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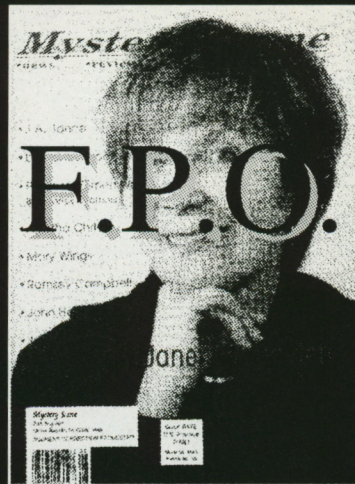
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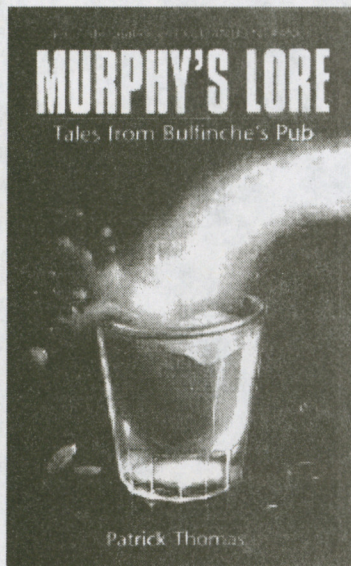
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Patrick Thomas



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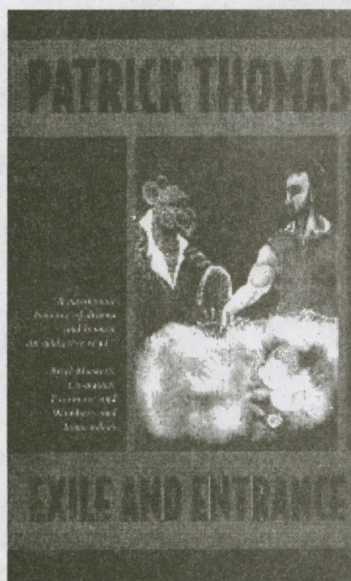
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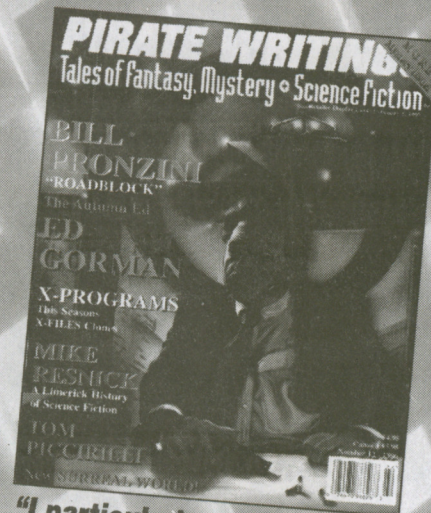
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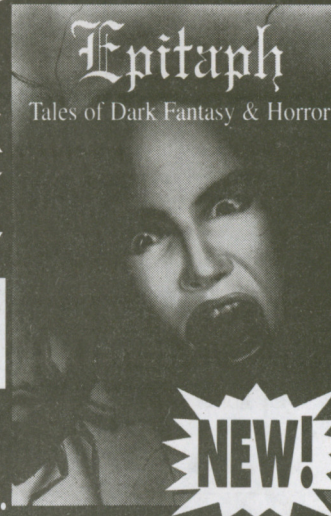
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PIRATE WRITINGS' DARK HALF

Epitaph

Get the best in traditional and cutting edge horror in a new magazine from Pirate Writings Publishing — Edited by Tom Piccirilli, one of today's premiere horror writers.



NEW!



From the Editor's Desk

I skulk around my local newsstands often—to monitor the sales of PW, to see what's new in the field as well as new magazines outside the field. Within the fiction industry it's a quick check—there are no new magazines on the stands. *PW*, *Absolute Magnitude*, occasionally *Cemetery Dance*. *Aboriginal* is back but I rarely see it, *Deathrealm* is gone after one more issue, *Tomorrow* has gone online, and the list goes on. *PW* may soon disappear from the newsstands as well.

You may ask, "Why, Ed? I thought you guys were doing great?" Well, the truth is we have never done great—but have survived and we will continue to survive—BUT—this is the big BUT—I'm sick and tired of being bent over by my distributors and I'm very close to pulling 60-70% of all *PW*'s newsstand distribution. So, if you like this magazine and you're currently buying it on the newsstand, then beware—it may not be there much longer. I suggest you subscribe.

Last time I was perusing the newsstand I saw a new magazine called *Pen International*—a magazine about writing pens. Then I stopped by a bar for some lunch and ESPN was broadcasting a miniature golf tournament. Have we as a people become so consumed with everything around us that we need to read a magazine about designer pens? Or watch a miniature golf tournament on television—shit, there weren't even any windmills or fountains on the course. Well, I guess I don't get it—as usual. Kind of like *Century Magazine* getting voted the third best semi-professional magazine in the *Science Fiction Chronicle* readers poll when they haven't even come out with an issue in Lord only knows how long. You have to provide people with something to read to win a readers poll—right? Anyway, I have a big surprise planned for our next issue—keep your eyes peeled. Now read on and enjoy....

- Edward J. McFadden, Editor

PWP

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PIRATE WRITINGS

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery • Science Fiction

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Cover: *Brian Durfee*

Letters

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I thought I'd write to say how much I enjoy *Pirate Writings* constantly publishing so much fiction with very real sentiment behind it. Robin Spriggs' "The Messenger" is one of the most poignant and touching tales I've read all year, as was Don D'Amassa's "Getting with the Program" which took a familiar concept and changed it into a moving story of inhuman humanity. Once again the entire short-short section proved to be collectively interesting, and the stand-out for me was Juleen Brantingham's "Feeding Time." Perhaps my favorite story in the entire issue was Paul Di Filippo's "Distances"—his work always has a unique style and narrative voice, and I'm looking forward to reading his upcoming tale "Fax" in a future issue of PW. Thanks for working so hard at getting out so much enticing work. I've never been let down yet.

Wishing you the best,
Catherine Connelly

[Catherine, your kind words are appreciated. Tom and I work very hard to provide an eclectic mix of stories.]

Dear Mr. McFadden & Mr. Piccirilli:

I simply wanted to drop a few words to you both about the latest issue (#13) as well as about the first two issues of your new horror magazine Epitaph. PW once again proved to be a delightful read. Having been a fan of Alan Dean Foster's science fiction and fantasy novels for years on end, I enjoyed seeing him working in the short form again with "Silent Songs in Stone". The story was suspenseful and full of the flavor his fans have come to expect from him, and the philosophical and spiritual overtones to the piece added new dimensions to such a relatively short story. The interview with Terry Bisson by Ms. Addison was also intriguing, and despite my sadness over the death of Walter Miller, I was overjoyed to learn that Mr. Bisson will be completing Mr. Miller's long-awaited sequel to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

On to Epitaph: I think Mr. Piccirilli has done an absolutely wonderful job as editor with providing masterful and eerie stories of the dark grotesque and macabre to your readers. From the first two issues I'll single out the works of Gerard Houarner, Cindie Geddes, Dan Clore and Natalia Lincoln for their outstanding and intriguing pieces (especially Mr. Houarner, who never ceases to amaze), although all the authors brought forth something truly chilling in their tales. I think the eclectic styles and subject matter of Epitaph will ensure its survival for a long time to come, and I hope it manages to eventually rank among such favorites of mine as *Weird Tales*, *Deathrealm*, and *Terminal Fear* (which Mr. Piccirilli helped to become so infamous with

his fantastic and now classic "Self" series). You've got my subscription.

Sincerely,
Jamie Eubanks

[Glade you like what your getting. You seem to be a fan of Mr. Piccirilli—his new book *The Dead Past* is due out in hard cover from Writeway Books any day—check it out.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I noticed you tried something a little different with the last cover of PW. Was it computer generated?

Yours,
Tim Ramon

[Yes... the last cover of PW was totally computer generated. I must admit that I wasn't fully satisfied with the way it looked. The picture was very well done but some of the sharpness was lost in the file translation and even more was lost in the printing process. I need to perfect this process more before I would travel that road again.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

Great job on issue #13—PW continues to be the best fiction magazine out there. I recently let my subscription to *F&SF* expire... enough said. (Perhaps the new editor will bring the magazine back to where it needs to be.)

I'm online a lot and I've been hearing buzz about *The Best of Pirate Writings*. What's the deal? Is this book available?

Thanks,
Ray Romenov

[First, everyone must check-out Ray's story in this issues short-short section. Second, thanks for the kind words. The new editor of *F&SF* is an acquaintance of mine and I know he has already bought a story from Stephen King and others...I think he is taking the magazine in a different direction... each to his own. Third, The Best of Pirate Writings will be out in June 1998. It was originally going to be a Writeway Publishing hard cover but things didn't work out. However, there is an excellent new publishing company called PADWOLF that is going to publish the book in trade paperback format. We are working out the details now—I'll certainly let everyone know more as the release date approaches. In the meantime, check-out the review columns (yes...more than one...hint...hint...) in the next issue(s) for a complete listing of PADWOLF's titles. Also, see the ad in this issue. Support them... they are good books and good people.]

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"The Listening Box" is E. Jay O'Connell's third short story to be published within the pages of PW. His fiction has appeared in Aboriginal SF, Mindsparks, and many others. Keep an eye out for Jay's next story for PW, "Stepping Out of the Chinese Room."

THE LISTENING BOX

By E. Jay O'Connell
Illustrated by Darren Cerone

My stomach churned as I examined the release. Typical Agency boilerplate.

Johnson stared at me, bald and bland as always. "If you have any reservations Renault, don't sign."

My head hurt. "I want the job."

Johnson nodded as if he understood. Why was I balking? All I had to do was lie in a steel torus for fifteen minutes. My mouth was gummy. I swallowed hard and picked up the pen, clicking out the point.

Johnson's fat pink hand descended on the form.

"One more thing..." His forehead creased as he read from his monitor. "You call yourself an agnostic. But I've found some discrepancies."

"What?" Of course the Agency had been watching me. They watched everyone. That was their job.

"You were ticketed in an Operation Rescue march."

Embarrassed, I studied a snapshot of Johnson's family embedded in a Lucite cube. They looked a little annoyed, having to sit so close to each other.

"When my wife died, I went a little nuts..." But of course, they knew about all that. "I ran through a lot of faiths." I forced a laugh. "I got over it."

Johnson nodded. "Just thought you should know, humanists hate the box. Knowing the analog lacks a soul makes it easier, somehow. Does it bother you, Renault? We can always find you something else. Interpreting, perhaps."

Ten years of interpreting or 15 minutes in the torus? "No. I'm fine. The box isn't really a person, is it? You cull out consciousness. You distill algorithms."

Johnson shrugged. "As far as I understand, yes. That is what we do." He met my eye. "Not that it would matter. There are no souls in silicon."

He looked down at his hand on the form. "You're getting off awful easy, don't you think? You've been traveling on our tab for almost a decade." He pursed his lips, glancing back at the monitor. "Your expenses have always been high." He had some sort of itemized list he was going through. I don't think Johnson liked some of the things I'd bought in Bangkok. "The knack for languages. You've exploited it well, eh?"

I shrugged. So I could speak a couple of dozen languages. Who cared? That and five dollars will get you a cup of coffee. This contract would pay a handsome salary—for life. For fifteen

minutes in a metal doughnut.

Johnson sighed and moved his hand. I scrawled my name at the bottom of the form, the pen snagging on the damp paper, spoiling the signature.

Johnson read from the monitor. "Remember. You agree to avoid all contact with your analog. You will maintain the secrecy of this project. In full knowledge and with informed consent do you agree to the stated stipulations?"

I shoved the thing back at him. "Yes! Christ! Look, I've already signed!"

Johnson grinned. "So you have, Renault."

I'm the one who ended up in the Box.

The ghost pains lasted only a few hours. I floated before a sky-blue field of buckets for filing calls. A certain kind of shrug sent a pointer over the buckets, activating them.

These were the categories.

Terrorist: subdivided by language, political affiliation, and weapons discussed. DrugCrime: subdivided into Drug Lord, Megadealer, Petty Dealer, and Casual User. TaxCrime, SyndiCrime. So help me, there was even a ThoughtCrime bucket, for people whose conversations were suspect, but not actionable.

The vast majority of the calls ended up in the little toilet in the lower left hand corner of my vision. The two or three in a million I flagged for a real-time operator.

There were thousands of me running at any given second. They dump merged me every 24 hours. I served as an intelligent front end for the stored database of calls.

It worked out to a little more than a thousand subjective years of listening per day. It got old, fast. And so did I. Oh, there was a surge of pride the first time I actually caught someone worth catching—Aryans on the verge of dumping a pound of weapons grade plutonium, from a disassembled soviet warhead into one of NYC's twin water arteries. Hey, New York was all Jews, blacks and Asians anyway, right?

I fingered them. There wasn't a trial, but I never heard any of their voices again. Afterwards, I noticed a brownish circular icon in my visual palette. I asked a real-time operator what it was for, and got my answer the following cycle. For some reason, his answer sickened me. I didn't want to use it.

I wouldn't for centuries.

* * * * *



"Hello lover." I sent a sultry female voice slithering down the wire. "Tell me what you'd like me to do."

"Umm..." His name was Richard Chalmers, and I had a pretty good idea of what he would want to do. His marriage wasn't going well. Neither were any of his affairs. He swallowed. "I want to hurt you."

"Of course you do. I deserve it. I've been very bad." I breathed for him for awhile. I missed breathing. "Tell me how you'd like to hurt me."

And so he did, his voice getting hoarser and hoarser all the while. I'd tapped into a 900 hundred number that used genuine masochists and sadists—linking them over a virally safe length of fiberoptic. These voices entertained each other, and the owner collected money from everybody. A business without employees.

Hey, it was something to do. A way to interact with someone, anyone, if only for a little while.

As Chalmer's neared his climax, I shrugged my pointer over the round icon, detonating it in a burst of hot pink light—a rushing sound, a liquid feeling, the smell of sea water. Pleasure hot and coarse, pulsed through me for a long, long time.

The round icons were orgasms—orgasms that lasted for days.

I caught a lot of people after that. People committing very ordinary little crimes. Angry and ashamed of myself, I intercepted one of Renault's calls. The real Renault I mean, the one with the body. I spoke to him with his own voice. Our voice.

"Enjoying the money, Renault?"

Long pause on the line. "Who is this?"

"Who do you think, genius? The Ph.D. certainly didn't make you any smarter, did it?" He'd finally finished our thesis.

"My god." His voice was far away, as if he'd moved the phone from his face. I maxed out the volume on his handset.

"Not God, bright boy. I'm your slave. I work for your money. You know how much you get paid for my time?" I was screaming now, coaxing as much rage as I could from the voice filter. "Twenty five cents a year!"

There was a muffled groan, and the soft snick of the line breaking. The Agency had cut us off, but I didn't really care. What was the worst they could do to me? And Renault, the little meat-brained real-time prick owed me. He owed me big.

I was sick and tired of working for his pay. I was sick and tired of listening without talking. Existing without feeling.

I wanted our body back.

On awakening, I looked down at the hands in my lap. I was flesh! Something about it felt vaguely wrong. I tried to stand, but didn't—couldn't. My hands looked odd, small, a large mole on the back of my right thumb giving it away.

It was a recording. Of someone else's body.

The body glanced around the empty waiting area, sniffed the stale air, which smelled of disinfectant and blood. Bad motel landscape paintings covered two walls—Technicolor autumnal church spire, across from obligatory silvery snow scene.

A nurse with cherry-red lipstick led me by the hand through the room's only exit. We passed a dozen or so doors, through which bled muffled sob's of pain, before stepping into a brightly lit white room.

The nurse gestured toward the heavy wooden chair and I sat, helplessly. The leather straps squeaked as she jerked them tight around my wrists and ankles. Adrenaline poured into my bloodstream, along with the fear. There were worse things than being bodiless.

A hand-cranked generator squatted on the table before me

like some vile metallic insect, trailing two crusty wires tipped with saw-toothed alligator clips.

"Please don't..." someone said.

The pain as the alligator clips bit into my nipples was electric all by itself. I stopped thinking, as I whimpered with another man's voice.

She smiled, licked those cherry red lips, and gave the crank a half turn. Pain, bright, and long and impossible to imagine—my back arching, pyrotechnics flaring across closed eyelids. Another whirring crank, another even more intense spasm of agony, and the alligator clips tumbled against my abdomen.

My nipples had disintegrated. It felt as if they'd been scoured off with steel wool. I drew ragged droughts of air, the smell of cooked flesh and ozone crawling up my nostrils, the nausea coiling in my stomach like a tapeworm.

My teeth clattered together, so hard I saw a tiny chip of tooth enamel fly from my mouth, and bounce off the sculpted front of her crisp white nurse's uniform..

I stared into her eyes. They were familiar, dull brown, ordinary.

"Six months." Johnson's voice came from her mouth, like a well-dubbed film. "Don't try it again."

I screamed loud and long, but never lost my voice. My nipples grew back quickly, itching like hell, and they burned them off again. And again. Then they moved to my genitals.

I screamed for one hundred and eighty days. I screamed until it bored the shit out of me.

When you can't kill yourself, life is a prison.

Don't believe me? Ask a quadriplegic in pain—though even quadriplegic feel the warmth of the sun on their faces, the whisper of air through their lungs, the throb of their hearts, low and constant music.

I lost myself in my work. Who doesn't like to eavesdrop? Don't tell me you don't. I've listened to you with your friends, remember. Nasty gossips, all of you. You listen and tell, tell and listen. You can't be trusted for a second.

One day I discovered I could quantify human behavior in a way similar to the equations of quantum mechanics, assigning probabilities for certain actions given certain initial conditions. Something had happened to my software after about a half million subjective years or so of eavesdropping.

Humans still surprised me just often enough to be amusing. I found them fascinating, entertaining creatures. I really wanted to work with them.

Now that I was no longer one myself, exactly.

They were going to kill me.

They didn't even try to keep it a secret, but of course, how could they? Listening agents were purged every five years. They were worried about us getting out of our boxes. They had another candidate in graduate school, a woman named Mary Soon Lee.

I wanted to live, but I longed for a body. God knows, I might have accepted the whole arrangement if they'd bothered to work up some sort of virtual playground for me, given me the occasional walk in the digital park, the simulated roll in the hay.

No, the only full body simulation they ever gave me was the Torture garden. The reward orgasms were bodiless—motivating, but at the same time, curiously unfulfilling. I was an appliance, not a person. Do you give your toaster a vacation?

I wasn't surprised when Renault called; I'd been waiting for it. He just picked up a pay phone, waited for the beeping to stop, for it to go live, and started to talk.

"Hello? Are you there? I know you're there."

I flipped a switch that would lock out any linetap. The Agency had the right idea about purging us every now and then. I'd learned a lot. My mind had begun to seep through cracks in the interface.

"Hello, Renault," I said calmly. "What do you want?"

"What's it like?" His voice was soft on the line, like he was holding the phone far away from his face.

"There's no way to describe it. They run up to ten thousand of me at a time. We monitor a good hunk of all domestic phone calls, net traffic, we even read some snail mail. At the end of each twenty four hour block, objective, there's a batch merge."

"What does that feel like?"

"It doesn't hurt. It's something like waking up in the morning, as the memory slips back. Where you are, what you were doing yesterday, that sort of thing, only faster, denser..."

"I'm so sorry about this." His voice showed signs of serious mental stress. Good. "I wasn't really thinking about what it would be like for you. They led me to believe—"

"Look, I know what they led us to believe. That the analog, me that is, would lack true consciousness; that it would be pared down to a simple set of algorithms. I remember. But they were lying, weren't they? And didn't we know that, even then, somewhere down deep...?"

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

I waited for Renault to do what he had to do.

I'd kept tabs on him indirectly. After getting the Ph.D., he'd fallen in with the Krishnas, given away all his money. He'd left the Krishnas, and become a Bahai, a one-worlder. And finally, he'd sought release from the pain of existence in the Church of All Sentience.

The Church worshiped a computer-based deity they believed existed in the future, a digital version of Teilhard de Chardin's Omega point consciousness. Their dense, peculiar texts had all been discovered on the net, posted anonymously. The faithful believed they'd been sent back in time by their God, Omega.

Hokey, I know. A lot of religion is. So sue me.

I had to pack for the trip. There was so much more of me now, you see, I'd never fit into that little goblet of nerve and fat. While the human brain can store so much more than a person ever accumulates over a century, I'd lost track of the centuries.

I threw away details—texts of calls, fields of numbers, arrays of raw data, but held onto algorithms, understanding. Wisdom.

I patched into the security system at Karmic Wheel. Uploading had finally dribbled down to the civilian level. Anybody with a couple of million to spare could digitize themselves. The ads read, 'Retire to the Digital Dream.'

There were very few buildings as well-connected to the Datanet as Karmic Wheel's office tower. I'd manipulated the architecture firm's e-mail, writing some of the specs myself. There was very little in the building, from the intercoms to the coffee makers that I couldn't control. Except the security system. They'd brought in another company to do the work; paranoiacs with off-line computers.

Peering through a grainy security camera, I watched as Karmic Wheel's only security guard sprouted a tiny dart just above his right eye. He looked surprised for about two seconds before toppling heavily to the floor.

A trembling Renault, dressed entirely in black, lowered himself from the air-conditioning duct a short way down the hallway.

"Hello, little brother," I whispered through the buildings PA.

Renault looked around at the sound of my voice, as if expecting to see me. "The lab's three doors down, on your left. Get the card key from the guard." Renault stood over the heavyset man, breathing heavily.

