finding out what she wants to do with this new awakening. The Orange Cat Bistro is a meeting place for Claire and her born-again soul. Her new world is centered on the simple room above the bistro where she writes and lives. Claire sets out to explore her new life through the main character, Nevada, in the novel she is writing.

Nevada has carved a 'Thing' from stone. On the outside, it looks like a definable shell, yet inside it defies normal space and becomes a magical landscape with the feel of an American Indian dream place. For agoraphobic Nevada, who loves to crawl naked into the Thing, this is the only space she feels safe in. Nevada's cruel boyfriend, Alex, sells it, leaving her nowhere to hide.

She can't bear staying in her apartment without her Thing and decides to go outside, but she does so with her eyes closed. On her way out she meets a man, Nicholas, who becomes her eyes. We don't see him, but do experience him through Nevada's other senses.

Claire envies certain strengths she has created in Nevada, like the physicality of her hands when sculpting the Thing, and her emerging relationship with Nicholas. Claire sits down at the bistro to share napoleons with Nevada and talk to her about her behavior. The surrealism is gearing up. Nevada confronts her maker with a demand that she get back to work because she wants to know how things will turn out with Nicholas. Once Claire returns to writing, Nevada is reunited with Nicholas and begins to see Claire as her friend. Their worlds continue to overlap when fictional Nicholas walks into the bistro while Claire is having *cafe au lait*.

For the insulated Claire, Nevada's emerging sensuality deepens her own hunger for love. Claire lures Alec, one of her characters, into her world to experiment with sensation. Nevada begins to make decisions outside her creator's watchful attention and is drawn back into the Thing by the goddesses who roam the spacious land inside.

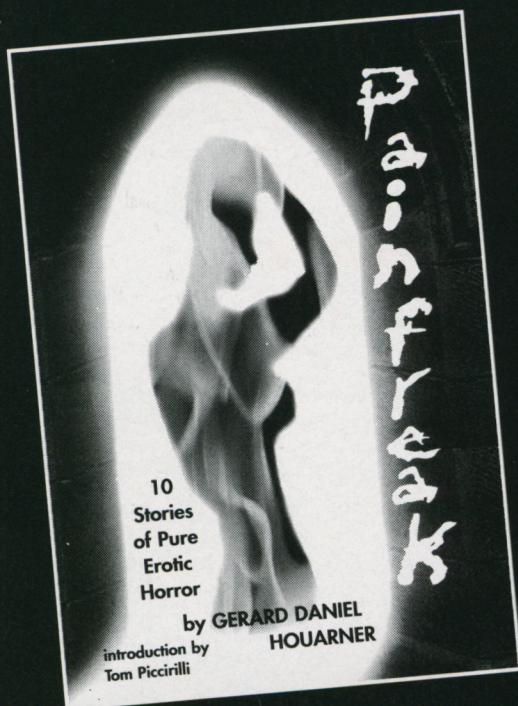
Nancy Linde has used the method of alternating chapters of her main character's point of view with Claire's own character, Nevada. Through Nancy's excellent writing style, we are never lost and become willing participants in the sliding reality of *The Orange Cat Bistro*.

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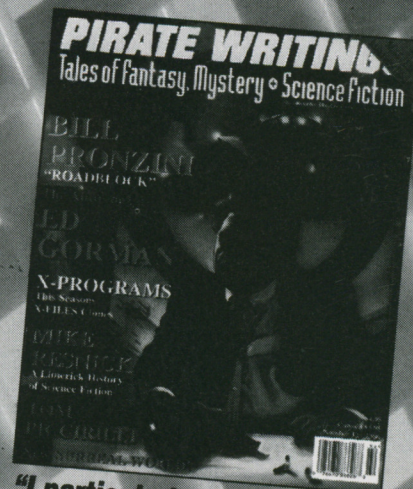
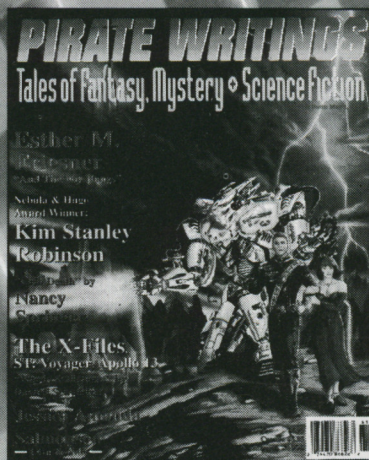


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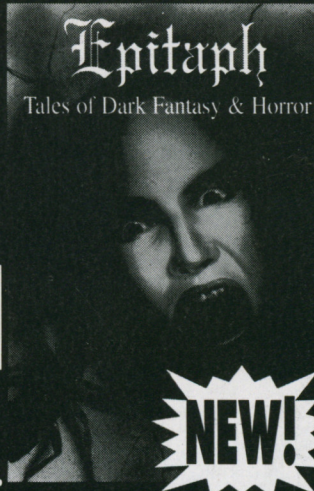
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