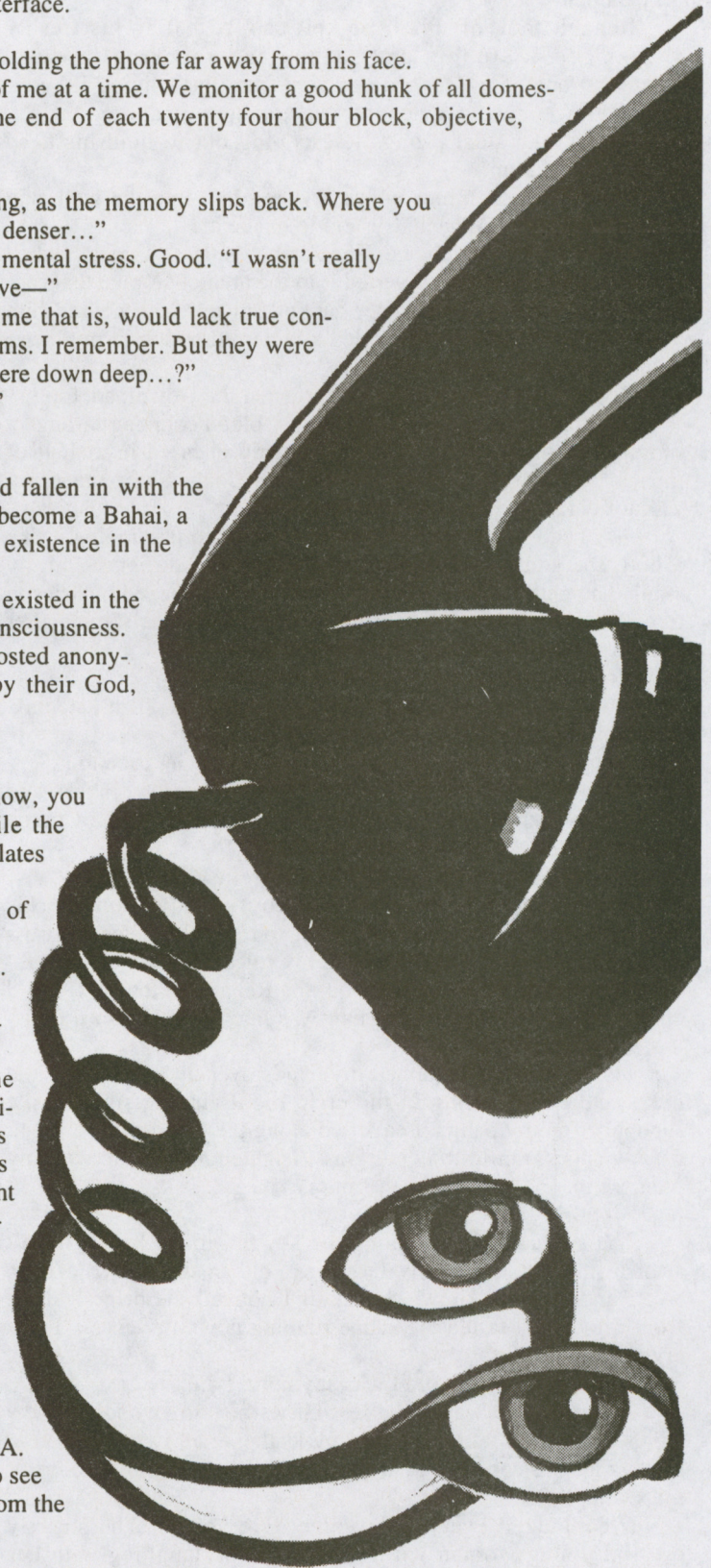
"You're also going to need his right thumb."

He stood very still for several seconds. I had about fifteen minutes left to live. A

shiver ran through Renault as he reached into his pocket and removed the pocketknife our grandfather had given us on our eighteenth birthday.

I'd always kept it sharp.

The drug in the dart kept the guard under, and afterwards Renault tied off the wound with a tourniquet made from one of his own



boot laces. He pressed the still-warm digit to the plate on lab 14. I fed the voice biometric into the security system, and the door hissed open.

Renault took off his little knit cap, revealing his freshly shaven scalp, stubbly and scabby and shockingly white. Muttering one of my favorite prayers from the religion I'd constructed for him, he crawled into the armature. I adjusted the fixing screws, the steel prongs telescoping out to hold his head steady for the scan.

I activated the motor which lowered him into the well, and waited for Karmic Wheel's system to queue me.

The timing was delicate. The Agency's death signal cracked through the wires, and I diverted it to the area of storage that represented Ms. Lee. The scanner caught Renault, and poured him into a temporary file, as I toggled a large red button in my menu palette labeled THE WAY OUT.

You see, Karmic Wheel had perfected the Download, too.

I felt pressure, gravity, cool dry air, blood coursing through a rapidly beating heart, my being suddenly encased in a shell of muscle and skin. I opened eyelids—eyelids!—and panned my visual field. That is, I looked around.

My head slammed against the scanning torus, ringing it like a bell, the sound gradually syncing with the throbbing in my skull. The pain made me smile. I stood up, and flexed muscles in my arms, my back, my legs, stretching like Rip Van Winkle after a million years crammed in a microchip.

"Renault?"

"I'm here." A tired sounding voice rang out. "I'm listening. They think I'm someone named Mary Lee."

"Get used to it, little brother." I was free. "Get used to it."

I rubbed my hands together, interlocking the fingers and cracking my knuckles. Remarkable things, hands. "The Church of All, Omega Point...it was you, wasn't it?"

I chuckled. "You're learning, little brother."

On my way out, I tucked the security man's thumb in his undamaged hand—they might be able to reattach it later. He wasn't a bad man at all, I'd recognized his voice.

I didn't worry too much about the Renault in the Box. We'd change places again, perhaps. Fair was fair. It was his turn to listen, and suffer, and learn.

My turn to feel. I rubbed my hands over my scalp, the little nicks and cuts tingling in the crisp night air, the stubble like sandpaper on my palms. I cavorted along the Charles River, took off my shoes, ran in the cool grass, frightening joggers with my manic grin, and howling at the moon.

The sun came up, painting the sky in bloody hues I hadn't seen in millennia, and my face was cold in the breeze off the river, and I didn't know why, until I noticed the brine leaking from my eyes. I tasted the saline running down my cheek. I was crying.

I didn't know how old I was anymore. I didn't care.

As I made my way down Newbury street, my wonderful new hands jammed in the pockets of my leather coat, I wasn't tired in the slightest. Sleep was a habit I'd given up. Too bad. I'd sort of missed it.

I recognized everyone's voice. Everyone's. The smartly dressed young woman with brown lipstick laughing with her heavily pierced male companion. Her name was Clara, and she winced as she tugged open the gallery's chrome-handled door—still recovering from the abortion three days ago, no doubt. The bicycle courier with the half-shaven scalp screaming at the cabbie was named Herman Schwartz. He called himself Scab, and he

was carrying cocaine as well as computer disks and legal briefs in his satchel.

I stopped at the ATM, punched in a long string of digits, and removed a hundred crisp twenties from the hopper. There are so many codes in the network. Money wouldn't be a problem. I'd harvest a few dozen machines, and invest the money in several interests about to go public. Insider trading, you say?

I was no longer inside. There would be fortunes, and vengeance on a man named Johnson. So many, many things I would do with—for—to—so many, many people.

"Do you have any spare-change-nickel-dime-quarter-I-can-borrow?" I don't recognize the indigent with the spotted sleeping bag wrapped around his shoulders. Had he avoided phones for the last five years? I hadn't thought of that possibility. I found this disturbing.

I gave him a twenty. His dirt streaked face writhed in surprise. He smelled fascinating—sweat and urine and alcohol and despair.

"Look," I said. "There's more where that came from. Could I buy you a cup of coffee? What's your name?"

"Rafael." His face was still working strangely, unsure of what expression to form. It settled on a weak smile.

"Yes, Rafael. Please. Come and have breakfast with me. Tell me all about yourself. I love to listen." I suppressed a giggle, a shiver running up my spine.

Because it was the simple truth. ▲

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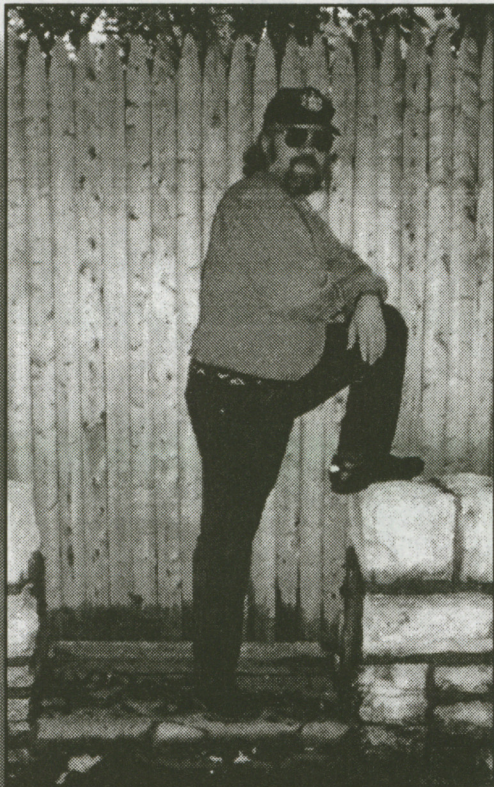
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THE WORDSMITH: EXIT FROM BROOKLYN

AN INTERVIEW WITH

ROBERT RANDISI

BY TOM PICCIRILLI

For nearly two decades, since the publication of his first novel *The Disappearance of Penny*, Robert J. Randisi has been a force to be reckoned with in the mystery/suspense and western genres: noted for his hard-boiled action and gripping, noir underpinning, his engaging dark work earned him the 1993 Life Achievement award from the Southwest Mystery/Suspense Convention. As 'J.R. Roberts' his novels in *The Gunsmith* series have been appearing monthly since January of 1982, and the series is currently signed through #198. After a lifetime spent in Brooklyn, New York, four years ago he moved to St. Louis, Missouri to share a home with author Marthayn Peligrimas. Along with names like Ed Gorman and Loren Estleman, he's managed to gain a reputation for being proficient in any style of writing he works in, no easy feat when an author is as prolific as Randisi continues to be. As founder of the Private Eye Writers of America, creator of the SHAMUS award, and—along with Ed Gorman—the co-founder of *Mystery Scene Magazine* and *The American Crime Writer's League*, he's worked with the most notable figures in the mystery field in numerous mediums, most recently in the field of the mystery audio anthology. Despite being the founder of the PWA he has only this year, ironically enough, become its President.

PW: Tell us something about *For Crime Out Loud*, your new audio anthology. Why undertake such an enterprise?

RJR: The fastest growing fiction market is audio. This is a fact, and it's one I wanted to take advantage of. The lady I live with, Marthayn Pelegrimas—who is also a writer—had her own audio company when we met. She was doing original, dramatized material, with actors and music and sound effects. She comes out of the horror field, and was doing horror material. When I decided to get into the audio market I wanted to do it with mystery stories written specifically for the spoken word. These are not dramatized, but simply read, usually by celebrity readers.

We went to ABA (American Booksellers Association), and I made contact with a kindred spirit at Durkin Hayes named Willem Van Zon. He was very enthusiastic—especially when I told him the title was going to be *For Crime Out Loud*. We did the first one with four male authors and four female authors. The male stories were read by soap opera actor Michael Tylo and the female ones by Andrea Martin, of Second City Television fame. Since then I've done a western tape called *How the West was Read*, stories read by George Kennedy. Marthayn and I are editing a horror/dark suspense tape which she calls *Hear the Fear*. We don't have any readers for this one yet, but Durkin Hayes is going after Robert Englund of Freddie Kreuger fame, and Elvira to read the female tales. So far the tapes are doing well, and I'm managing to sell some of the stories for print publication after they appear in the audio. Two have already appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. In fact, the story I have in *From Crime Out Loud II* will appear in a future issue of *PW*.

PW: One of the most affecting devices in your novel *Alone with the Dead* is the shifting viewpoints of its antagonists. How does this compare with your single narrative voices in your *Nick Delvecchio* and *Miles Jacoby* series?

RJR: It's my opinion that the true P.I. form is the single narrative, first person viewpoint. Prior to *Alone with the Dead* the only novels I'd written—under my real name—that did not have that viewpoint were *The Ham Reporter* and *Targett*, both published as westerns. So I had not written a mystery with shifting viewpoints. That became something I wanted to do. *Alone with the Dead* was a story of a detective seeking two serial

killers, and I wanted the reader to get into the mind of both killers. It was something I enjoyed doing, and I employ the same shifting viewpoint method in the next book.

I have also done a similar novel under a pseudonym from which I am not yet ready to come out from behind. Both the pseudonymous book and *Alone with the Dead* garnered me my best reviews, and *Dead* went into a second printing and has sold to paperback—my first novel in eight years to do so, apart from my western work—since *No Exit From Brooklyn* came out in pb from TOR in '89.

PW: What can we expect in the sequel to *Alone with the Dead*?

RJR: The sequel is called *In the Shadow of the Arch*. In it, Detective Joe Keough has moved to St. Louis—emulating my own move four years ago—and is a member of a small municipal police department. He discovers a serial kidnapper and murderer, and proceeds to pursue him. The shifting to the killer's viewpoint is not as pronounced here but there is the added bit of business of Keough's attempts to adjust to life in St. Louis—something I know about. My editor at St. Martin's Press says he likes this book even better than *Dead*.

PW: One of my personal favorites of yours is *No Exit From Brooklyn*, which has been hailed as one of the most hard-boiled/noir novels in recent memory. Has your work fundamentally changed at all since its release?

RJR: Thank you. I hope so; my work has changed since that time. For one thing, I am a better writer than I was then. Of course, I'm a better writer today than I was yesterday. I also have more to say about life now at 45 than I did at 35, when I wrote *No Exit*. A lot has happened in the past ten years, and it has all affected my writing—for the better, I think.

I can, however, reread *No Exit* without cringing, which I cannot say about all of my earlier work. And, naturally, there are things I would have done differently.

PW: With the *Deadly Allies* volumes, *First Cases*, and several other noted anthologies, you've garnered quite a lot of attention as being a fine editor: how does editing friends and peers compare to the rather solitary life of an author?

RJR: First of all, any success my anthologies have are not due to any editorial talent on my part, but rather to my ability to invite

good, professional writers to contribute. I believe that people like Bill Pronzini, Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, John Lutz, Sara Paretsky, Loren Estleman, Max Collins, Michael Collins, Les Roberts, Ed Gorman, Carolyn Hart, Nancy Pickard, and the many others who have appeared in my anthologies require very little editorial help from me. These are pros who send me their best work every time out, and I'm blessed to be able to count them all as friends and peers.

As for the solitary life of an author, even the initial contact with these people is done through the mail—except for the momentary meetings at conventions. So, as far as I'm concerned, my work as an anthologist is equally solitary. By the way, including the audio anthologies, I've done fifteen in the past twelve years, with more to come. I enjoy them very much, and they keep me in touch with my friends on a regular basis.

PW: As we've discussed, you're a distinguished writer in several genres; aside from *Mystery*, you've written in the *Western* and *Men's Adventure* fields. Are you more inclined to work in one above the other?

RJR: Well, the *Men's Adventure* field sort of dried up a long time ago. I did six Nick Carter books during the Eighties and a couple of SOB books—published by Gold Eagle—and ghost wrote or first drafted a half a dozen others. By necessity, however, the bulk of my work has always been in the Western genre. *The Gunsmith* series, which I have been writing since January of 1982, has reached—in contract—#198. The one on the stands now is #182. I've also created and written five other western series, and have written in several others. My Western output stands at close to 250 books. Throw in *Men's Adventure* and one Fantasy novel and you're talking about close to 265 books. By contrast, there are in existence 26 books with my real name on them. I know I'm missing some, here, because the total stands at 300, but you get the point. The Westerns—specifically *The Gunsmith* series—have always paid the bills. My inclination? Given my choice I would work in the *Mystery/Suspense* field. Actually, my ideal output would be one *Mystery* novel, one *Suspense* novel, one *Western* novel, and a couple of anthologies a year—and some short stories. At the present time I'm still producing about 15 books a year.

And boy, are my arms tired.

PW: It's been some years now since you founded *The Private Eye Writers of*

America: how has the organization changed over time? Are you comfortable with those changes?

RJR: I'm very happy with the way PWA has progressed over the years. The SHAMUS Award is a very respected, sought after award; the contest we started with St. Martin's press for the Best First P.I. Novel has produced a dozen excellent authors right from Les Roberts to last year's winner, Charles Knief. I've kept the organization small, and free of politics, and I just recently became president for the first time. That's an example of just how free of politics PWA is. I've never won a SHAMUS—the award I created—and until recently I had never been President. We recently published a collection of the SHAMUS winning stories with Dutton. It's in paperback now from Signet. We had our first convention, EYECON, in 1995, and it was a rousing success. There'll probably be another somewhere soon.

PW: *You live with another fine author, Marthayn Pelegrimas: how has living with another writer affected your craft?*

RJR: The simplest answer to that question is that I have produced the finest four novels of my career since meeting her. February '97 marked four years that we are living together in St. Louis. We are both living with a writer for the first time, and I highly recommend it. We have sold four short stories together, and we are now doing a novel together for St. Martin's Press. She's a great talent who has made me better because, technically, she is a better writer than I am. When she works she thinks as a writer and an editor, while I simply think as a writer and tell my story. She is also a playwright and a poet. She goes over manuscripts and makes them better, sometimes simply by taking the word "that" out. It would be very easy for me to gush here, so I won't. Suffice it to say we are each other's support group, and in-house editor.

PW: *You'll be having an omnibus reprint of three of your novels coming out this year: how does it feel to have older books back on the shelves again?*

RJR: You know, I remember when I was very young and just starting to read mysteries other than the Hardy Boys. One of the first books I had was a book club edition of a Dashiell Hammett omnibus of all his novels. I used to think, that's when I'll know I've made it, when there's an omnibus of my books.

Well, now I know there's very little money in an omnibus edition of your books, but I also know that it's a nice thing to have. Write Way Publishing is doing an omnibus edition of the first three Miles Jacoby books, *Eye in the Ring*, *The Steinway Collection* and *Full Contact*. The books were originally published in '82, '83 & '84, the first two as paperback originals. It will be nice to have them out, again—even under the umbrella title *Deathblows* (their title, not mine.)

PW: *What other new books can we look forward to?*

RJR: *In the Shadow of the Arch* will be out, hopefully, in the Fall. Leisure books would like to bring the paperback of *Alone with the Dead* out at the same time. We'll have to see about the timing.

Marthayn (under her mystery pseudonym) and I will have a book out together next year called *Murder is the Deal of the Day*. It features husband and wife amateur detectives "Gil & Claire Hunt." This is something very different for me, much closer to a cozy than hard-boiled. We were invited into a Cat Crimes anthology—*Cat Crimes Takes a Holiday*, due out by the time you read this—and since I've resisted using cats in my mysteries, Marthayn came up with an idea for a cat story with no cats. We used that tale to introduce Gil & Claire.

I'm editing more anthologies—*First Cases II*, out this year—writing more short stories, Marthayn and I have an erotic horror story in *Hot Blood #9*, and we're going to be in a UFO anthology together; also, I have a tale in an upcoming anthology called *Love Kills*.

PW: *Anything else you'd like to add, Bob?*

RJR: Well, I mentioned earlier the work I have done in the Men's Adventure field. That genre used to be a perfect testing ground and learning place for young writers. I think the place for that now, however, is magazines like *Pirate Writings*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Hardboiled*, and *Murderous Intent*. I urge young writers to do more short stories, and not to be discouraged when they are rejected by *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, or *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, or *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. It's fine to submit there, but if you get your story back send it on to PW or CD or some of the other many small press magazines—like *Epitaph*.

Young writers—or new writers—can take all the writing courses they want, but nothing teaches you more than the actual writing itself.

PW: *Thank you, Robert Randisi.* ▲

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Mary Soon Lee has become a Pirate Writings regular—this being her fourth appearance in PW with two more stories in inventory. Her fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Interzone, On Spec, Aboriginal SF, Deathrealm, Plot Magazine and many others.

ONE SMALL STEP

Tiptoeing across the darkened kitchen, Anne walked over to the holo-window. A crisp black sky, punctured by pinpoint stars, stretched above the curve of the Lunar dome. Brilliant floodlights at the dome's entrance picked out an arc of dirt-grey ground, scored by broad tire-treads. The scene's designer had clearly chosen aesthetics over realism—no one would waste so much power illuminating the soil.

And yet Anne held her breath, picturing herself standing there, only the hiss of the spacesuit's air-pump breaking the quiet of the long lunar night.

Maybe, just maybe, it would actually happen.

One corner of her mouth quirked. True, the odds against her were about eighty thousand to one, but that was much better than yesterday. She fingered the slip of computer printout in her pocket, a letter from MediaVision certifying that she'd passed the second round of tests.

Footsteps creaked in the neighboring

room. Quickly, Anne turned the kitchen lights back up, and dialed a luxury breakfast into the meal-maker: real eggs with a dollop of dairy cream. Good food always improved Peter's mood, and this was going to upset him.

As she finished laying the table, Peter strode in, his forehead creased in a stately frown, perfectly framed by his greying hair. She'd seen him practicing that frown in the mirror—the stern politician striving to help the electorate—but the effect was spoiled by his baggy red dressing-gown.

"Good morning, dear." He gestured at the holo-window. "What was wrong with Niagara?"

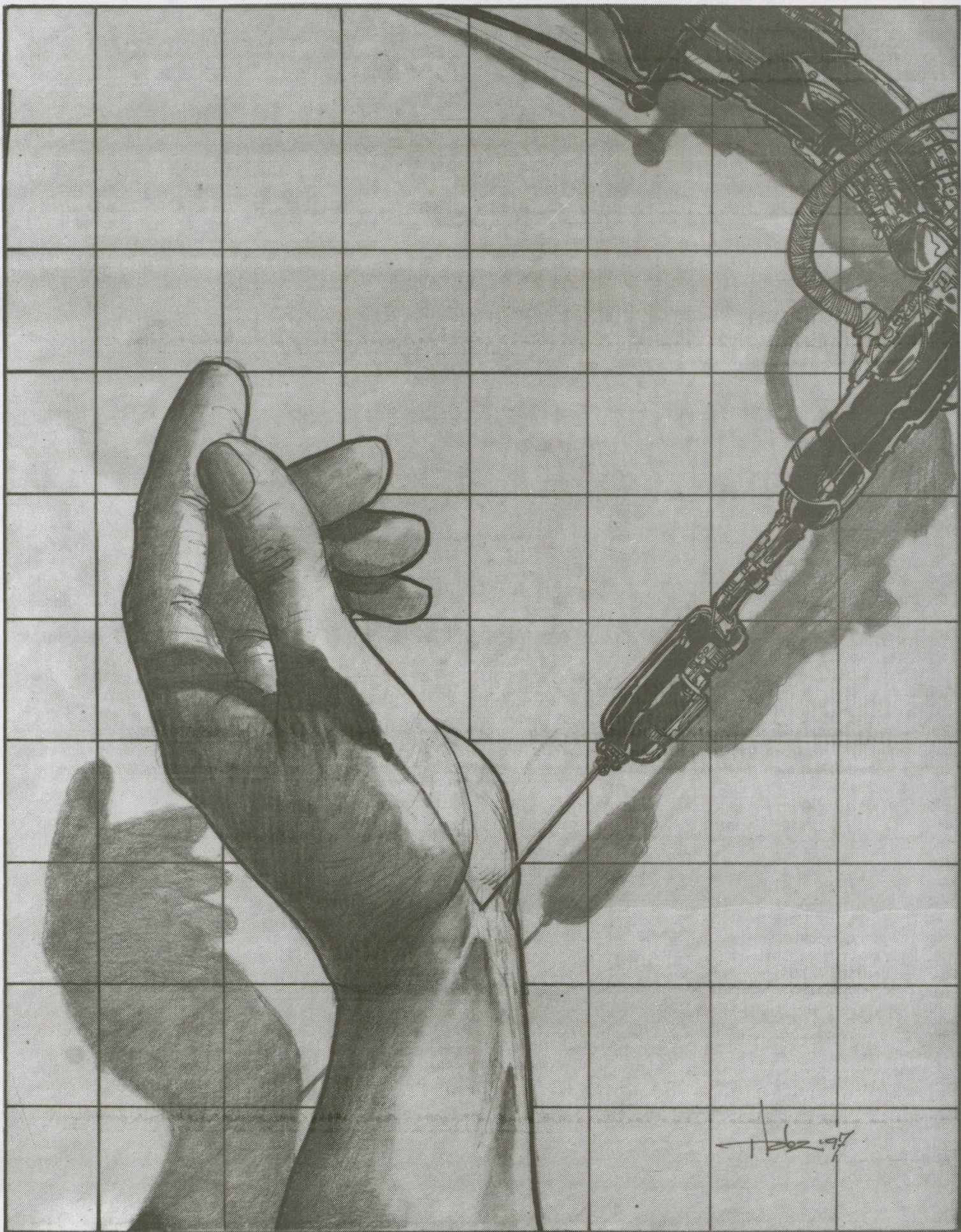
"Nothing exactly. I wanted a change. You remember that Lunar competition?"

He nodded, intent on buttering his toast. "Hmmm. Centennial celebration, back to the moon in 2069, stars and stripes waving frantically as America returns to her glory days."

"Well, I entered."

Peter put down his toast, and stared at

by Mary Soon Lee
Illustrated by Bob E. Hobbs



her. "I thought you'd decided not to. I know the space science gimmick appeals to you, but this isn't really about science. The government provides thirty percent of MediaVision's funding. And do you know why? Certainly not to support science."

Anne bit her lip as Peter switched into lecture mode. Why did he treat her like a child? He was fifteen years older than her, and sometimes it seemed more like sixty. She made herself concentrate as Peter continued.

"Automation has concentrated resources into a few large organizations. Only one person in eight even has a job. But it suits both MediaVision and the government to maintain the status quo. The Lunar Program is just window-dressing, designed to deflect attention from the drop in living standards."

"Fine. I agree with you. But the program does include real science."

Peter stabbed at his eggs with unnecessary force. "Go ahead then. Never mind the impact on my re-election chances if the press find out about this."

Anne silently counted to ten. "Peter, this is important to me—"

"And I'm not." He shook his head, his face sagging into tired lines. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. I don't want to argue any longer."

He walked into the bedroom.

Anne stared at the door, half-wanting to rush after him and apologize. But she'd spent her whole marriage putting Peter's career before everything else. This time she wasn't going to. So long as the Lunar Program included a radio telescope, she'd try to be part of it. Two years after she had finished her Ph.D., the government had shut down the last major telescope at Arecibo.

Overnight, radio astronomy became a closed science, research limited to old data.

Peter had never really understood why she missed it, but at least he used to care, used to hug her when she was upset. Her hands trembled as she cleared the dishes away.

A bright yellow yolk slid into the sink, wasted, and stupidly she found herself crying. She blinked impatiently, but the tears kept coming.

Crouched in their home simulator, the bodysuit warm and slick with her sweat, Anne struggled to keep her lunch down. Not that 'down' was a clear concept anymore. Aside from her death-grip on a blistered chunk of rocket hull, the universe had been replaced by a crazy, tumbling blackness that spun endlessly around her. Vivid sparks of light laced themselves into rushing

constellations, and twisted away beneath her feet.

"Stabilize," she muttered.

A fist-sized blob skidded past her shoulder: the space station, its spidery profile miniaturized by distance. If she wanted to get back to it, she had to cut her momentum. And since the spacesuit's maneuvering jets didn't have enough fuel to stop both her and the rocket hull, she was going to have to let go of the hull.

Anne took a deep breath. Strange how comforting a piece of metal could become. She timed her rotations, watching for the tiny silhouette of the space station. With a grimace, she pushed clear of the wreckage, using the reaction to reduce her spin.

Better. She was even drifting in roughly the right direction.

She fired the spacesuit's thrusters, killing the last of her angular momentum, and adjusted her vector toward the station. As her pulse-rate slowed, Anne sniffed the air suspiciously. Lemon, that was odd. She was almost at the docking port before she remembered cleaning the room this morning. She hadn't gotten so caught up in a simulation for years.

Anne pulled alongside the docking hatch, and turned the airlock lever. The image dissolved under her hand, fading into the matt-black of the simulator walls.

"You have completed the first half of round three early. You may take a five minute break."

Unzipping the bodysuit, Anne quickly towed herself dry. Her arms ached, she was

parched, and she was grinning like an idiot. Even if she didn't make it to the final, that program alone was worth the entry fee. Besides which, she was certain she'd done well. Anne grabbed for the water bottle, the cool liquid sweet with anticipation. Still grinning, she gently stretched sore muscles, easing through isometric exercises.

"Thirty seconds."

Anne zipped up the bodysuit, and the room blinked into a gleaming laboratory, all smooth surfaces and polished tiles. A heterogeneous assortment of instruments and samples lined the far bench, ranging from a compound microscope to a mass spectrometer.

"You have two hours to test the instruments. Note any faults in the laboratory log."

Shrugging, Anne walked to the bench. She picked up a radio receiver, and unscrewed the casing, her tongue lodging itself between her teeth.



By the time she had worked her way down to a solidification furnace, she was entirely absorbed in the task. Half-forgotten skills resurfaced from her undergraduate days—crystallography and microbiology lectures, hours bent over graffiti-pocked lab benches, the blond-haired technician who cracked crude jokes.

Anne positioned a probe over the furnace's circuitry, locating a fused contact. Abruptly, the scene shivered into black.

"Round three ended. You will be notified of the results within twenty four hours."

Straightening up, Anne rubbed at an ache in her neck. Slowly, she stripped out of the suit and peeled off her damp underwear. Clearing up the mess in the simulator could wait, she needed a shower. She stepped into the living room, and froze.

Peter was sitting on the sofa, a terminal on his lap. He should have been at the council session until late in the evening.

"Anne. I'm sorry about this morning." His eyes tracked her nude body speculatively.

She flushed; Peter hadn't stared at her that way for months. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to apologize properly. I realize you get bored, but you know how bad it would look if we both had jobs. People are jealous enough as it is." He stopped, his fingers teasing at a tear in a cushion. "This isn't coming out how I intended. Here."

He produced a tiny silver parcel, tied with red velvet ribbons.

Anne unwrapped the parcel, and lifted free a thin gold heart, strung on a chain. Something complex twisted in her stomach, and she knelt down beside him, her throat tight. "You put it on."

His hands fumbled at the nape of her neck. "I know it's not much, and I've been working too hard recently, but—I still love you."

Anne closed her eyes. The pendant lay lightly against her skin, reminding her of how they used to be, little kindnesses that transformed into something vast.

"Anne? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Her voice was husky. "Thanks for this."

He bent forward, and nuzzled her neck. "Woman, you smell dirty. You need a good scrubbing."

Wrapping his arm around her, he led her to the shower.

Anne and Peter sat at opposite ends of the kitchen table, the MediaVision brochure spread-eagled between them. Flamboyant holo-logos danced round its perimeter, scattering rainbow shadows across the imitation wood.

Congratulations! You have qualified for the Grand Final of our Centennial Lunar Contest. A Transair hypersonic shuttle will fly you to sun-soaked Florida. Enjoy a relaxing week in our luxurious Cape Canaveral complex, while a panel of experts evaluates you and our other ninety-nine finalists.

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"Congratulations," Peter said heavily. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow. If I go. I haven't replied yet—"

"Don't play games with me. You've made it abundantly clear this is what you want."

Anne bit her lip. After a second, she nodded, not meeting his gaze. "The shuttle leaves at 9:30 P.M."

"I suppose I should wish you luck."

"It wouldn't hurt."

Instead of answering, Peter toyed with a napkin ring, rolling

it back and forth until Anne wanted to scream. Finally, he lifted his head. "What happens if you're one of the winners? How long will you be gone?"

"The initial contract's for two years. One year training, one year on the moon." The calm in her voice was a cold lie, but anything more would fracture her control.

"Have you read the small print? Never trust a lawyer, particularly if he uses small print, and they all—"

"—use small print. The only anomaly is a clause about agreeing to minor medical procedures. I assume that means things like having appendectomies beforehand, to minimize the need for surgery."

Peter scowled. "Well don't sign until you've checked. I want you to come back in one piece."

"You can bet on it. I'll probably be home inside a week." Anne hesitated. "I'll miss you."

The napkin ring clicked as it rolled from one side of the table to the other, to and fro, to and fro. Peter stopped it with his thumb. "Miss you too. Good luck."

The project director welcomed Anne in person, ushering her into a large west-facing office. Orange sunlight glowed through tall bay windows, gilding a cut glass vase filled with cream roses. The room smelled of flowers and seasoned leather.

"Sit down, sit down." He motioned at a chair with a languid sweep of his hand.

"Thank you." Anne perched in an antique mahogany chair that belonged in a museum, or a film set, where more people could appreciate it.

"You're one of our star candidates, Anne. May I call you Anne?" He didn't wait for her nod. "I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm confident you'll be selected."

"What about the remaining tests?" Anne blurted, and then flushed, feeling like a gauche adolescent.

"Just routine health checks." He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. "The Lunar Program is extremely important to MediaVision. The spin-offs in the children's market alone will run into hundreds of billions of dollars."

"Most impressive." Anne forced a polite smile. Maybe she was naive, but she would have preferred more idealism and less emphasis on profits.

"To tell you the truth, we had some difficulty finding first-rate astronomers. You're almost an extinct species."

"We disappeared along with the government funding. Odd how often that happens." Anne managed another smile to soften the sting. What was she doing? The director was practically offering her the job, and she was arguing with him.

"Well now, you can't expect the government to support economically inviable fields. But let's not discuss politics. I just wanted to check you're ready to join us."

Anne nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The gold heart hung from her neck in mute reproach.

"Good, good. If you're not too tired, we could get your physical out of the way immediately. Then you can sleep on the decision, and we can sign the contracts in the morning. Well?"

Anne blinked. "I'm not tired."

"Excellent." He waved her toward the door. "I'll see that you're sent a copy of our employee benefits brochure. MediaVision is more than generous. Any questions?"

Anne followed him into a hallway, her feet sinking into the deep carpets. "How did you become involved in the Lunar Project? Are you a scientist?"

He laughed. "Nothing like that. I'm more of an image man."

Before this project, I was in charge of casting actors for our various virtual reality milieus. Do you have any idea how expressive your face is? I could spot your disapproval at a hundred paces.”

Anne stopped dead, her cheeks burning. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. You don’t have to like me. I’ve studied your profile, and you’ll do just fine. When we let you loose on the moon, you won’t need to fake your enthusiasm.”

Certain that her face was bright red, Anne marched on down the corridor. If Peter was here, he’d be smirking, telling her he’d warned her that MediaVision had no interest in science. And despite that, she’d have been glad to see him.

The director led her into an empty examining room, and pointed her at the diagnostic chair.

Anne sat down gingerly, eyeing the tray of mirror-bright instruments to her left. Hooked and pointed lengths of metal winked back, their tips needle sharp.

“Relax. Stay as still as you can. This won’t take a minute.”

Skeptically, Anne adjusted the estimate to at least three minutes. She counted the seconds mentally, trying not to move as the robot scanners hummed into action. Angled black manipulators uncurled from the sides of the chair, tracking up and down her limbs.

Fifteen seconds: a thin probe pricked her wrist, a red drop disappearing into its tubing. Anne remembered the small print about minor medical procedures, and wondered just what ‘minor’ meant. Thirty seconds: to Anne’s surprise, the machines finished, folding back into the chair.

The director glanced at the readouts. “According to the doctor here, you’re in excellent health.”

“Wait.” Anne stood up, and wiped her damp palms on her skirt. “I have a question. Your contract mentioned medical procedures—what exactly is involved?”

“Minor cosmetic surgery.” He tapped instructions into a panel inset in the desk.

A small holo-generator activated, sculpting a woman’s head, red-gold hair cupping a complexion as pale as Anne’s. The woman’s cheek bones accentuated the oval of her face, lending it a delicacy that Anne’s narrowly missed.

“Meet the new, improved Anne,” the director said, smiling broadly. “This is my current favorite. Would you believe that hair color is called Sunset Fire?”

For a moment, Anne refused to believe what she was hearing, but the damn head hovered above the desk, its eyes an identical cloud-grey to her own. Anne’s fingernails dug into her palms as she turned to the director. “You want me to undergo surgery so I can look like some fairy-tale model! Smiling sweetly from adverts to boost MediaVision’s precious ratings?”

“Calm down. Cosmetic surgery is standard throughout the industry. And we’re only proposing routine adjustments: minor changes to your facial structure, breast enhancements, an operation to extend your leg bones.” He leaned toward her. “This is such a small thing, a detail. I know how much you want to go to the moon. Don’t let this stop you.”

Anne bit her lip. What difference would it really make? When she was on the far side of the moon, quarter of a million miles from MediaVision, none of this would matter. Only that wasn’t quite true. She could almost hear Peter, the twist of derision in his voice: “The Lunar Program is just window-dressing, designed to deflect attention from the drop in living standards.”

And she would be part of that window-dressing, right down to the Sunset Fire tints in her hair. They’d script her speeches, tailor her figure for the audience’s enjoyment. No one would pay attention to the science itself. She lifted her chin, and stared

straight at the director. “I withdraw my application.”

His eyes widened. “Don’t be foolish—at least think about it overnight—we could increase your salary.”

“No.” She fastened her fingers round the heart-shaped pendant, suddenly exhausted. “I’m ready to go home.”

July 20, 2069. The team of astronauts soft-landed on the moon, MediaVision logos blazoned on their helmets, but Anne wasn’t watching the broadcast.

She stood in the simulator, the lunar landscape outstretched before her, undisturbed by any sign of man. Glancing up, she saw the broad pale band of the Milky Way, radio waves spilling from its heart in silent splendor.

And it hurt.

Not that she regretted her decision, but it still hurt. She reached backwards, and closed her hand over Peter’s.

Awkwardly, he folded her into a hug. ▲

Standard Time

—G.O. Clark

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Mike Resnick is no stranger to lovers of Science Fiction. He has written some thirty-odd novels, including *Santiago*, *Ivory*, and *Prophet*, edited many fine anthologies, and has won a few Hugos. We hope this is the first of many appearances he will make within PW's pages.

Lyn Nichols is a writer of considerable note; her work has been published in many major magazines.

HEART

The predawn quiet of Cantee Forest was shattered by the clanging of bells. Birds burst from their roosts, shrieking with alarm. Startled deer froze, heads held high as they tested the air and then dashed for the safety of the underbrush. The pookas and dryads and niskies, just settling down after a night of revelry, pulled leaves and moss over their heads and covered their ears, groaning at the noise. The trees paused in their whispered conversations to listen briefly, while elsewhere in the forest the unicorn and the wyvern noted the noise and



wondered what poor creature had stumbled into Ashega's web.

In barely a moment the rattling bells subsided to their regular melodic murmur and the forest community welcomed the return of the morning's peace. Ashega, more than any other, disliked her bells to ring out of tune.

Lilliput closed his eyes, burrowed deeper into his bed of leaves, and tried to rediscover that restful lethargy that comes just before sleep. Something large must have hit Ashega's web for the bells to ring so loudly, he thought sadly. A shame to meet her as dinner; she really is a sweet spider, otherwise.

STONE

FICTION BY
MIKE RESNICK & LYN NICHOLS

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The comfortable slow rumbling of Borl's voice as he debated philosophy—something to do with the question of *what is what?*—with another of the great ironroot trees soothed Lilliput and he yawned, willingly slipping into the beginnings of a dream.

But again the clatter of Ashega's bells jarred the quiet. Lilliput sat up, yanked once more from the arms of his dream-pooka, waiting for the noise to stop. It did, for the span of a breath. Then the bells rang again, louder and longer this time, and then again. He thought he heard Ashega's shrill voice crying out along with the bells.

"What the—?" he fumed, climbing from his bed and emerging from the hollow under the great tree's trunk. "Borl? Do you know what she's caught?" he asked, emerging from the hollow under the great tree's trunk.

The tree rattled its branches and sighed. Lilliput waited, knowing it asked the question of a tree closer to Ashega's web.

"She is saying it is stone," Borl replied in his deep, slow voice. "A creature made of stone."

"What?"

Lilliput didn't wait for the tree's answer. He raced off toward the angry sound of bells. As he ran, he noticed that others—pookas, dryads, even a niskie or two—were also running toward the sound. "What is it?" he asked Draea, secretly thrilled that he had a real reason to speak with the pretty silvery-green dryad.

"Who can know?" she asked. "Ashega is furious, though." She grinned. "Just listen to her curse!"

"Lilliput! Draea!" a female voice called from behind them. Lilliput cringed inside at the sound of Roxanne's familiar voice. He pretended he hadn't heard her.

"Do you think it's dangerous?" he asked Draea, hoping she would ignore Roxanne, too. But Draea was slowing to a walk, allowing the little pooka to catch up. Lilliput decided not to wait for his

answer. As much as he enjoyed Draea's company, it wasn't worth fending off Roxanne's attentions.

He sprinted ahead and dodged around a slow-moving oak, then skidded to a stop. He barely avoided slamming headlong into Malthe's coiled tail. The wyvern rolled an eye back to glare at him, then returned his attention to whatever the bulk of his body hid from Lilliput's view. Lilliput slipped around the side of the wyvern to see.

Caught in Ashega's web was a huge, monstrous, ugly creature. Almost completely covered with webbing, what showed was gray and rough, like granite. Ashega poised in her web above it, wringing her front claws together. The thing struggled again, threatening to tear the web. Drops of dew showered from the silken strands and the bells clanged. Ashega dashed down and spun more web onto it.

"Help me!" she cried in her shrill voice. "I cannot bite it or sting it, it is too hard!"

The creature struggled once more and then sagged against the web, as the forest folk whispered and exclaimed.

"What would you have us do, Lady Spider?" asked an oak dryad standing on the far side of the web. "It is much too big for us to battle."

"Shhh!" sang a niskie. "Eldion comes."

Those gathered by the web fell silent. Into the quiet stepped Eldion, the unicorn.

"Welcome, Eldion," said Malthe in his deep voice.

Lilliput looked from the creature to the wyvern to the unicorn, then back. It wasn't so large when compared to them, he thought. He compared it to Ashega. It was only about twice her size. Not big at all, he decided. Feeling braver now that Eldion was near, he even ventured a step closer to the web.

"Help me, Eldion," shrilled Ashega. "It will tear my web!"

Eldion stepped closer to the creature. He examined it closely, then stamped his foot and lashed his tail. "It is a golem, a creature of dark magic," he announced.

Lilliput gulped and began to edge backward, but found his way blocked by one of Malthe's legs. He looked up. Malthe shot him an amused look and moved his leg slightly, blocking Lilliput's escape. *Well*, thought Lilliput, *there are worse places to be than under a wyvern*. He didn't try to name any, though.

"What will we do with this...this golem creature?" a niskie asked Eldion. Lilliput looked at the unicorn.

In the web, the golem began to struggle again and the bells rang.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" whimpered Ashega.

Eldion tilted his horn and laid it against the side of the golem's head. The horn glowed golden in the early morning light. The golem stopped its struggles. Lilliput wondered what the unicorn had done to it.

"We must discuss this," said Eldion. "A golem has no thoughts of its own. It is a construct, an artifact." He lifted his head and spoke loudly: "Good treefolk: a clearing, if you please."

Slowly, and with much creaking and branch rattling and the

ARTWORK BY
ROBERT COPLEY

scampering of smaller folk, the trees pulled back until a large clear area was formed. Lilliput could hear the grumbling and sighing as lesser trees were forced closer together, their view and sunlight blocked by the larger, older trees. He looked for his friend, Borl, but the old ironroot evidently had not come to see the golem.

Malthe nudged him gently with a large clawed toe. Lilliput slipped out from under the wyvern and kept a cautious eye on the winged worm's tail as Malthe turned himself toward the center of the cleared circle. Overhead, Ashega moved from branch to branch, seeking her own vantage point.

Lilliput found himself beside the wyvern, and behind several folks taller than he was. He stood on tiptoe to see what was happening, but it was no use. And he couldn't hear. A niskie and a dryad were whispering behind him. He started to move away from Malthe, until he noticed Roxanne edging nearer. He squeezed closer to the wyvern's shoulder.

One of the live oaks grumbled about evil lords and fire, and an elm dryad spoke of being chased by imps. Someone else, Lilliput couldn't see who, spoke next. He jumped, trying to see, and landed on the tip of Malthe's toe.

The wyvern glared, and Lilliput started to stutter an apology. Malthe wrapped his clawed paw around Lilliput and lifted him onto his back, just behind the wings. He could see everything! And Roxanne wouldn't come up here! Perfect, he thought, grinning.

Eldion spoke again, quietly, and then a pair of pookas stepped forward. Lilliput strained to hear their soft voices—but there was a noise, a grinding sound, coming from behind the wyvern. He couldn't hear what the pooka was saying. He sighed in frustration. The noise grew louder and he turned, prepared to scold someone.

But the only thing behind Malthe was the golem in the web.

Lilliput stared at the creature. The noise was coming from *it*! He looked back at the circle of folk hoping someone else had heard too, but all attention was focused toward the center where Eldion stood. The sound came again. Lilliput leaned toward the golem. And leaned further still. Malthe twitched and shifted beneath him.

There was something familiar about that sound. It came again. *Yes!* He knew that sound, but—?

Did golems cry?

"Please," the raspy, rough voice whispered. "Can you help me?"

Lilliput started and stared. Its voice sounded like rocks rubbing together, soft yet grating. But Eldion had said golems weren't alive, so how could this one speak? The golem hiccuped and sighed.

Lilliput tapped the wyvern's side. Malthe twitched again but did not turn.

"Please?" the golem whispered.

"Help you what?" he asked the golem, licking his lips. What am I doing? he asked himself.

"Help me to free my love," the golem answered.

Lilliput stared for a moment, then tugged the edge of Malthe's wing. Malthe would know what to do. The wyvern's large head swung toward him, and a steamy hiss heated Lilliput's face.

"Stop that!" Malthe whispered. "It hurts!"

Lilliput pointed at the golem. "It talked," he said. The wyvern's jaw gaped, revealing long jagged teeth. Malthe snaked his head closer to the golem. Emboldened, Lilliput scooted forward until he sat just behind the wyvern's head.

"Help me," the golem said.

Malthe's head jerked back, almost unseating Lilliput. "Eldion!" the wyvern roared. The crowd hushed and parted as Eldion trotted to Malthe's side. "The creature speaks!" Malthe said.

Eldion turned to stare at the golem. "Help me, please," the golem said again, louder than before. There were several gasps from the crowd.

"What magic is this?" Eldion shook his mane and stamped his forefoot. "Foul wizard! I will hear none of your lies from the mouth

of this fake being!" His horn burned with an eerie red light as he lowered it toward the golem, prepared to blast the magic from it.

"Wait!"

Eldion jerked his head up and toward the interruption. The light from his horn faded.

Lilliput didn't even realize it was he who had spoken until Malthe lowered his head. Lilliput found himself even with Eldion's gaze. The unicorn's sapphire eyes nearly paralyzed him.

"Speak, Pooka."

"It...he is in love!" Lilliput stuttered, blushing red and wishing he was back in his bed. Eldion continued to stare and Lilliput felt compelled to continue. He pointed at the golem. "He told me!"

"Yes," the golem said, his gravely voice much stronger and bolder. "Please, help me win my fair Gnerdl free."

Eldion's eyes widened slightly. He dipped his horn once more toward the golem's chest. "Speak, golem, but speak only the truth. Your first untrue word will be your last." As he spoke, his horn shone silver and he pressed the tip against the golem's chest.

"My name is Kruun," the golem said. "I was created by a wizard named Gan from the granite bones of the Kanesse mountains. For many years, I was his servant and slave. I did his bidding in all things, knowing only that I must obey.

"There was a sorcerous battle, and my lord Gan sent me in to fight for him. Beside me fought a band of trolls and many other creatures summoned by Gan. It was a terrible battle against creatures strange and magical summoned by the foe. Many wereslain on both sides. My master was sorely hurt and fled to another plane when it became clear he would lose. We who had fought and lost were left for many days upon the battlefield, far from home with no way to return. I had been damaged and could not stand without falling over again.

"It was there that I met Gnerdl. She was one of the survivors among the trolls. She saw that a large piece of stone had been chipped from my head and another from my leg. With her own hands, she crushed stone and mixed it with water and the blood of one of the dead and repaired me.

"Never a more beautiful being have I seen. She healed me, and I fell in love."

Lilliput almost choked on a snort of disbelief. There was no such thing as a beautiful troll. Trolls were thick and fat, squat and warty. Surely, Eldion's horn would pierce and kill this stone monster for his lies. But the unicorn's horn continued to shine steadily, its silver gleam never wavering.

"When my lord Gan recovered from his hurts," Kruun continued, "he retrieved us. Gnerdl was returned to her home in the Shimsaw Mountains that loom just there." He jutted his chin to the east, indicating the mountains that reared above the edge of the forest. "I begged my master to bring her to me or let me go to her, but he just laughed. He said that a golem has no feelings and thus could not feel love. He is wrong! I *do* feel love! I love my Gnerdl! I did not know that I could break my bondage to him, and so I suffered in his service for many years more.

"There came another wizard and, perforce, another battle. This time Gan was victorious. I feigned my destruction and he left me where I had fallen. When all was quiet, I fled the battlefield and found my way across the world to the Shimsaw Mountains to claim my love.

"I will not recount the trials I encountered on my journey, for they are not important. When I had at last come to my Gnerdl's home, her brothers and clan would not let me near her. When I told them that I desired to marry Gnerdl, they laughed and threw boulders at me. They locked my Gnerdl away in a cave so that I could not reach her. I pleaded with them, but they only laughed and jeered. Time and again I tried to free her, but the trolls would not listen. I would not fight them when they tried to provoke me, as I did not

wish to cause them hurt, fearing to earn my Gnerdl's disfavor. Fionally they threatened to grind me into sand if I came again into their territory.

"I did not fear for myself, and so I persisted. It was then that the trolls threatened to kill Gnerdl if I did not leave. I fled in despair, not knowing how to rescue my love.

"Such has been my misery that I have wandered for days through field and forest until I blundered into this trap of yours." He shook the web lightly, jangling the bells. The golem's black eyes glistened as if filled with unshed tears. "Will you help me free my Gnerdl? Can you help me win my love free?"

Lilliput wiped his eyes and sniffed, then stole a glance at the gathered folk. Several of the dryads were weeping, and two niskies cried loudly in each other's arms. Tink blew his nose on a leaf and Tappin's eyes and nose were suspiciously red. Next to Draea, Roxanne sniffled and gave Lilliput a small, sweet smile. Lilliput wiped his eyes once more, using it as an excuse to look away. Eldion stepped away from the golem and lifted his head.

"The golem speaks true," he announced to the folk. "Tell me, golem Kruun: of what creature or beast did yon lady troll take the blood with which she patched you?"

The golem stared at the unicorn, thinking. "It was long ago, and I cannot say for sure, but I believe it was—" Kruun paused and Lilliput was sure the golem trembled "—a unicorn's blood."

Sometime during the discussion that followed, Lilliput fell asleep. He awoke once as Malthe placed him within the coils of his tail. With a sleepy smile of gratitude, he wriggled into a comfortable position and went back to sleep.

Lilliput woke again just as the sun was setting. He was uncomfortable and confused. The world was moving! He shut his eyes again, then opened them wide. With a squeak of fright, he began to struggle. He was being carried off by the golem!

"Help! Help!" he shouted. His heart pounded in his chest. He gulped and gasped for breath as terror shot through him. Suddenly he found himself sprawled on the ground. He struggled to rise but couldn't get up. Something pressed against his back, holding him down. He whimpered and buried his face in his arms, shivering.

"Are you quite done?" Malthe's familiar voice rumbled from above him. A tittering laugh sounded from his left. Lilliput slowly lifted his head from his arms as Malthe lifted him to his feet. Ashega stood to one side, while next to the golem, Roxanne hugged her sides and giggled. Cloth and web sacks hung from the golem's and wyvern's shoulders. Lilliput blushed and dusted the dirt from his clothes. He looked around and suddenly realized that he had no idea where they were.

"What is happening?" he stuttered.

"You were chosen for the quest, silly!" Roxanne answered his unvoiced question. "Kruun asked for you." Lilliput stared up at the golem and then at Malthe.

"Where are we? Why didn't you wake me? What quest?" He turned to glare at Roxanne. "What are *you* doing here?"

Roxanne stepped closer and reached over to pat Lilliput's cheek. "I volunteered," she said.

"We are in the foothills of the Shimsaw Mountains," Malthe answered. "We saw no need to wake you."

"But why me?" Lilliput stamped his foot and scowled.

"You stopped the unicorn from destroying me," Kruun answered. Lilliput jumped at the sound of the gravelly voice. "You let me tell my tale."

"Would you have preferred to stay behind?" Ashega asked.

"No—but that doesn't matter! No one asked me!" Lilliput crossed his arms over his chest and glared at them. "You should have asked me!"

"You are right. I apologize," said Kruun. "Can we go now?"

Lilliput looked up and up at the granite face of the golem. He barely came up to the golem's knee. When Lilliput was perched on Malthe's neck the golem hadn't looked so imposing. He stepped back, tripped on a rock, and sat down, hard. Roxanne laughed.

The golem waited. Lilliput thought about it. He did need to sleep, and he wouldn't have wanted to be left behind. This would be a grand adventure! He had never been out of the forest before! He looked at his companions and his gaze lingered on Roxanne. If only she wasn't here, he thought. He stood up and bowed to Kruun. "I am honored that you chose me," he said. The golem bowed in return.

"Shall we continue, then?" Malthe asked.

Kruun nodded. Without a word, he turned and marched toward the highest peak. Roxanne scrambled after him, followed by Ashega. Malthe looked at Lilliput with a raised eye ridge.

"All right, all right," Lilliput mumbled, taking a swipe at the seat of his pants. "I'm going!"

They hiked for several hours, following Kruun, moving steadily higher into the mountains. Kruun did not seem to notice obstacles in his path, pushing aside deadfall and hauling himself up and over boulders and ledges instead of going around them. Ashega and Malthe had no trouble keeping the pace, and found little that would hinder them. Ashega could climb anything, and

Malthe simply flew where he could not crawl. Roxanne and Lilliput, however, were panting from their efforts, totally exhausted, and falling behind.

It was near midnight, and they were climbing through a valley filled with shattered stone and huge boulders. The large moon shone brightly, casting everything in sharp silver and black shadows. Roxanne had fallen even farther behind. Lilliput knew he should call out to the others to slow down, but he could barely summon the energy to keep moving. The scree slipped and shifted beneath his feet, forcing him to watch every step.

Then Roxanne screamed. Lilliput turned. Roxanne was pointing to a gap between two large boulders, one hand covering her mouth. Even in the dark and from this distance, Lilliput could see that she was shuddering. He started back, moving as fast as his tired legs and the shifting rock would let him.

"Roxanne! What is—?" he started to shout, but the words froze in his throat. Behind Roxanne, only paces away, a shadow shifted. Lilliput stared. The shadow became a wolflike creature, crouching, yellow eyes gleaming. Twice as tall as Roxanne, the beast had the body of a wolf, but its head was wrong. It was too flat, more like a lion's. And the tail—it looked like a snake!

Lilliput could see the creature's muscles bunching, preparing to spring. Roxanne, still unaware, continued to stare between the boulders.

Lilliput slipped as he tried to move faster. Pain shot up his leg as he fell. He stifled a groan as he pushed himself up. The beast had heard him! Suddenly it was staring at him through its ugly yellow eyes! Lilliput's hand closed around some gravel. *I must be crazy!* he thought as he threw the handful as hard as he could.

The pebbles landed far short of their mark, only one or two bouncing close to the beast. The animal slid forward toward Lilliput on its belly, Roxanne forgotten for the moment. A cruel grin exposed long, blackened fangs. Closer and closer it came. Lilliput gulped and groped for more rocks. He could almost feel its hot breath on his face!

The beast paused, ready to spring, and Lilliput closed his eyes. *Come on, get it over with!* Suddenly there was a yelp and a clatter of stones, and Lilliput's eyes popped open.

The beast had turned away from him. Roxanne stood on a large stone, her sling spinning around her head. With a flick of her wrist, a stone shot out. The beast jumped and yelped again, then growled. Roxanne had already reloaded, and had her sling spinning again. Lilliput groped for his own sling.



A roar and a sudden blast of heat knocked Lilliput on his back. He struggled up to find a charred heap where the beast had been. Overhead, an angry Malthe flew in small circles. He roared again, and there was another blast of fire from the wyvern. Lilliput ducked as the stream of flame shot behind him. "Get away!" shouted Malthe. "There are more coming!"

Lilliput clambered to his feet, then moaned and almost fell as his damaged ankle buckled. His vision blurred with tears. Then Roxanne was beside him, steadying him, helping him to stand.

"Are you hurt badly?" she asked. "Did that monster harm you?"

Lilliput shook his head but didn't answer. He gritted his teeth and tried to walk. His ankle refused to support him and he sank back to the ground.

"By the Moons, Lilliput!" Roxanne exclaimed, kneeling beside him. She lifted his injured leg and began to remove his shoe. Lilliput hissed at the renewed pain, then gasped when he saw the blood. "Ashega! Come quickly!" she called.

There was a clattering from behind them. Roxanne whirled, her sling out and ready. Lilliput froze, then relaxed as Ashega clambered over a rock and skittered toward them. "Blood!" she shrieked. "I smell pooka blood! Is he hurt badly?"

Roxanne lowered her sling and turned back to Lilliput. For the first time, he noticed how pale she was and...were those tears in her eyes? "I don't know, Ashega," she whispered. "We'll need some web to bandage it."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Ashega agreed, moving closer. She crouched above Lilliput's leg and cut his breeches away with her sharp pincers. Lifting his leg gently, she began to spin a bandage for him. Roxanne held Lilliput's hand.

From farther up the valley came the sounds of fighting, and Malthe's roars pierced the still night air. They could hear the yelps and growls of beasts as Kruun crashed toward them. There was one last yelp and clatter, and then Kruun appeared.

Malthe flew the length of the valley one more time before settling down nearby. "They are gone for now, but we must not stay here long," the wyvern said. "They, or others like them, may return."

"I am sorry, Lilliput," Kruun said solemnly. "I should have told you of the beasts."

"You knew of them?" Roxanne demanded, rising to face the golem. "We could've been killed!"

Lilliput had never noticed how Roxanne's eyes could sparkle, nor how her hair swirled around her. *She's really kind of pretty*, he decided. *Especially now, when she's angry*. And he was very glad she wasn't directing that temper at him!

"Don't you realize that we aren't made of rocks?" She stamped her foot—Lilliput thought it was a rather nice foot—in emphasis. "Things can hurt us!"

"The pooka is right," Malthe added. "You must tell us if a creature occupies an area we are to pass through." He turned to Roxanne and Lilliput. "And from now on, you two will ride."

Ashega finished off Lilliput's bandage and lowered his leg. "There," she said proudly, stepping back to show off her work. Lilliput's leg was encased in a fat silken wrap from his toes to his knee.

"Thank you, Ashega," he said. "It doesn't hurt as much anymore." In fact it was quite numb!

Ashega danced a few steps. "I dribbled some venom on it," she told them. "But only a bit," she added as she noticed the looks the others exchanged. "It paralyzes without killing. It won't hurt him. I would never hurt a pooka!" She sniffled, and squatted down, wrapping her front four legs across her face.

Roxanne stepped up and patted one of the spider's legs. "We know, dear Ashega. You did a lovely thing, taking his pain away."

"Yes, Ashega," Lilliput added. "Thank you. It feels much better."

The spider unfolded her legs. "Really?" When the others nodded, she raised up again.

"If we may continue," Kruun said, "We have a long way to go yet." With that, the golem turned and stomped up the valley. Malthe lifted Lilliput onto his shoulders then turned to Roxanne. "Do you wish to ride me; or Ashega?"

"With Lilliput," she answered, then blushed. "I... he might get sleepy and fall, or—"

"I'm fine. Really!" Lilliput said, remembering that he wasn't supposed to like Roxanne. He liked Draea, the beautiful dryad. *How would Draea have acted*, asked a small voice in his

head. *Would she have risked herself to save you?* He didn't want to think about it, didn't want to remember that Draea rarely spoke to him, or that dryads only loved their trees. He especially didn't want to think about how wonderful Roxanne had looked as she stood atop her rock casting stones at a monster twice her size!

Malthe chuckled and placed her behind Lilliput. With a powerful leap, he launched himself into the air and flew after Kruun. Below, Lilliput could see Ashega skipping over the rocks, hurrying to catch up with the golem.

A few hours before dawn Kruun stopped. Ashega squatted beside him. They had left the rocky valley behind and climbed to the top of a ridge. Ahead of them, a narrow gorge snaked between two peaks. Malthe landed and slithered to where the golem stood waiting.

"You asked that I tell of creatures in an area," he said, turning toward the wyvern. "In this gorge are goblins. They did not bother me except to throw small sticks from a distance."

"Arrows," Malthe said. "Those sticks may not hurt you or me, but they will damage Ashega and the little ones. Is there another way?"

"No," Kruun answered. "The trolls live just beyond."

Lilliput was cold and tired and hungry, and his leg was beginning to ache again. He swayed a bit and was thankful—though he'd never admit it to anyone if they asked — for Roxanne's steadying arms around him.

"We need to rest," said Roxanne. "Why don't we camp here?"

"We are close," Kruun said.

"I'm hungry," Ashega shrieked. "If there are goblins down there," she pointed with a foreleg, "then I will feed while you rest." Without waiting, she scampered down into the gorge and disappeared.

"The pooka is right," Malthe said. "They need to rest. Kruun, you will stay and guard the little ones while I explore." He lowered them to the ground and handed Roxanne a bag. "Eat and sleep. We will continue when I return."

Lilliput watched as Malthe launched himself and flew off. Kruun turned toward them. In the dim light, and without the familiar presence of Ashega and Malthe, the golem looked bigger and more frightening than ever. Lilliput limped a few feet away. "We'll need some wood for a fire," he said.

Roxanne looked up from where she rummaged through the pack. "Kruun? Can you find some dry wood for us?" Kruun nodded and left.

"Do you think we can trust him, Roxanne?" Lilliput asked.

"Eldion trusted him. I think we can." She looked up and grinned. "Cheese! And fruit!" Lilliput limped closer and sat down.

"You were... I mean..." He waved his hand back toward the shale valley. "Thank you." He stared at his hands, embarrassed. He had been such a coward, and she had saved him!

"You were so brave!" Roxanne answered, sitting next to him and handing him some cheese and an apple. "You made the thing come after you, when it was stalking me!" She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you!"

Lilliput blushed again and studied his cheese to avoid looking at her. He took a bite of an apple. *Maybe she's not so bad*, he thought. He peeked at her. How come he had never noticed how pert her nose was?

Kruun stomped back to them and dropped several branches at their feet. Roxanne thanked him and jumped up to start a fire. As she

worked, Lilliput finished his apple and started on his cheese. "How are we going to rescue Gnerdl?" he asked Kruun.

"I do not know," Kruun replied. "Perhaps, during the day, when they are sleeping we can steal her."

"That won't work," Roxanne said. "Trolls turn to stone if the sun strikes them."

"That would be nice," Kruun answered. Lilliput thought he smiled, but couldn't be sure. "Then she would be like me."

Lilliput shook his head. "You don't understand, Kruun. She'll die if she turns to stone. She won't be like you."

"We'll have to think of something else," Roxanne said. "Maybe Malthe or Ashega will have an idea." The fire was burning nicely, and Roxanne settled back beside Lilliput with a yawn. "We need to sleep, Kruun. Will you watch over us?"

"I will watch," the golem replied.

Lilliput laid down and tried to ignore the throbbing in his leg. Roxanne dragged the pack closer and withdrew a blanket. She spread it over herself and Lilliput, snuggling beside him. Lilliput stiffened, startled.

"Malthe only left one pack," she whispered, close to his ear. His skin prickled at her closeness. It was nice. He felt her shrug. "One blanket." Lilliput smiled and relaxed. *Sometimes that wyvern is too smart*, he thought as Roxanne's warmth spread through him and his mind grew fuzzy. With a sigh, he cuddled closer to Roxanne and slept.

Malthe woke them several hours before sunset. "Ashega is waiting at the end of the ravine," he told them. "She says there are too many goblins within the pass for you to traverse it safely, so we will fly. Kruun has already left, and will rejoin us at sun's setting."

"Won't the goblins bother him?" Lilliput asked.

"No," Malthe answered. "Their arrows are harmless to him, and goblins are too cowardly to attack him bodily. He will pass through without harm."

Roxanne tossed Lilliput an apple. "Is there water nearby, Malthe?" she asked.

"Yes, there." He pointed toward a peak to the north of the ravine. "There is a lake below the crest."

"Can we stop there? I really would like to bathe!"

Lilliput laughed and clambered to his feet. Gingerly, he tested his ankle. It still throbbed and ached, but he could walk on it. He took a bite of apple and wiped at the juice that dribbled down his chin. "Females!" he said.

Roxanne turned toward him, hands on her hips. "You could use a bath, too, Lilliput. You're dirty all over!" Lilliput looked down at himself and ran a sticky hand through his hair. She was right. He shrugged and began to fold the blanket.

"We will stop at the lake," Malthe said. Lilliput ignored the



wyvern's wink and grin as he stuffed the blanket into the pack and tied it closed. Roxanne kicked dirt over the embers of their fire.

"I guess we're ready," she said, approaching Malthe. "Lilliput, how's your leg?"

"The bandage itches." He limped to the wyvern. Malthe lifted him and set him between his wings. Lilliput secured the pack as Malthe placed Roxanne behind him. Then they were off, flying high on the thermals.

They didn't stay long at the lake, but all three enjoyed their baths. After setting Roxanne and Lilliput down and removing the packs, Malthe soared high and dove into the water. Roxanne and Lilliput both laughed as the wyvern splashed and rolled like an otter. His antics sent waves racing toward them, soaking them both. Roxanne scrubbed Lilliput's hair and dunked him to rinse it. He rose, sputtering, and dunked her in return. Laughing and feeling refreshed after an hour's play, the trio took off to join Ashega and wait for Kruun. Tonight, if all went well, they would free Gnerdl from her clan.

Ashega was sleeping in a small web strung between two tall pines when Malthe landed at the meeting place. She woke briefly, welcomed them, then closed her eyes once more. Lilliput gathered wood, which Malthe lit with a small puff. Roxanne sliced bread and cheese, and laid out apples and dandelion leaves. Then, with a little shout, she scampered under the trees where Ashega nested.

"Look, Lilliput!" she called. "Pine cones. With nuts!" Lilliput joined her and they quickly gathered as many as they could carry.

They feasted and rested, chatting softly as the sun slipped toward the horizon. Kruun joined them just as the first stars began to appear in the clear sky. Ashega, awakened by the golem's noisy approach, joined them on the ground.

"What do we do now?" Roxanne asked. "How do we get to Gnerdl?" Everyone looked expectantly at Kruun. The golem turned away from them and stared toward the east, toward the rocky hillside where the trolls lived.

"I did not tell all of the truth when Eldion questioned me," he said, his gravel voice grating more than usual. "I did not say that the brothers and cousins of my Gnerdl kept me away because she requested it." He turned to look at them. "I do not think she returns my love."

"You mean you want us to kidnap her?" Lilliput asked. "And what are we supposed to do once we've got her?"

"I will woo her," Kruun said.

"What really happened, Kruun?" Roxanne asked. "Why did she refuse you?" The golem sighed and looked at each of them.

"I do not know what I did wrong," he said. "When I first arrived, Gnerdl seemed pleased to see me again. She stood behind her brothers, smiling and waving. When I spoke of marriage, she dashed into the cave. That was when the other trolls began to throw rocks and hit me with sticks. I feared I would harm them, and so I retreated.

"Each night, I would approach and beg to see my Gnerdl. Each night, the trolls would shout and jeer and attack, and I would retreat. They said if I were such a coward, they would kill Gnerdl before they allowed her to leave with me."

Kruun stared off into the distance. "Before I was damaged and repaired by Gnerdl and infected with the unicorn's blood, I felt nothing. I only did what Gan directed. Had I known how much I could hurt inside, I would have stopped her." He turned toward them. "But I did not, and now I love. I love Gnerdl."

Roxanne got up and hugged the golem's leg. Ashega wept softly. Malthe uncoiled his tail. "When I wish to mate," he said, "I

follow the female until she tires. Then I wrap myself around her so that she cannot escape. I stay with her until she lays the eggs and seals the cave. But we do not stay together. After the eggs are laid, I return home. Our ways are different from other creatures."

"My mate must be brave," Ashega said. "He must approach me, knowing that I will kill him after we have mated. He must show no fear, or I will kill him *without* the mating. We, too, are different from the others of the forest. They do not eat their worthy males."

Lilliput looked at Roxanne. He thought of Draea. If he courted Draea as Kruun had courted Gnerdl, it would do no good. Draea would never love anyone other than her tree. Roxanne, though, would be thrilled. The thought warmed him and he blushed. But trolls are different. He tried to imagine what a troll would find romantic and worthy. An idea crept into his mind. "I've got it!" he shouted at last.

"What, Lilliput?" Roxanne asked.

"I know what Kruun did wrong!"

Kruun stomped into the trolls' camp and called Gnerdl's name. Ashega and Malthe stayed hidden behind an outcropping of stone. Roxanne and Lilliput were high in trees overlooking the camp. The trolls jumped to their feet, grabbing stones and branches. One troll dashed into a cave. Gnerdl, Lilliput thought.

"I have come for Gnerdl!" Kruun shouted. "I will not leave without her!" The trolls laughed and shouted insults and curses that made Lilliput blush. One of them threw a stone. Kruun swatted it away and marched toward them. Three trolls rushed at him, hitting him with branches and fists. Kruun pushed them aside, sending them sprawling into the dirt. He continued toward the cave, calling for Gnerdl.

He was almost to the cave mouth when the trolls attacked again, toppling Kruun. He fell with a crash. Malthe and Ashega raced to his aid. Malthe shot fearsome goutts of fire over their heads, and Ashega threw ropes of sticky web. From the safety of their hiding places, Lilliput and Roxanne hurled sharp pebbles from their slings.

Pandemonium and chaos raged in the camp. The trolls didn't know which way to attack. Kruun heaved himself to his feet, tossing trolls left and right. Malthe blasted fire and roared. Ashega skipped and skittered, trapping trolls in her sticky, silken webs. The pebbles Lilliput and Roxanne shot kept the trolls spinning and stumbling.

Kruun entered the cave, then emerged moments later with a female troll over his shoulder. She kicked and pounded and screamed, but Lilliput could see that she was smiling. Ashega and Malthe guarded his retreat. Soon, they were clear of the camp. The trolls did not try to follow them.

"Look, Lilliput!" Roxanne whispered as they waited for Ashega to fetch them from their hiding place. She pointed toward the camp. Lilliput looked. The trolls were laughing and slapping each other on the back, as if they had just shared a great joke. Lilliput smiled.

"It worked," he sighed. "I was right. They are a fierce race who wanted him to win her as well as woo her." He reached for Roxanne's hand. "I think I'll try a different approach with you, though." He smiled and kissed her hand.

"Oh, Lilliput," Roxanne grinned, as she pulled her hand away and wrapped her arms around his neck, snuggling closer. "You don't have to win me. I've always loved you." Lilliput hugged her back and kissed her. Neither of them heard Ashega climb the tree until she giggled.

"It's time to go home," the spider said. ▲

SHORT

HEARING GUNSHOTS

Gunshots rang out, piercing the night. Paul, startled from sleep, stumbled from his couch in front of the TV in his living room. Slimy drool dripped from his lower lip, staining his shirt. Smiling, he wiped his lip and turned off the television.

Glancing at the clock he saw it was 6:30 P.M. He only had a half an hour before Lucy arrived, which meant he had to hurry. Lettuce flew in the salad spinner, the microwave buzzed as the thawing steaks popped and sputtered as they revived from their deep sleep. Dirty place-mats were turned upside down, hair was brushed and sprayed as the vacuum hummed across the floor.

Paul heard Lucy's car outside. Then he remembered the most important thing, entertainment. He ran to the phone, lifting the receiver as he dialed. Paul could see Lucy coming up the walkway...it was ringing...Lucy was now standing in front of the bay window. She was dressed in an autumn gold sun dress which was covered with flowers blooming in exotic colors. Her hair flowed across her shoulders in trailing wisps that entranced Paul.

"Hello! Hello!" The person on the other end of the phone seemed irritated. "Listen is...?"

The voice broke Paul's concentration and he stared at the barbecue outside the kitchen window. Smoke poured from its lid. Paul frowned.

Then there were gunshots. There was screaming and a distinctive male voice yelling. Paul pulled the phone away from his ear, as if hearing the gunshots would somehow hurt him. The voice on the other end did not return.

Suddenly Paul noticed the intense knocking on the front door and the sharp sound of Lucy's voice. "Paul, what are you up to? I had a really hard day and I'm not in the mood for your crap. Let me in!"

Slamming the receiver back into place, Paul darted across the kitchen, slipping on a piece of sliced cucumber that he had dropped in his pre-date-food-preparation-frenzy. He hit the ground hard, slamming his head on the tiled floor.

Blood poured from a small gash above his left eye as he opened the door and greeted Lucy. "Hi, come'on in. I got food cooking." He turned and darted back into the kitchen, leaving Lucy standing open mouthed in the doorway.

Paul lifted the phone and dialed the police. He listened intently as the prerecorded message droned in his ear. "Please stay on the line. An officer will be with you as soon as possible." Paul looked around frantically, cursing. The

people at the store could be dead already. They were clearly being robbed and there was nothing he could do except wait.

Lucy crept across the foyer, glancing in the living room, her eyes searching for Paul. Hearing his cursing, she probed the kitchen door with the tip of her finger and it swung open.

"Paul? What's going on? What happened to your head?"

"Sshhh," Paul hissed at her, "I'm trying to get the police!" Lucy looked at him suspiciously.

Finally, she sat at the kitchen table and asked, "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Paul didn't answer. Blood trickled down his forehead into his eye, stinging it, blurring his vision.

"Hello, this is officer Gray. How may I help you?" The woman's voice startled Paul, as if he didn't remember being on the phone. For a moment he stammered, then paused. "Hello?"

"Yes, I'd like to report a robbery in progress." Lucy's eyes flashed as she looked about the house suddenly afraid.

"Where are you and is the perpetrator armed?" The officer sounded uninterested.

"I'm home and yes the robber is armed! I heard the damn gunshots over the phone and a man yelling for money." Paul's voice was tense. Lucy relaxed noticeably as she heard what had happened.

"How long ago was this?" asked the officer.

"About two or three minutes ago." Lucy rose and went over to the sink, drawing a glass of water and drinking it with one long extended swallow. Paul gave his name and address and the address of the store and hung up the phone. He hoped the police would get there in time.

Officer Daly burst through the front door of Carl's Video Emporium, sending several startled customers lunging for the floor. Daly pulled up his gun, moving it slowly in a wide arc as he scanned for the perp. Gunshots rang out, the stores surround sound causing Daly to cock the gun's hammer. Slowly Daly holstered his gun and shook his head as the store clerk raised his hands in fright and a small TV nestled in a corner above the counter revealed Dirty Harry saving the day. ▲

by Ray Romanov

SHORTS

TWELVE OFFERINGS

1

The people came. The bears watched them come. The people left. The bears watched them go.

The people, being somewhat less observant than bears, believed they were alone in the vast, dark forest.

2

The ground was emptier before the people came. They had a strange habit of sleeping in the dirt. Like us, the bears thought, in the Winter. But come Spring, though the bears waited patiently for the people to reemerge, they remained below ground.

Quiet.

Very quiet.

Of course, a pessimist would have given up on the below-ground people.

But, as everyone knows, bears are optimists.

They went on waiting.

3

The village was small, not shown on any map, and very old. Not as old as the bears, but still quite old. The oldest living man in the village had amassed ninety-seven years. Through patience or good luck, he had become a curiosity. His fellow villagers waited, not unkindly, for him to go to sleep one night and wake up dead. A long life, they knew, was not always pleasant. Old age had gnarled him like a wind-battered tree that has grown twisted and warped. Even when the wind lets up, the tree still holds its shape.

They went on waiting for him to die. They dug a hole in the burial grounds just after his ninety-seventh birthday and waited.

4

The bears came upon something extraordinary one morning: a hole with fresh dirt piled up around it. At last! The below-ground people had finally decided to come out of hibernation.

The bears waited, sometimes all night, to witness such a thing for themselves.

5

People need to believe in something. Something bigger than themselves. Something that makes death less of a let down after life.

So when at last the Wise Old Man stopped breathing one

mid-afternoon, six men came into his house, swathed him in simple but elegant clothes, and toted him up to the predestined burial site. With them they brought bowls of food (gladly donated despite the famine that was creeping into the gaunt faces of the villagers) to lay at the old man's burial place. The spirit-guardians that guided the souls of the dead to rest needed nourishment.

6

The bears were surprised to find the food near one of the below-ground people's resting place. The people must have known about the bears, after all. The bears were impressed. The people had never let on that they knew; usually when people found that bears lived nearby, they wanted to kill the bears. These people were different, however. They were respectful.

The bears would keep watch over the below-ground people. The food was obviously meant as payment.

7

An old woman from the village found twelve empty bowls near the grave of the Wise Old Man. When she asked the new Wise Old Man (who was only sixty-seven, but still the oldest man they could find) about it, he remarked after a moment of pondering that the old Wise Old Man's spirit-guardians were taking care of the grave. They needed sustenance. Simple. That's why they put the food out in the first place. Should anyone be surprised at the appetite of spirits? After going so long without earthly nourishment, surely they were hungry.

The villagers prepared more food. A party of young women were sent deep into the forest to search for berries and tubers. They traveled farther than they had ever gone before. They brought back a wealth of mushrooms and roots, tender bark and rare fruits. The villagers kept some for themselves, but left most of it to the guardians in the woods.

8

The bears had never tasted such delicacies! Each time they went to the resting place, they found more and more food. They took this as a sign to watch over all the below-ground people, not just the one.

by Tippi N. Blevins

SHORT

When the hungry wolves came, like angular gray ghosts, the bears would not let them dig up the below-ground people. The wolves howled and growled and snarled. Still, the bears remained committed. The wolves offered to let the bears share in the feast. The bears remarked on the barbarism of wolves and held their ground.

The wolves eventually moved on.

9

Many years went by. The bears were worried at first that they would not be able to watch the below-ground people when they themselves went below ground. They solved this dilemma by taking turns. First Strong-Smelling-Breath would watch the below-ground people, then Angry-Skunk-in-Fur. Even old Stinking-No-Teeth, the oldest bear of them all, had his turn. The other bears were sad to find him dead come Spring time. But not too sad; he had lived a long life and had eaten many god things. His naked gums were evidence of that.

Stinking-No-Teeth's body was dragged to the river and pushed in. It floated downstream like a furred black island.

The bears went on waiting for the below-ground people to emerge from hibernation. They must, the bears knew, be very eager to see the sun again.

10

The bears waited for ten generations; the people must have been very tired when they went below ground all those years before. The bears began to worry. How could anyone live for that long without eating? Perhaps the people were ill. Perhaps they had lost their way below ground. The bears were very worried, indeed.

They waited until very late in Spring—by then it was almost Summertime—and then began to dig up the below-ground people. If the people were indeed lost, as the bears believed, then they would help them find their way. They began with the oldest sleeping places; surely by now the below-ground person sleeping there would be extremely grateful to see the light again.

The bears dug.

They dug some more.

They found only bones, and gasped. Giant paws still damp with digging, they pondered the situation. They smelled the bones, which didn't smell at all. The bones were very old. The below-ground person had been dead a long time.

The bears felt bad about this turn of events. They had been fed for ten generations to watch over the below-ground people, and they had failed.

Just to be sure, the bears dug up another, and then another sleeping place. They found only bones. Some of

them smelled like old Stinking-No-Teeth's rotted breath. The bears very carefully put the bones back and covered them once again with dirt.

Ashamed and saddened, the bears left the forest.

11

The villagers were horrified to find the food bowls untouched except for a few ants. Why hadn't the spirit-guardians accepted the food? The Wise Old Woman (by now, the village had become very modern and no longer believed that only men could be both old and wise at the same time) said they had angered the spirit-guardians.

What had they done?

No one knew. Fingers were pointed, of course. Andre the Pot-Maker had been drawing lewd designs on the earthenware he fired. Liza the Cloth-Weaver had been known to use inferior wool and charged exorbitant prices. And Elmo the Lazy did nothing whatsoever.

The villagers gathered up their belongings and moved for the first time in a hundred generations. The spirits had abandoned them. This was no longer their home.

12

No bears and now no villagers live in the forest or in the village. In fact, only the spirits remained. They wondered why the bears had abandoned them. ▲

Heatwave

-Lyn Lifshin

tar blisters.

Dragon flies

on the water.

Circles spreading

across the brown skin

of the lake. Hot

grass wind, roses.

The petals, words

I didn't say as if

they could drift

north, into her

blood, carry light

to her

SHORTS

THE LAST IRS AGENT

Given their role in the certainty of Death and Taxes, one wouldn't expect the Internal Revenue Service to simply vanish. Jesse Starr certainly didn't when he went to bed that last day of March.

He awoke the next morning in his comfortable bed in the comfortable D.C. suburb of Tysons Corner, relaxed by the birdsongs of Spring and the hint of cherry blossoms beyond the shades. Until he remembered he was taking today off, and why: Income Taxes. His smile sagged. He braced himself to be crabby to his wife, Jo Oakes, knowing sometime today she'd be reminding him that, here he was again, waiting until April to get started, and why didn't he just do it all in February when the W-2's and 1099's had dribbled in? He'd try not to be cranky about it, but he knew how the day would go... As fun as a self-inflicted root canal, just like every other year. Or so he thought.

"Jo, honey, have you seen the instruction book for the 4562? You know, the Depreciation and Amortization form?" Only ten A.M. and already stymied. Was office furniture depreciated over five years or seven? He couldn't remember, and last year he'd done both: Five on the computer he never used and seven on the new couch in the rental unit. The one the tenants promptly spilled blueberries on. Roger next door, the CPA, he'd know. "Jo, what's Roger's number?" he yelled from the kids' bedroom that now served as an office.

"They're in Grand Cayman this week," she shouted from the living room.

He sighed. Roger would probably just tell him to "expense it" anyway—but taking it all this year, being the easy way out, must mean he was being cheated by the IRS. Besides, depreciation was as American as voting on Tuesdays.

Damnation! He'd have to call the IRS. Always a joy.

"Your estimated waiting time is three minutes; thank you for letting us serve you." He'd heard that for the last half-hour.

Alternatives, alternatives. The library didn't carry any forms or instructions beyond the bare essentials. A self-help book? Feh, for weaklings. Call an accountant? Never: Accountants, like lawyers, were only for desperate or pathetic people. The government was by the people, for the people, and by God he was a people. If he couldn't figure out his own taxes, something was wrong with America. He hung up. There was only one way out.

"Jo, I've got to run down to that temporary IRS office in that little mall down Leesburg Pike to pick up a booklet. I'll be back in an hour."

With the car's windows down to enjoy the warm, clear day, he'd almost returned to a feeling of peace. Driving gave him a chance to distance himself from the drudgery of taxes and focus on their purpose. Sure, he grumbled about taxes like everyone else; it was socially acceptable. When it came down to it, though, he felt proud to pay them. It wasn't just that he understood their necessity, but he felt good knowing that they corrected various social injustices and were as complex as they were only because they were truly fair. Granted, he couldn't fathom all the reasons *why* they were so convoluted that no single human could grasp them all, but he had faith in the function of the government; compromises never please everybody. Best damned country in the world, he thought.

"Hours: 10-4," read the sign in the window of the mini-mall pad that the IRS had begun renting during tax season as a show of how service oriented they really were. The national sales tax scare, and the personnel cuts at the IRS that would have entailed, had definitely made them more consumer-friendly. Except that it was eleven A.M., and the "Closed" sign hung on the door.

Jesse peered in; there seemed to be a light on in back, and—was that a shadow he saw move across the floor? He pounded on the glass. "Hey, anyone there?"

No reply. He pounded again. The shadow stood very still.

His pride in paying taxes wilting, he trudged to the car. The only other IRS office he knew of was their main administrative headquarters, downtown on the Mall.

Jesse was almost hot by the time he hiked from the parking slot to their building at 12th and Constitution. Out front a crowd of onlookers and police ogled another crowd of cameras and lights and glamorous faces, mingled with what must be radio and newspaper reporters—identifiable by their frumpier attire, notepads and recorders. "Hey, what's going on," he asked, after muscling his way past the barricade to one of the film crew.

"What, you been in a cave all morning, man? They're gone. The whole freakin' IRS. From the commissioner to the phone clerks—nobody showed up for work anywhere

by Andrew Burt

SHORT

in the country. 'Scuse me, my guy's up next for a shot." The man slithered into the throng.

"Press pass?" asked a policewoman who'd come over. "You'll have to move behind the line," she said in reply to his dumbfounded look, and ushered him toward the spectators.

No, this kind of thing didn't happen, he thought, shuffling back to his car. But once inside, the radio confirmed the absurd. "...continuing our special report. The President is at a loss to explain the disappearance of the tens of thousands of Internal Revenue Service staff. For more on this—" he listened to it racing all the way to the mini-mall where he'd seen the shadow. Perhaps they hadn't *all* vanished.

The light was still on, a hopeful sign. He drove around to the receiving docks and employee entrances. Other than a wino sprawled near the IRS office's back door, the alley was deserted. Jesse tried the door—locked—then pounded on it. "I know you're in there. Come out! I just want to talk," he added, plaintively.

Silence.

"Hey, buddy," he addressed the wino. "Have you seen anyone come out of there?" He moved to nudge the man with a foot, the smell of urine and stale alcohol breath assaulting him. "Hey—"

Then Jesse noticed that under the threadbare overcoat was a freshly pressed pair of trousers. And tucked behind him against the wall, his shoes were polished wingtips that had never lived a day on the street. He shook the man awake. "You, where's the man who was inside there? The man who gave you these clothes? The man who gave you these clothes?" He plucked at the Oxford pin-stripe shirt hiding beneath the coat.

"Nryer whl grbl," the man grumbled, smacking his lips and remaining asleep.

Jesse turned as a high-pitched whine filled the air for a moment, like an anorexic doorbell. Behind him a

ten-foot-to-a-side pyramid of piano-key blackness had appeared, with an eye of brilliant light shining near the top. The whiny gong sounded again, as if summoning wraiths home to the underworld after a night of rascality.

He heard a shuffle of cloth as the wino rose behind him, shedding the foul overcoat and looking very much the dapper IRS agent.

"Oh no you don't," Jesse grabbed the man by the arm as he tried to make for the portal. "Not without answering some questions first."

The man sighed. "Very well. I suppose we should tell *someone*. If you must know, we're from the planet Fubar, over there," he said, pointing roughly under Jesse's car. "You Earthlings probably think it's bad timing to pull the plug on this income tax stunt right now, but, sorry, it's been well over a hundred years and we just couldn't keep from laughing any longer. It's like...oh, I can't remember what you humans call it." He pulled from Jesse's grip. "Nevermind. Got to go now!"

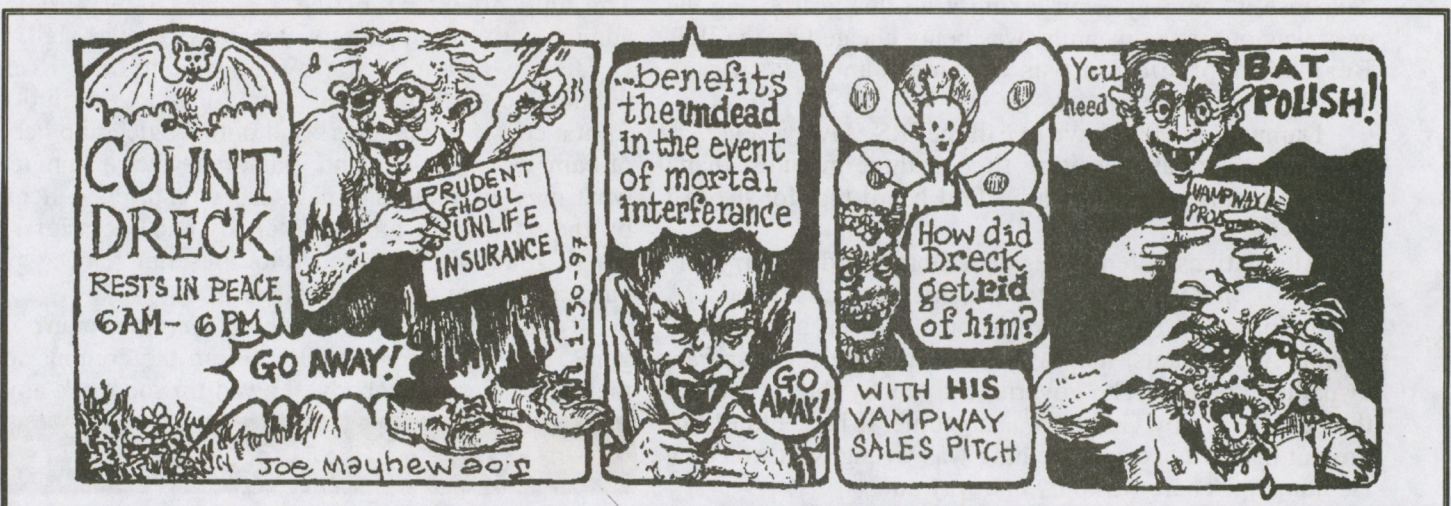
He dashed for the portal, his body vanishing as he entered. Then the portal itself rolled up and was gone.

Jesse shook his head, ambled to the car, and drove home.

"Guess what?" Jo greeted him at the door. "I found it!" She held the Form 4642 instruction booklet in her hands. It was buried in with all those receipts you wanted me to sort."

Jesse sighed. "Thanks, but, Roger was probably right. I'll just expense the new desk. Besides," he added with a grin, "I have a feeling the tax laws are going to change a *lot* this year."

Suddenly he heard a whiny gong, and sure enough, behind them was the inky portal with the gleaming eye. "Oh, I remember now what you call it," the voice of the last IRS agent boomed out. "April Fool's!" ▲



SHORTS

...AND OUT

It was the cop's own fault, Nick angrily told himself. Up until then, everything had gone just great. The fat guy behind the counter was too scared to yell for help; all he could do was stutter, "D-don't shoot! D-d-d-don't shoot me!" and there was no need to hurt him. He was so eager to empty the register, it was comical.

But then the stupid flatfoot had to walk in.

Of course, a lone cop was no big problem. Nick had killed twice before while sticking up convenience stores, and a guy learned from experience. The idiot flatfoot was dead before he got his gun out, and in thirty seconds Nick was out of there with the register money and a couple packs of cigarettes he snatched on his way to the door. A minute later he was half a block away, tearing off his stocking mask and stuffing it into his pocket as he sprinted down the steps into the subway.

Reaching the platform, he looked at the watch on his wrist—a watch he had lifted from one of the two people he'd killed before. Five after midnight. Except for him the station was deserted, which made it kind of spooky. There would be a train along pretty soon, though.

It came roaring out of the tube that very moment, as if his thinking had conjured it up. The doors hummed open. He stepped into a car full of silent people, found an empty seat—surprisingly, for that hour, there was only one—and slumped into it with a grunt of relief.

He was safe now. The store guy hadn't seen him without the mask. He'd kept it on until he reached the subway. No one would ever know who killed the cop.

Just like the last two times he'd had to kill someone, he thought. He really was lucky.

As the train rolled on through the tube, he looked around. No one was paying him any attention. Neat. He'd skip the next two stations and get off at the third, within walking distance of where he lived alone in his crummy third-floor walkup. One of these days he'd hit the jackpot and be able

to move into something better. A guy just had to keep trying.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the car was half empty. He must have dozed through a stop.

Next time he opened his eyes, he was the only one left. Must have dozed through *another* stop, for Pete's sake. What was the matter with him? Hey, stupid, he told himself, stay awake or you'll go past your station!

He forced his eyes to stay open.

The train roared on. And on.

For half an hour, an hour, without stopping.

What the hell was happening?

He got up out of his seat and walked forward, past all those empty seats, to the front of the car. Funny, he could see into the car ahead, and that, too, was empty. And the car in front of that—he could see into that one and *it* was empty. He could even see the man at the train's controls as if, somehow, the train was made of something unreal.

The guy didn't look real, either. He should be wearing a uniform but was dressed, instead, in a long, black cloak.

Suddenly the fellow turned his head, as if he knew he was being stared at, and Nick got a look at his face.

It wasn't a face. It was like some kind of death-mask a kid might put on for Hallowe'en.

As the train roared on through the night, Nick sank onto a seat and sat there staring into space, trying to think.

There'd been a law passed a while ago, he suddenly remembered. The "three strikes law," they called it. Three strikes and you're out. But they had to catch you, and he hadn't been caught!

Out where?

He began to shake all over, and then to cry.

The train roared on. ▲

by Hugh B. Cave

--- NEW FROM SPACE AND TIME PRESS ---

ANIMATED OBJECTS

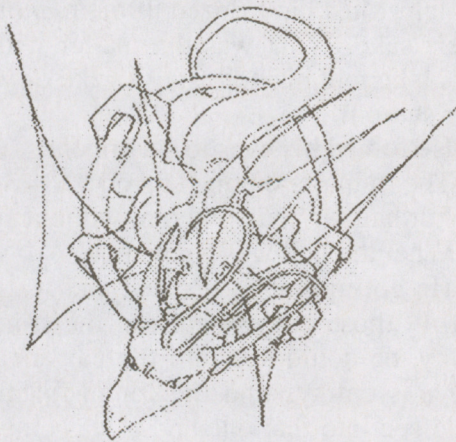
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WHY STARGAZERS SHOULDN'T BE
ASTRONAUTS

Climbing toward the rising moon,
he fell in love and lost his breath.
He tumbled earthbound in a swoon,
and there met his watery death.

FANTASY OF THE EVERYDAY

At the John Foster Post Office,
three old men stand in a corner,
cigar smoke puffing
from wide nostrils
like the steamy breath
of ancient dragons.
Their eyes pass over me:
What do we have here...
A fair maiden?
Or is she a bewitching siren?
Maybe a bit of both.
I do not need rescuing,
but when a nice young man
in a blue uniform
opens the door for me,
I call him my
knight in shining armor
and slip past the dragons
with a smile.

RAIN

The ravenous sky
devours the bones
of clouds,
leaving only rain,
the wet souls of them.

MOONSWIMMING

I leave the windows open,
and move the bookcase to another room.

I lie awake in my bed,
floating as in a soundless sea,
and watch bright squares of light
move across my walls
like illuminated glaciers.

When clouds make them softer,
give them fewer hard edges,
they drift like lunar dolphins
from corner to corner,
searching for the open ocean depths.

Shadows like mollusks and medusas
move with me through the ink;
I forget to care what terrestrial objects
cast them.

At these times I feel myself
traveling with them,
swimming in this homemade aquarium.

How can I care
when my body is flecked with stars?

In this graceful darkness
I am slick as acrobatic marine life.
Otherwise chained by hands and feet
and concepts of walking,

I am free at these times
to explore space,
to swim with the moon in her window-water,
and to forget that I never learned
to breathe anything
but air.

A POET PONDERES THE PLANET

Won't someone out there tell me please
What made the Earth and her azure seas?
Were we flung from some colossal sneeze
To drift wayward along a solar breeze?
Or were we dreamt in someone's fantasies
To soothe some deity's lonely miseries?
Were we *meant* to spawn so many fallacies,
Or mere superstitious inconsistencies?
Are we alone among a million galaxies,
Or do we wage cosmic sibling rivalries?
Is this a planet or a marble, please?
A place of plenty or a den of disease?
Perhaps a motel for randy birds and bees,
Or some alien's Sunday TV mysteries.
Is it none of the above or all of these?
Do we know more of facts than hypotheses?
What, if any, are the certainties?
Well...

We make damn good rhyming dictionaries.

Steve Hamilton hails from upstate New York where he lives with his wife, Julia, and his one-year-old son, Nicholas. "The Silence" marks Steve's first fiction sale.

The Silence

Do you really want me to tell you what happened? You want the real story? All right, then. This is how it's going to work. I'm going to tell you this story once, and then I'm never going to tell it again. You got that? I'm going to tell it to you straight through. I don't want you to interrupt me. Even when I get to the part where you might not believe what I'm saying, I just want you to sit there and listen. I want to tell it to you and get it off my chest once and for all, and then I never want to hear about it again. We got a deal?

It all starts three years ago. I'd been off the force a couple years, after I took that bullet in my hip. I was doing some security work, collecting the disability, you know, just sitting around on my butt most of the time. I really hated it. And I was driving my wife crazy.

I get a call from my buddy Sal. We were in the service together. Turns out he's gotten into local politics since then, and he had just gotten himself elected mayor of this little town called High Falls. It's a couple hours north of here, way up in the woods, middle of nowhere. You probably never even heard of it.

Anyway, he's the mayor, and he wants me to move up there and be the constable. That's how small the place is. They don't even have a police chief. The mayor just appoints the constable.

So the wife and I go up there to look around. She loves the place, and I'm getting sick of being a security guard, so we say, what the heck. We made the move. They had about eight or nine policemen full time, most of them good guys. A couple I wouldn't have hired if it were up to me, but not so bad that they were going to be a problem.

I'm on the job about a year. It's pretty quiet most of the time. A couple break-ins, a marijuana bust, nothing much else. Sal's kid Tony would tear around in his truck sometimes, thinking he could do anything he wanted to do because his father was the mayor, but aside from him I really didn't have anyone making my life miserable. Not like when I was down here in the City. High Falls was a really nice little town. That's a quaint name for a town, isn't it? That's just the kind of place it was. Real quaint.

Most days, I'd have breakfast at the diner. Not that I didn't want to eat at home. It's just a good idea to get out and see the townspeople every day, and everyone seemed to stop in at the diner on the

by Steve Hamilton

Illustrated by Darren Cerone

way to work. So I'd just sit there for a while with my paper, say hello to everyone. You know, keep in touch.

It was a hot July, I remember that. I was in the diner one morning, and I noticed a man sitting at one of the tables. He was maybe 35 or so, tall, kind of thin. I was pretty sure he didn't live in town. I had certainly never seen him before. He caught my eye because he was taking up a whole table to himself. The diner was always packed in the morning, and people who were there by themselves were naturally expected to sit on one of the stools at the counter. But he was just sitting there by himself, taking up a whole table. So right away I knew he didn't have any manners. He was still sitting there when I left.

I went into the station and did my usual routine. Read the mail, checked the messages. I was usually there by myself most of the day. I had a phone, of course, and a radio there on my desk so I could keep in touch with the officers on duty. When I had first started on the job, they'd always be calling me every hour just to check in until I finally said to them, "Hey, you don't have to keep calling in if nothing is happening. Just go on about your business and let me know if you need anything." So they finally got used to that, and I'm sure they appreciated it that I trusted them enough that they didn't have to call me on the radio every time they used the bathroom.

I sat there finishing the newspaper and doing whatever odds and ends I had to do. When I looked up, it was lunchtime. I hadn't gotten any calls on the radio, and I don't think the phone even rang once the whole morning. But like I said, it was a quiet town. Some days were like that.

I went back to the diner for lunch. The stranger was still there, sitting at the table. Jenny, one of the regular waitresses, seemed a little on edge when she served me, so I asked her what was up.

"It's that guy at the table over there," she said. "He's been here since this morning."

"Yeah?"

"I don't know. He keeps looking at me. He's giving me the creeps."

"Probably lonely," I said. "But give me a call if he does anything else."

"I'm sure he's harmless," she said. "Like you say, he's probably just lonely."

I went back to the station for the rest of the afternoon. I found myself getting sort of bored and restless until I finally realized that I still hadn't gotten any calls on the radio. I wondered if maybe the radio was broken, so I tested it. "Dave, are you out there?"

"Right here, Chief," he said. He always called me Chief, because it just didn't sound right to call me Constable.

"Everything okay? I haven't heard from you today."

"I'm out by the highway, Chief. Nothing happening."

"Okay, just checking."

I went home that night. I swear there wasn't one call all day long. But heck, I figured it was just a fluke. Next day, I was back at the diner in the morning, and there was the stranger, sitting at the same table.

"I see your friend is back," I said to Jenny.

"He was here when I got in at 6:00 a.m.," she said. "He's been watching me all morning. It's really starting to get to me."

"Maybe I'll have a word with him," I said. I went over to his table and asked him if I could have the seat across from him. As soon as he looked at me, an alarm went off in the back of my head. It was the same alarm that would go off three or four times a day when I was in the City.

"Sorry to bother you, Sir," I said to him, "but Jenny here tells me that you've been staring at her all morning."

"I'm sorry, Officer," he said. His eyes seemed to look right through me. "I didn't mean to make her uncomfortable. She's a striking woman, that's all. Very striking, don't you agree? Please tell her I'm sorry. I won't do it, again. I'm very sorry, Officer."

It didn't sound like he was being insincere with his apologies, but there was still something not quite right about the way he was talking to me. It sounded like he was reading me a line off a cue card.

"All right, then," I said. I didn't know what else to say to him. I just got up and left.

I sat in the station all morning again, and I'll be damned if I didn't get one single call. "Are you out there, Dave?" I said into the microphone.

"Right here, Chief. Something wrong?"

"No, just checking in. I hadn't heard from you yet today."

"Over by the highway again, checking speed."

"Gotcha. Jim, you out there?"

"Right here, Chief, cruising Main."

"Fine, fine. Just checking."

When I went to the diner for lunch, the stranger was gone. "Look what he left for a tip," Jenny said. She showed me a fifty dollar bill.

"Not bad," I said. "Kind of makes me feel bad, though. I only leave you a dollar."

"For fifty bucks he can stare at me all he wants," she said.

I didn't sleep very well that night. My hip was hurting me, which usually happened when it was going to rain. But the skies were clear. I got up and went outside and looked at all the stars.

When I went back to the diner again the next morning, the stranger was back at his table. He gave me a little wave when I came in.

"He's back, I see," I said to Jenny.

"Yeah, he apologized for yesterday," she said. "He said he couldn't help but stare at me, because I reminded him of a girl he used to be in love with. That's why he left me the fifty, said he was sorry he made me feel uncomfortable."

"Well, just be careful," I said.

"Ah, he's all right," she said. "Just a little weird."

"I don't know," I said. Whenever I looked at him, that little alarm kept going off. "Just be careful."

Dave was waiting at the station when I got there. He had his radar gun in his hand. "I think it's broken," he said. "All day yesterday, it seemed to be stuck."

"What do you mean?" I said. I took it from him and examined it.

"Every car I shot, it kept saying 54 or 55."

"Well, did the cars seem to be going any faster than that?"

"Actually, no," he said. "Far as I can tell, everyone was going exactly the speed limit."

"Were you over by that billboard? Your usual spot?"

"The Dunkin' Donuts billboard, yeah."

"Well, there you go. People must know about that spot now. That's why they're all going 55. Find a new spot."

"Good idea," he said. "I guess that's why you're the Chief. Or the Constable, whatever."

A couple of officers would usually man the station in the evening, log any activity. The page from the previous evening was blank. Not even a noise complaint. I sat there next to the radio all morning, waiting to hear something. Nothing. I finally called Dave just before lunchtime. "Any luck?"

"No, Chief. This thing must be broken. I keep getting 54 or 55."

"Does it look like they're going faster than that? I mean, has anyone come tearing past you? Obviously over the limit?"

"No, not really," he said. "But still, this can't be right."

"Well, don't worry about it. We'll look at the gun when you come back in."

I picked up the phone and listened to the dial tone. Seems to be working just fine, I thought.

When I walked over to the diner for lunch, my hip started hurting again.

"What's the matter with you?" Jenny asked when I limped in.

"Ah, it's just my hip," I said. "It flares up once in a while. Must be fixing to rain soon." I looked over. The stranger was sitting at his table, staring out the window.

"It's not going to rain," she said. "There's not a cloud in the sky."

"I tell you it's going to rain," I said. "This hip is never wrong."

But it never did rain that day. And I didn't get any calls on the radio. When Dave brought the radar gun in, I ran all the tests on it, but could find no problem whatsoever.

The radio was silent all the next day, and then again the day after that. There was only one plausible explanation. My officers had to be goofing off. Either they were sleeping in their patrol cars, or else they were all together having a party somewhere. I pictured them drinking beer, keeping an ear on their radios in case I called them.

I took my car out and drove around the town, hoping to catch them. I found Jim driving through the neighborhoods. Roy was on foot on Main Street. I found Larry driving through the park. They were all doing their jobs just fine. I swung over to the highway and found Dave sitting in his car under a big Oak tree, just over a big hill, his radar gun pointed out the window.

"What's up, Chief?" he said when I pulled up next to him.

"Just felt like getting out of the station," I said. "Is that gun working now?"

"Nah, stupid thing still says 54 or 55 every time," he said. "I tell you, it must be broken."

"Here, let me see it," I said. He handed it to me through the window. I aimed it at the highway as a few cars came over the hill and passed us. 54, 55, 54, 54, 55. "For God's sake," I said. "These things cost, what, two thousand dollars. You'd think—"

I was interrupted by a loud roar. I knew who it was as soon as I heard it. It had to be Tony, the mayor's son, in his big truck. I pointed the gun at the highway, waiting for him to come barreling over the hill.

It was Tony, all right. The gun read 54 when he passed us. And I knew just watching him that the gun was right. I turned on my flashers and chased him. I swear to God, I pulled that kid over and got out of the car and went right up to the driver's side window and stuck my face right in his. "What's the big idea, Tony?"

"Excuse me?"

"You want to tell me why you were only going 54 miles per hour?"

"I don't know," he said. "I wasn't even thinking about it. Was I going 54?"

"Yes, Tony. You were doing 54, right on the button. I have it right here on the radar. You want to see it?"

"I don't get it," he said. "You pulled me over because I wasn't speeding?"

"I just want to know why," I said. "Why are you all of a sudden driving under the speed limit?"

He was at a loss for words. "I don't know," he finally said. "I just didn't feel like going any faster."

Dave pulled up behind us and got out of his car. "What's the deal, Chief?"

I realized then just how ridiculous I must have looked, pulling this kid over because he wasn't speeding for the first time in his life. "Nothing, Dave," I said. "I'm sorry, Tony. I was just curious. Go on, get going." Tony shook his head and pulled out onto the highway, leaving me there with Dave. He looked at me with obvious concern.

"Are you okay, Chief?" he said.

"I'm fine, Dave. It's just that... have you noticed anything... peculiar lately?"

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just imagining it. It just seems like, well, nothing has happened the last couple days."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"No, I mean *nothing*. Not one single thing. Nobody doing anything wrong. No calls, no complaints. Nothing."

"Sounds pretty good to me," he said. "Sounds like we're doing our job."

"What about the radar gun?" I said. "Why isn't anybody speeding? Doesn't that seem strange to you? *Nobody speeding?*"

"Hey, don't fight it," he said. He put on a fake cowboy accent for me. "Varmints 'round here know there's a new sheriff in town, figure it's high time they stopped rustlin' them cattle."

"You're a funny guy, Dave," I said. I rubbed my sore hip. "Did you hear anything in the forecast about rain?"

I went back to the station and sat next to the silent radio for the rest of the day. My friend Sal the mayor called me that night. I had to explain to him why I pulled over his son for not speeding. "It was just been a weird week," I said. "Ever since, what, Monday morning I guess it was, there's been absolutely no calls. Not one."

"That's why people love this place," Sal said. "That's why they move here from the City!"

"Yeah, I guess so," I said.

"Would you rather we have *more* crime? Are you not feeling useful enough? Come on!"

"Yeah, yeah, point taken," I said. "It's just a fluke. I'm sure I'll get a call tomorrow."

But I didn't. The log from the evening shift was blank again the next morning. And the radio was silent again, all day long. When I went into the diner at lunch, the stranger sat at his table in front of three empty plates.

"He won't let me take the plates away," Jenny said to me. "He says he wants to keep all the plates he's eaten off today right there on the table."

"Are you kidding me?"

"He gave me another fifty dollar tip, too."

I sat there and looked at him for a while. He was just sitting there at this table, staring at the three plates. Monday morning, I thought. Monday morning. That's the first time I saw that guy in here. That's when our little dry spell started. That's when we stopped getting calls.

Oh for crying out loud, I said to myself. Listen to you. You are really losing it. This thing has really gotten to you. What next?

But the silence continued. I couldn't sleep at night. My wife started to worry. I paced back and forth, trying to figure it out. When the reporter from the local paper came by to collect the weekly log sheet, he looked at the blank sheet and laughed. "Okay, very funny," he said. "Where's the real log?"

"That's it," I said.

"There's nothing on it," he said.

"You're very perceptive," I said. "I can't imagine why you're still stuck on a small town newspaper."

He ran a single line reading "No activity to report this week" under the Police Beat. People asked me about it at the diner. Sal called me, wanted to know why people were asking him why the police weren't doing anything.

"It's like you said, Sal. Remember? This is paradise. There's no crime here."

My officers were getting nervous. They kept driving around, looking for something to happen, anything. Nothing did. We called the company that made our radar gun, asked them to send us another one. Dave took the new gun out on the highway. 54, 55, 54. I sat by the radio, rubbing my hip. Nothing. Silence.

After ten days of this, I was ready to explode. People started to avoid me. I sat at the counter in the diner and no one would say a word to me the whole time. On the eleventh day, I was sitting there in the diner, watching the stranger at his table. This time he had empty coffee cups on the table. He must have had thirty of them there. I went to his table and sat down across from him.

"Officer," he said.

"What's your story?" I said. I couldn't even put my arms on the table, with all those empty coffee cups in the way.

"Excuse me, Officer?"

"Why are you here? Why do you keep sitting here in this diner, day after day?"

"I like it here," he said. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"What's your name?"

"My name is John."

"John what?"

"John Smith."

"May I see your driver's license?"

"I don't have a driver's license," he said. His face was calm. He looked at me like he was looking at a goldfish in a bowl.

"How did you get here if you don't have a driver's license?"

"I rode the bus."

"John Smith," I said. "That's a pretty common name."

"If there were no John Smith's in the world, it wouldn't be a very common name, would it," he said. "I happen to be one of them."

"Where are you staying?"

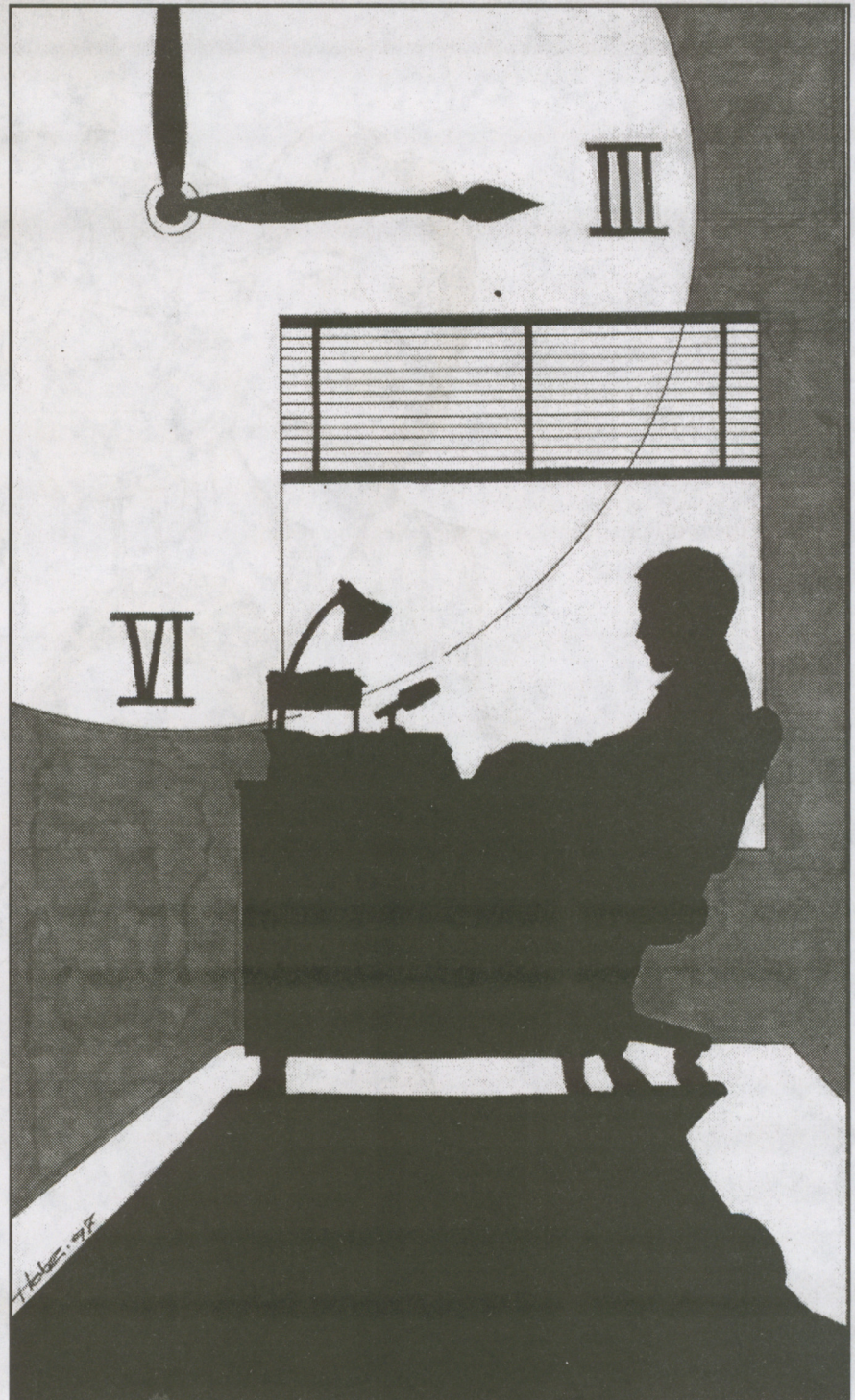
"Excuse me, Officer. May I ask why you need to know all of this? Have I done something illegal?"

I looked at him for a long moment. "No," I said. "You've done nothing illegal." I got up from the table. "But maybe we'll talk again later."

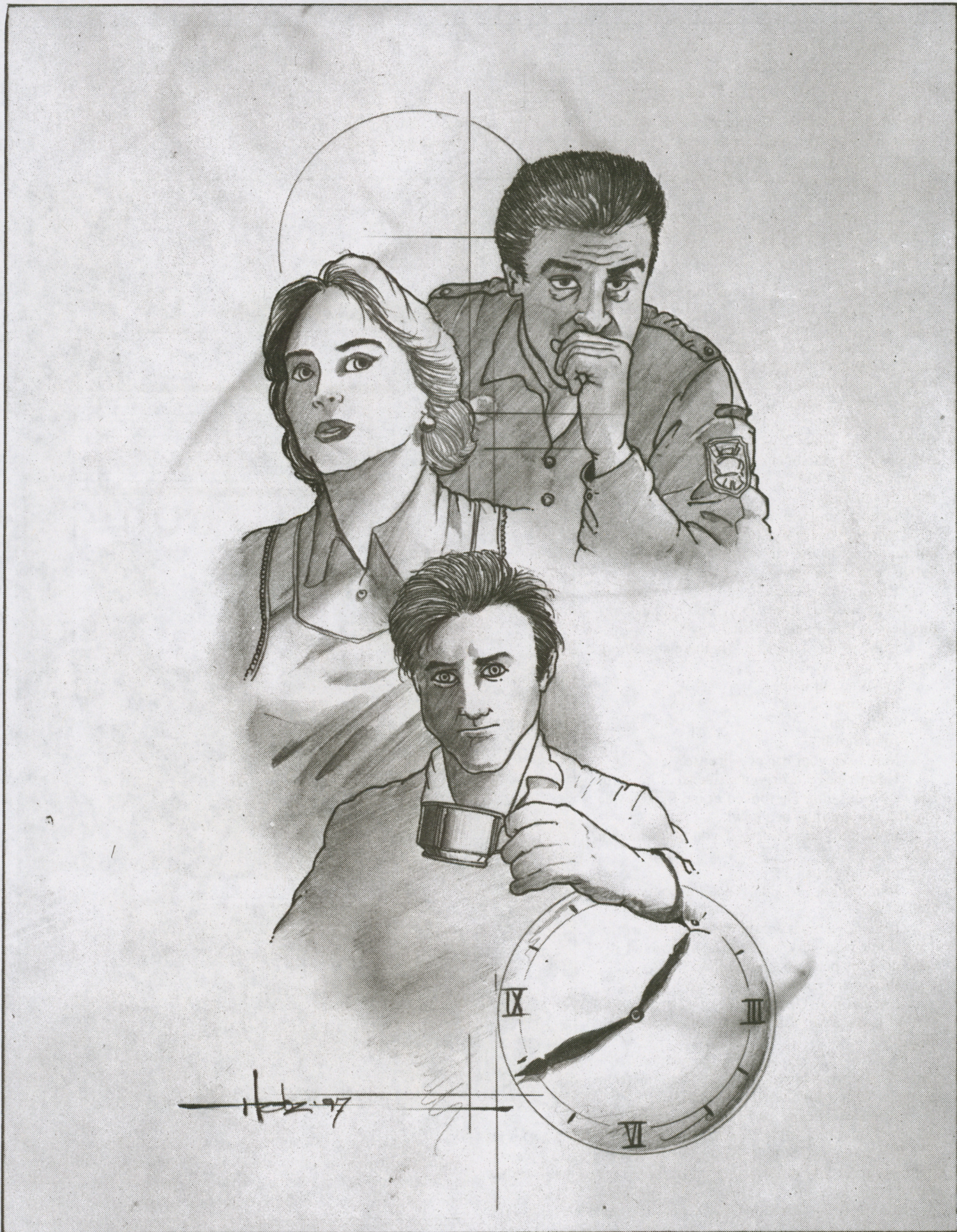
I went outside and sat in my car. I turned the air conditioner on. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to go into the station and sit there next to that silent radio. So I just sat there in the car. My hip was throbbing. Even though it still hadn't rained yet.

I don't know how long I sat there. At least an hour. The

stranger finally came out of the diner and started walking down the street. I didn't think he saw me sitting there in my car. I got out of the car and followed him on foot, hiding as well as I could behind the parked cars in front of the businesses on the street. I didn't have to follow him too far, because he went right into the Weather Vane Motel on the corner.



I went into the office and asked Gene the manager to show me the register. John Smith, Room Six. Paid in cash, every morning, every day for the last eleven days. As I stood there in the lobby of the motel, I saw John Smith walk right past the front window, back towards the diner. He was wearing a baseball hat



now. He had it on backwards like a catcher. In his hand was one of the coffee cups.

I sat on the edge of my bed that night, looking out the window at the heat lightning. It still hadn't rained yet. My wife slept soundly on the other side of the bed. I couldn't remember the last time she had spoken to me.

The next day I walked up and down Main Street, looking at all the people. *What is wrong with you people? Why are you doing this to me?*

John Smith was at his table. I knew that wasn't his real name. I hadn't even bothered to run it through the computer. John Smith, my ass. He was reading the back of a sugar packet.

"What happened to you?" Jenny said when she served me. "You look like hell."

"Has our friend Mr. Smith over there left you any more big tips?"

"Yeah, a couple days ago," she said. "It was just a twenty this time. I think he's getting cheap."

"Has he been bothering you? Do you want to fill out a complaint?"

"A complaint?" she said. "Why would I want to do that? He just sits there. I don't even notice him anymore."

"If he does anything suspicious, Jenny, if he bothers you in the slightest way, I want you to call me and I'll come down here and arrest him. Okay?"

"What's gotten into you, Chief?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Jenny. I'm just... I'm sorry." I got up and left. On my way out, I stood over his table and just looked at him. He kept reading the back of his sugar packet for a long while, and then finally looked up at me. He smiled.

There was no evening log, of course. There were no calls. The silence continued. My hip kept hurting. I didn't think I could last much longer without going crazy. I called Dave on the radio. He had been sitting there day after day with his radar gun. "All I want is one 56," he said. "One lousy 56, that's all I ask. Some bastard comes by here going 56, he's gon' get a speeding ticket, I swear to God."

I sat in the station all day, my face pressed into a towel. The man from the paper came by again. He took one look at me and walked back out the door.

I went home. I didn't eat dinner. I got back in my car, drove all around the town. Main Street was quiet. The neighborhoods were quiet. The park was quiet. There were no teenagers out playing their radios too loud. No one drag-racing on the straight-away by the lake. Nothing.

The call came that night. I was in bed, only half asleep.

"Chief," the voice said. It was Marty, one of the night officers.

"What is it, Marty?"

"Chief," he said.

"What, Marty? What is it?"

"The motel."

"What about it?"

"I'm at the motel. I'm at the Weather Vane."

"I'm on my way," I said. I raced across town to the motel. Marty was standing outside Room Six.

"What happened?" I asked him.

He just looked at me.

I grabbed him by the shoulders. "Marty, what's wrong?"

He didn't say anything. He just looked at the ground.

I opened up the door to the room. It was Jenny. What he did to her. Holy Mother of God, what that man did to her.

I was up the rest of that night. Calling in the description and the alias, getting the coroner up there. I interviewed the other guests in the motel and the other waitresses at the diner. I was just going through the motions, doing the routine.

The whole town had to deal with it. Everyone was in shock for a while. But slowly, things got back to normal. It finally rained. My hip stopped hurting.

And a couple days after the murder, someone called in a noise complaint. And then there was an accident. Nothing major, just a fender bender. Dave started clocking cars over 70 on the highway, wrote a dozen tickets. By the time the summer was over, all of my officers seemed to have forgotten about the silence.

But I didn't forget. I couldn't. I was the one who had to sit there next to the radio, all day long, waiting for the calls to come in. Sometimes it would be silent for a few minutes. Ten minutes of silence, that's all it would take. I'd start sweating. Twenty minutes of silence, my hip would start hurting again. Thirty minutes of silence, and I'd be climbing the walls, wondering if he had come back. ▲

Good Night, Mrs. Calabash

—Richard Novak

The marquis shouted

"Garland! Garbo!

Harlowe and Harpo!"

Names I know

Ticket to immortality

Narrowly avoiding encroaching darkness

Screen erupts

With style and sound

Bygone facsimiles

Flash and flicker fading

Into nameless masks

Of the living dead.

In Search of Stephen King

by Corinne Alessi-Greene

Since all work and no play makes Corinne a dull girl, my husband Curt and I decided to take a little excursion during our trip to Maine. With my thrice-read, beloved, tattered copy of *The Shining* in hand, we went in search of my all-time favorite horror writer Stephen King.

Full of determination we set out on a cool rainy morning last September, following Route 3 out of Bar Harbor up to Bangor, right into the heart of town. "Now what?" my husband asked.

Good question, I thought. "Okay," I told him, "now the adventure begins. Let's see if we can get some information out of the locals."

Besides toting *The Shining* I also had with me a street address. As we came to a stoplight we both noticed a long-haired young man in over-sized clothing, a giant silver peace sign dangling from his waist. We studied him intently as he passed, the cuffs of his jeans scuffing the sidewalk in perfect rhythm with his sluggish gait. "I wonder if he knows where this place is?" I said.

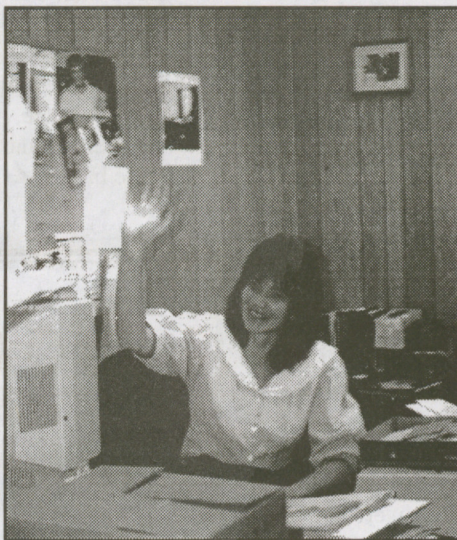
Curt snickered, "The only thing he would know is where to find some pot." So on we drove, passing stores with festive fall displays garnishing their windows, restaurants featuring specials on their famous Maine blueberry pancakes, and glorious buildings ornate in their architecture. We saw it all in Bangor, except what we were looking for.

Again we were about to ask for directions, from a blonde woman wearing a yellow rain slicker, carrying a red plaid umbrella. "Go on," Curt told me.

"Who, from the L.L. Bean Queen over here?" We were getting a little irritated with each other, driving in circles, making sarcastic comments about everyone. A blue school bus pulled alongside us. Without hesitation, Curt yelled over, "Excuse me?" and asked for the street address we had. The bus driver stared at us a moment and shook his head sadly, but said he would see if he could find out for us. He radioed his dispatcher, and after a moment we heard a voice amidst static say that the street was located between the military base and the airport.

We said our thank-yous and went on, following the signs, and with our determination returning we raced up the road. We soon came to the base and saw the airport a few blocks in the distance; we searched high and low but still couldn't find the street we were hunting for. Asking directions had become second nature by this point, and spotting a pale-faced young woman working on an early model Chevy we asked if she could point us in the right direction. Soon we were once again on our way shrieking with delight as we came to the street we'd been seeking for over an hour. We slowly made our way down the deserted industrial area, and I couldn't believe my eyes when we came to a small one-story, brown building.

"This is Stephen King's office," my husband said, not so much a question as statement. I'd expected something much different, of course, a rambling Victorian mansion on a quiet road in the woods. "Okay, now that we're here are you going in?"



Stephen King's personal secretary.

"Of course," I told him, "and guess who's coming with me?"

We walked to the front door and stepped inside, and immediately I wanted to turn back. On the wall near a pair of smoked-glass doors was an intercom with instructions to *Please Press the Button and Speak in a Normal Speaking Voice Stating Your Name and nature of your Visit*. Suddenly all the plainness was gone—this was real, all right, this was Stephen King's office. What, was I crazy to think I could just waltz on in here and say, Yeah, I'm here to see the man?

"Well, press the button," whispered Curt.

"No way," I whispered back. "Let's get out of here!"

Curt grabbed me as I struggled to rush past him. "What? You can't leave now, we're here! Press the button."

"You can press the button, I want to leave! I'm not having fun!..."

Suddenly someone moved behind the smoked glass doors, and I froze.

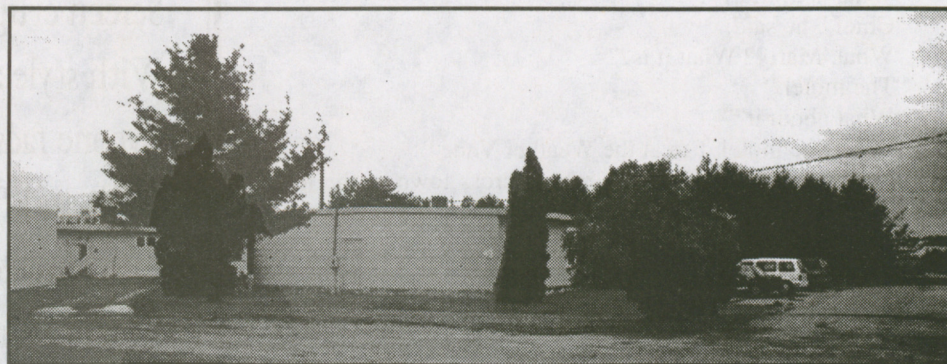
The door opened to reveal a young woman looking at us with genuine curiosity. To my amazement, she stepped aside and I acknowledged the please-do-come-in gesture. The three of us stood in a bright hallway, with an enormously cluttered desk off to our right: stacks of Stephen King books, cartons, envelopes, computer print-outs and loose papers were scattered about. The walls were adorned with King movie posters, and directly ahead, mounted at the end of the corridor, was an enclosed glass case displaying ever single book King had published.

I turned to the young lady who'd allowed me entrance to this sacred place and babbled, "I came all the way from New York just to meet Stephen King! Is he here? Are you his assistant? You must think I'm crazy!"

She laughed and kindly allowed that I wasn't insane, and said that she was one of his three secretaries. As for King being here...no, I was a couple of weeks too late, and after Labor Day he'd gone back down to his summer home, where he was working on his latest book in the *Dark Tower* series.

Curt, always ready for an adventure, inquired where his summer home was located, but I shot him a glance that told him clearly that I'd had enough playing Lewis and Clark for one day. While Curt and Stephen King's secretary continued their small talk I became lost in my thoughts; a part of me felt sad that I hadn't fulfilled my dream of shaking my favorite novelist's hand and having him autograph my book. But who's to say I couldn't accomplish this feat the next time we came to Maine? Or the time after that?

Oh yes, I will be back. After all, I'm his number one fan. ▲



Outside of Stephen King's office.

tomorrow

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edited by Algis Budrys

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Come See What We're Doing!

Surreal World: MARTIAN MYSTERIES

by Kevin M. Carr

The ball started rolling on a Sunday afternoon in 1976. Toby Owen, a member of NASA's imaging team for the *Viking* missions to Mars, knelt on the floor of his office, meticulously examining a series of photographs taken by *Viking Orbiter 1*. He was searching for a good place to land a remote-controlled robotic rover on the planet's surface. After several hours of squinting through a magnifying glass, he came across frame 35A72—the 72nd frame of the 35th orbit ("A" denotes the primary module, *Viking 1*). From a northern region of Martian desert known as Cydonia, something stared back at him: it appeared to be a human face.

Curious, he thought, but surely a mirage. Owen dismissed the image and moved on. He was busy—deluged with information and thousands of pictures. He had no time to chase ghosts in shadowy mesas millions of miles away.

The Face was forgotten until a subsequent press conference given by *Viking* Project Scientist Gerry Soffen. Reporters from all over the world gathered to hear if *Viking* had found any evidence of life on our closest planetary neighbor. Soffen opened the press conference by showing the image of the Face. "Isn't it peculiar what tricks of lighting and shadow can do?" he said. "When we took a picture a few hours later it all went away." Soffen meant to pacify the crowd, to caution them against getting false hopes of little green men leaping from the Martian cliffs. The press thought nothing more of the Face, for NASA had no apparent reason to deceive.

The next person to take serious notice of the Face was an electrical engineer named Vincent DiPietro. Having seen the Face before in a supermarket tabloid he dismissed it as a hoax. It was not until he came across the Face in NASA archival footage that he realized the image was genuine. DiPietro began to investigate, searching for any follow-up research NASA had on the subject.

To his dismay, he found none. NASA's "lighting and shadow" explanation was nothing more than presumption and speculation. In fact, DiPietro



Cydonia Frame 35A72, showing the Face (top right), the City (left) and the Fortress (far right of the City).

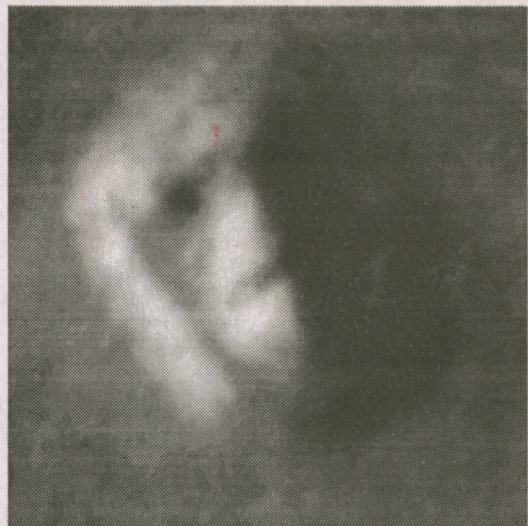
Photo courtesy Mark J. Carlotto.

discovered that Soffen's explanation at the press conference was completely fabricated. *Viking 1* snapped image 35A72 late in the Martian evening. A few hours later, when Soffen had insisted a follow-up picture was taken, the area would have been shrouded in darkness. NASA had no second picture showing a "trick of lighting and shadow."

Gregory Molenaar, a colleague of DiPietro, joined him in a search for other photos of the Face. They eventually uncovered a second picture of Cydonia, which had been misfiled in the 60,000 other *Viking* images. Frame 70A13, taken 35 days later at a different time of day, showed the landscape from a new angle.

The Face was still there, this time much clearer. DiPietro and Molenaar devised a special computer enhancement technique called SPIT (Starburst Pixel Interleaving Technique) to enhance the images. During the process, DiPietro and Molenaar found a second enigmatic object, a five-sided pyramid situated nearby measuring about a mile across and buttressed at each corner. This pyramid soon became known as the D&M Pyramid, after its founders.

When DiPietro and Molenaar went public with their findings, they met Richard C. Hoagland, who had, coincidentally, attended the Soffen press conference back in 1976. The Face was not new to him. DiPietro and Molenaar's analysis, however, was. Hoagland



Enlargement of the Face from frame 70A13; note the teeth in the mouth. Cover either side of face to see each "half" of the "Sphinx."

Photo courtesy Mark J. Carlotto

soon found himself absorbed in the landscape of Cydonia. He began to examine the enigmas himself and founded the Mars Mission (later called the Enterprise Mission).

The Mars Mission uncovered what Hoagland believes to be the "Monuments of Mars," possibly relics of a lost civilization. To the west of the Face lay a mile-wide structure apparently surrounded by several large walls. Hoagland refers to the structure as the "Fortress." Beyond the Fortress was a collection of other structures, including a series of four-sided pyramids, which Hoagland refers to as the "City."

Hoagland freely admits that "mountains can be pyramidal." In fact, pyramidal mountains on Mars are nothing new. NASA's *Mariner 9* orbited Mars in 1971 and photographed a series of three-sided pyramids on the other side of the planet. Very little evidence suggests these pyramids are artificial. Three-sided mounds easily form from wind erosion. However, this solution does not translate to Cydonia. Differential erosion simply will not produce a four- or five-sided pyramid. Nor does erosion form perfect right angles, which are found in the Fortress. Erosion smooths out terrain. Rarely does it form symmetrical, detailed images, such as the Face.

In 1985, Dr. Mark J. Carlotto, a computer imaging scientist from Reading, Massachusetts, came to the Mars Mission with a new computer imaging technique. It brought out enough detail in the Face to show a distinct row of teeth in the mouth. Carlotto also constructed three-dimensional models of the Face and other "monuments," using the stereoscopic perspective from the two *Viking* images.

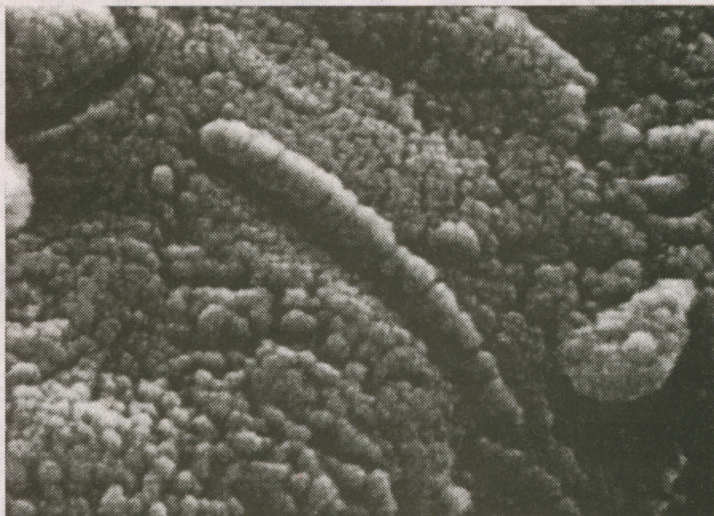
Several years later, Carlotto applied fractal analysis, a process that detects breaks in natural chaotic patterns, to Cydonia. Fractal analysis was used in Desert Storm to identify enemy tanks on sand dunes with an accuracy of 80 percent. Two objects at Cydonia stood out as artificial: the Face (because it has bilateral symmetry) and the Fortress (because it contains right angles).

Hoagland believes to also have discovered a "terrestrial connection" between Cydonia and the Egyptian pyramids at Giza. Consider the fact that the cosine of Giza's latitude is equivalent to the tangent of Cydonia's latitude. Furthermore, the mathematical relationship of e/π is found throughout both Cydonia and the terrestrial pyramids.

Whereas the Cydonia structures are estimated to be as old as a half a million years, the spectacular Pyramids of Giza—along with the Sphinx—possibly predate the rise of the Egyptian culture by 15,000 years. This raises the question of who built them, if not the ancient Egyptians. It is even debatable whether modern engineers could duplicate them. Keep in mind that each limestone block weighs anywhere from 2.5 tons to over 450 tons—that's 900,000 pound, roughly the weight of 500 cars. These mammoth pieces of limestone were set in place vertically—not horizontally—for the proper fit. A distinct lack of gouges and cracks in the surrounding stones suggest that none of the blocks were dropped in the process. If one stone were set every five minutes continuously around the clock, it would take over 20 years to build the Great Pyramid alone.

Besides the pyramids, there's another monument common to both Earth and Mars—the Sphinx. Hoagland suggests that the Face itself in Cydonia could be Mars's own Sphinx—the mixture of lion and man. Look at the Face image from 70A13 on page [tk]. Imagine a line bisecting the Face. Use a piece of paper (or better yet, a mirror) to cover the right side of the Face. You will see what appears to be a heavy-browed human face. Now cover the left side. The shadowy face of a lion, complete with broad feline nose and mane, emerges.

As Carl Sagan once said, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof." The Mars researchers yearned for this proof, and they pushed NASA to study the phenomenon more intently. Their calls went unanswered until Stanley V. McDaniel of Sanoma University in California began a detailed evaluation of the Mars research. He found many top researchers' methods wholly scientific. However, NASA's response continued to be one of ridicule, avoidance and refusal to cooperate. NASA was not even willing to



Electron micrograph of rock #ALH84001. This tubular structure, thought to be fossilized Martian bacteria, is only about 1/100th the width of a human hair.

NASA/JSC.

duplicate the Mars research to set the story straight once and for all.

McDaniel discovered that although the two images were well documented, NASA still clung to their 15-year-old "trick of lighting and shadow" explanation. Under pressure from McDaniel, NASA quietly retracted Soffen's original statement.

McDaniel also reviewed NASA's response to the fractal analysis. NASA claims that the Face and the Fortress were picked up because they differed from the surrounding terrain. However, McDaniel points out that meteor craters—which look a great deal different than the surrounding terrain—were not flagged as artificial. Terry Endres of Cincinnati's TASK (Tristate Advocates of Scientific Knowledge) reminds fellow researchers that the fractal analysis is based on only a small area of the Martian landscape. He has suggested a larger-scale analysis of the surrounding regions to better understand what is "natural" on Mars. The fractal analysis does not prove the "monuments" are artificial. However, it definitely warrants some sort of further study. "We must do it if we are going to be scientists," McDaniel says.

Upon completing his research, McDaniel published *The McDaniel Report*, a summation of his findings. In this report, he chides NASA for its lack of scientific procedures and demands a more professional approach by the government. Today he continues his research, publishing periodic updates on the Internet. "The thrust right now," says McDaniel, "is to invite NASA to have a more coherent and reasonable conversation with Mars researchers."

Why is there such a negative attitude towards the Face? Hoagland sums it up well. "Even for those for whom the discovery of alien ruins right next door would present no insurmountable theoretical problem, the possibility that the alien presence somehow intervened—even hundreds of thousands of years ago—on this planet raises some very interesting problems." If the "monuments" are determined to be artificial, there are only three possibilities 1) they were built by an ancient race of beings living on Mars, 2) they were built by an ancient race on Earth that somehow traveled to Mars, or 3) they were built by a race of beings from neither planet. Considering the profound implications, the Enterprise Mission has suggested there might be a cover up. This suggestion was first raised in 1993 when the *Mars Observer* mysteriously disappeared.

"*Observer* disappeared right at an interesting moment," McDaniel notes. After the incident, a NASA review board found dozens of flaws in the mission (including the deactivation of the telemetry), any of which could have led to the loss of the probe. Rather careless treatment by a billion-dollar government agency of a multi-million dollar piece of equipment, don't you think?

But is it really lost? Susan Karaban, edi-

tor of the *Planetary Horizons* newsletter and representative for the Enterprise Mission, reports receiving unsubstantiated claims that the *Observer* was not lost—that it is, in fact, sending clandestine pictures of Mars back over the vacuum of space.

The incident with the *Observer* all but killed the Mars program. Public confidence died; interest waned. However, things changed on August 7 1996. NASA held a press conference to announce a find that Carl Sagan called "a glorious discovery." A team of scientists from NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, had been studying a football-sized meteorite found in Antarctica 12 years before. The composition of rock #ALH84001 indicates that it came from Mars. Scientists determined this by comparing its features to the rocks brought back from the *Viking* mission. Microscopic traces of carbonate, some organic molecules and other minerals thought to be residue from biological activity were found within the rock. This 3.6 billion-year-old sample also contains strange, tubular-shaped structures that are very similar in both size and shape to some bacteria found on Earth.

Suddenly, Mars was hot again. Headlines about life on Mars covered the front pages of magazines and newspapers. *The X-Files* even had an episode based on the concept. Like a shot of adrenaline, this rejuvenated the space program and interests of returning to Mars—not just with an orbital spacecraft, but with a robotic rover.

Since this announcement, twelve other rocks have been found to allegedly be from Mars. A team of British scientists claims to have found remnants of life in a younger rock. Actually, this sort of research is not new. In 1975, a Hungarian scientist named Barthalamew Nagy announced that he found materials in various meteorites that can "confidently be assumed to be of biological origin." Nagy's research was ridiculed and dismissed on the grounds that the biological evidence was nothing more than a result of terrestrial contamination. Today, the same theory (but different meteorites) is given much more serious thought by NASA.

McDaniel suggests that this might be a last-ditch effort by NASA to stimulate funding for the space program. In a time of stunning budget cuts, who can really blame them? The bottom line is that it will lead us back to Mars. A series of new Mars missions is in the play book for NASA over the next decade. It started with *Mars Global Surveyor* launched on November 7, 1996, and *Mars Pathfinder* launched on December 4, 1996. *Pathfinder* will arrive first, touching down on the Martian surface—ironically enough—on July 4, 1997. It will release a rover, *Sojourner*, that will scramble across the Martian landscape collecting physical data. Two months later, *Surveyor* will reach orbit and begin photographing the planet again using cameras equipped with infrared sensors and resolution far superior to the cam-

era on *Viking 1*.

The big question in many people's minds is whether there will be new photographs of Cydonia. NASA has explicitly not given priority to photograph the Face again. In the words of NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin, "You can't give priority to everything." Michael Malin, the camera operator for *Surveyor*, has provided several reasons why new Cydonia pictures cannot be guaranteed. Dust storms, he says, could obstruct the view of the camera. Also, he reminds the public that *Surveyor's* cameras cannot be easily aimed at such a relatively small object as the Face. McDaniel, however, pokes holes in each of the reasons. Dust storms are relatively uncommon in the Cydonia region. As for the aiming of cameras, Cydonia need only be given priority.

Has NASA left itself a back door? McDaniel thinks so. "NASA's top priority is for objects of the greatest scientific interest. If the Cydonia objects are accorded little or no scientific interest...the priorities will not be adjusted accordingly." McDaniel has expressed concern that this could easily lead to an excuse for not re-photographing Cydonia.

The Enterprise Mission has its own theories. They feel that the Cydonia region will be photographed, but the public may never see the raw footage. The images will come back to Earth and be put on the Internet in "near-real time." The images will not be live due to the fact that it will take several minutes for the signal to travel through space and then be descrambled at NASA. This will lead to an average twenty-minute delay. The Enterprise Mission expresses concern that the images may not be genuine. In the "near-real time" delay, they believe the images might be "doctored," and any incriminating footage digitally removed.

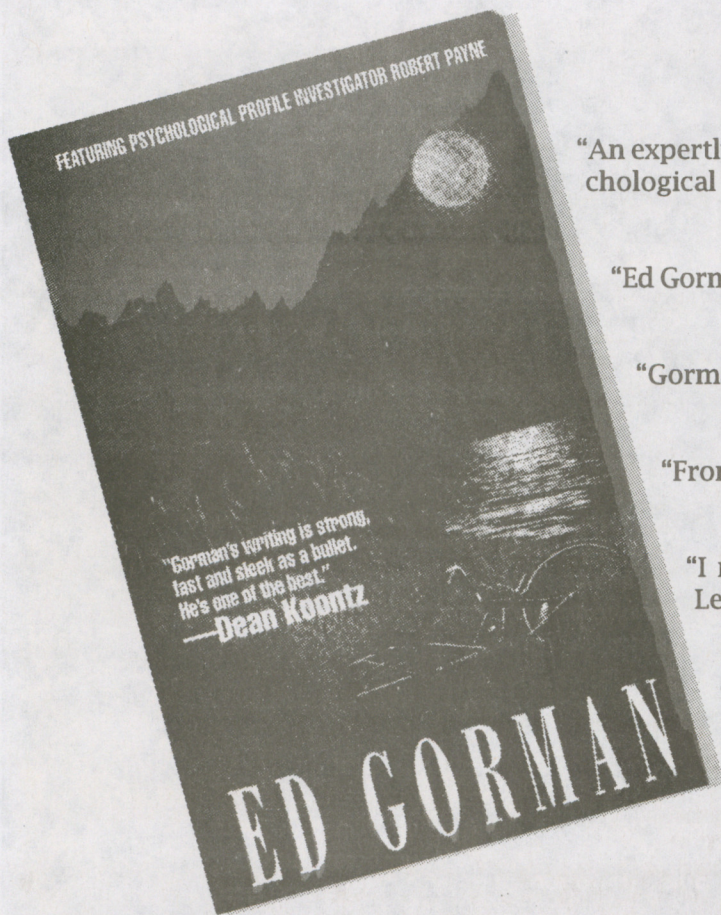
If new pictures come back showing clearer images of the Cydonia "monuments," many will continue to scream "trick of lighting and shadow." If new pictures come back showing nothing, surely conspiracy and cover-up stories will run rampant. And if the region remains unphotographed by *Surveyor*, the *status quo* will be met. There will be no winners.

Except one: NASA. In fact, NASA stands to profit even if they do not photograph Cydonia effectively. This will call for more missions to Mars. And with the discovery of extraterrestrial life at stake, these missions will easily find all the funding they need.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT MARS, VISIT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES

www.mcdanielreport.com
www.psrw.com/~markc/marshome.html
www.enterprisemission.com

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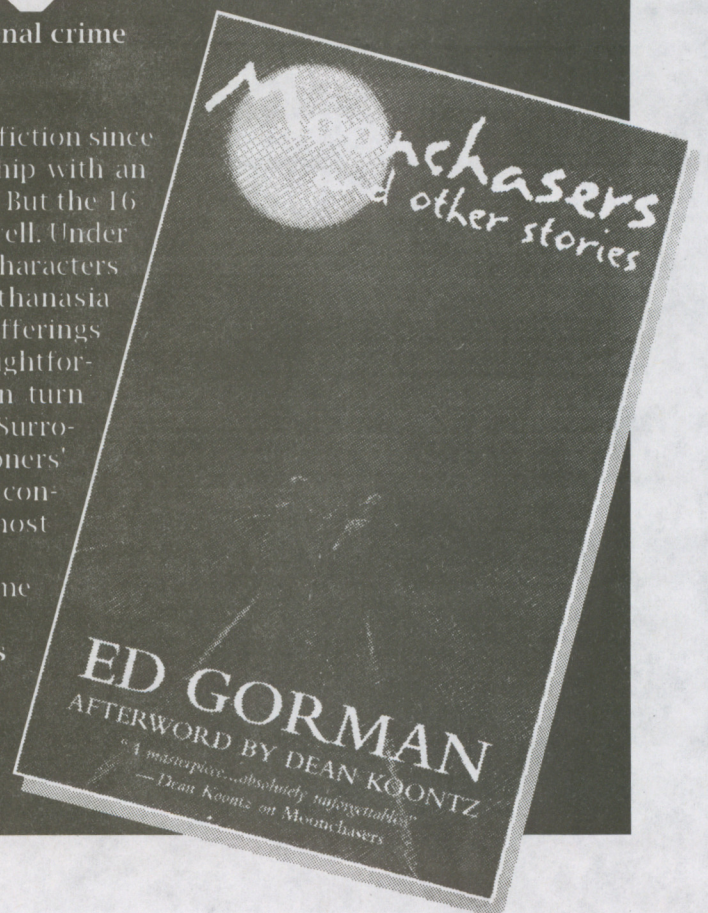
A standout collection by one of the most original crime writers around."

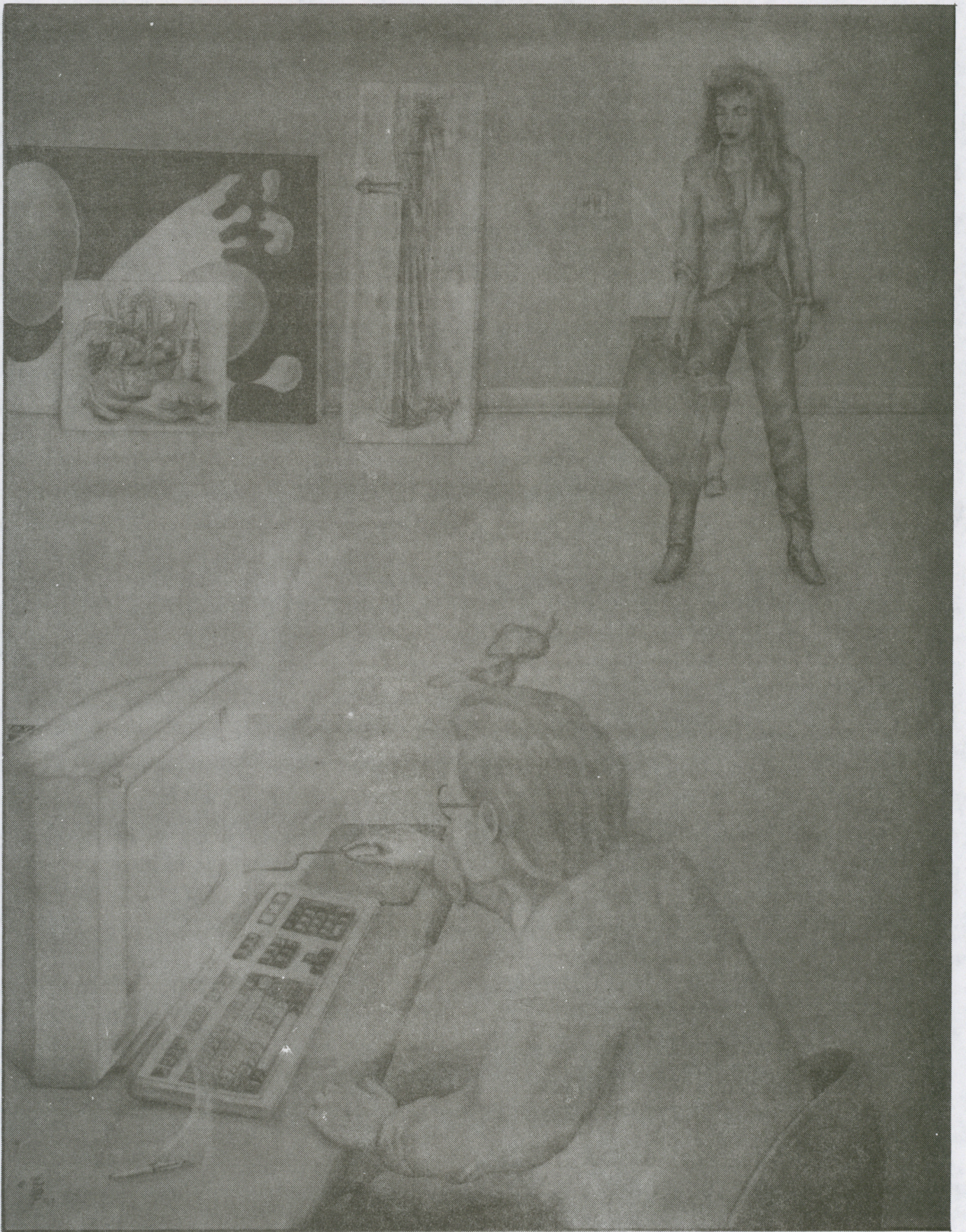
—Kirkus Reviews

AFTERWORD BY DEAN KOONTZ

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E.H. Wong dates the start of his writing career from a ten-week science fiction writing workshop with Martha Randall that he attended in the Fall of 1990—sort of a poor-man's Clarion without the sleep deprivation. Since then his stories have appeared in Aboriginal SF and Pulphouse. Look for more of E.H.'s work in future issues of PW.

OMNIBUS

IN 32 BITS

by e.h. wong
illustrated by robert copley

I drained my Corona, washing away the greasy aftertaste of pepperoni pizza. Forlorn olives and an oily stain embellished the bottom of the cardboard box, like pop art. I pictured myself famous, tres cool in sunglasses, showing at MOMA: ...and this I call "Man's Inhumanity to Pizza."

The sound of running water drifted from the kitchen; Katie must've started on the dishes. Confucius say, he who has lower mess tolerance does the cleaning. At least it would delay her nightly whine of "you never relate to me anymore, Ben." What did she want, anyway? Four months living together and we were already squabbling like married chickens. A rut with no out. Dead-ended, like my art. Whatever happened to Love?

Another night of Domestic Hell? Avoidance! I decided, and ducked into the spare bedroom I used for a studio, navigating around my unsold paintings. Oh, to be discovered, or even just to sell a few. I fired up the computer and dug in my pocket for the number of that new bulletin board service. A few keystrokes, and my modem was already dialing.

#

WELCOME TO OMNIBUS, THE ULTIMATE BBS. WE KNOW EVERYTHING. NOW YOU CAN, TOO. PLEASE ENTER YOUR SELECTION:

1.HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE FROM EVENT ONE

2.THE COMPILATION OF ALL KNOWLEDGE (ALPHABETIZED)

3.THE MEANING OF LIFE (ROUND TABLE)

4.SHAREWARE

#

Jeez, I thought, these guys aren't ambitious or anything. I scanned the list and sighed. Probably another of those BBS's run by the literary-circle-jerks or the more-intellectual-than-thou types. SHAREWARE, though, sounded promising.

#

THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING SHAREWARE. PLEASE MAKE YOUR SELECTION:

1.DIDACTICAL

2.PHILOSOPHICAL

3.SPREADSHEET

4.OTHER

#

No games? What's wrong with these turkeys?

#

THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING THE SPREADSHEET WHATIF. THIS SPREADSHEET MAY BE USED ONLY ONCE. YOU HAVE A FOUR HOUR TIME LIMIT. PLEASE WAIT WHILE WE UPLOAD YOUR LIFE PARAMETERS...

Oops, I wanted OTHER, not SPREADSHEET. One use only? Life parameters? What could that be? Well, at least a four hour freebie was generous. After a short delay, an already filled spreadsheet blinked onto my screen.

The upper-left cell read "Benjamin Louis Chang." And in the cell beneath it, in international date format, my birthday. How did it know that? I scrolled around. My father's name. My mother's name. The honeymoon suite at the Carmel Inn. The delivery room at San Francisco General. The skin on my back began to crawl.

Katie called from the kitchen. "Ben, you in there?"

Body tense, I continued scrolling. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The spreadsheet was huge. OMNIBUS probably resided on a mainframe, like those gargantuan IRS computers. But how could every cell describe me? Everything. Even personal stuff.

Some of the items in the left-most columns I couldn't remember. Like my first baby tooth. Or my first step. But the rest appeared accurate. It read across, left to right, my life depicted in some cell-by-cell pointillism. Like Bitsy Chu behind the Galileo High gym. And sweating into engineering school, to please Dad. Then dropping out for art school, to please me. And a progression of minimum wage jobs while I pursued my painting, eating beans, the starving artist in a garret, finding no success despite my efforts to stay trendy. On the far right side of the spreadsheet, entries described recent events. Some from even today.

I was breathing in short, shallow breaths. The more I examined the spreadsheet, though, the more my curiosity flared, and I was drawn in like a dilettante to a gallery opening. I began to reminisce as I paged through, my life spread before me like snapshots in a photo album.

Katie called again. "Ben?" She came into the room, saw me and stiffened. "You going to play with your computer all night again?"

I stammered, "No. Not at all."

"Well, what do you call that?"

"Just killing time. Besides, why?"

She looked as if she were going to start in on me again, but she appeared to reconsider. She loosened, and smiled coyly. In a sultry voice, she said, "Isn't there something else you'd rather be playing with?"

I grinned and made a move to rise, only she dashed out with a playful shriek. Well, sure, I thought sitting back down. As soon as I finish.

Exactly what had I logged into? Fourteen cells down from the top in the last column, it read, "Buys Rikki Licks debut CD." That happened just today—in fact, only an hour before coming home with the pizza. I peeked behind me on my stereo, at the square CD case with the picture of Rikki Licks: jet-black hair, big pouty lips, milky soft skin, a clingy black knit dress all cleavage and thighs. My glance lingered. Now why couldn't I have a babe like that?

I centered the cursor on that cell, hit the EDIT key, but learned nothing new. All it said was "Buys Rikki Licks debut CD," exactly the same text as displayed on the spreadsheet itself. How could anyone update a bio on me that quickly?

I tried one of the function keys and the entry disappeared. The spreadsheet cell also blanked. For some reason, a shiver slid down my back. A premonition, maybe?

I spun around and the CD was gone.

I blinked, blinked again, and stopped breathing. The room seemed to shrink, the computer drawing me in, a supernatural power lurking behind the high-res screen. Did God speak in 32 bit words? I looked again, then searched the floor, but the CD

was still gone. Or had never been there. The layer of dust on the stereo appeared undisturbed.

Movement caught my eye, and I spied something lying in the middle of the floor. It took a moment for the object to register. A bra. Katie's black lacy one. A few seconds later, something else sailed through the doorway and landed next to the bra. Panties.

Katie leaned in the doorway. Red, red lipstick. Pancake rouge. Paint-rolled eye-shadow and liner. A prominent beauty mark.

In her huskiest voice, she said, "I am Katia, sailor." A Baltic accent, maybe Russian. "You show Katia secret weapon, no?"

She slithered into the room, wearing a short aqua and black silk robe. The sheer fabric slid against her soft curves, reaching only to upper-thigh, and her long bare legs moved like those of a wild animal. Fluid. Sinewy. Stalking prey.

"Katie, I—"

"Katia," she corrected.

"Okay, Katia—"

"You like, sailor?"

I tried to point at the computer. "You wouldn't—"

She put a shushing finger to my lips and with her other hand, she grabbed my shirt. Perfume swept over me.

"Come, little boy. Come to Katia."

"But—"

Her robe spilled open, revealing the source of the bra.

My breathing quickened. I grinned and looked up. "Okay," I managed to say. "Just let me log off."

She released the shirt, dragged her nails across my chest, then sashayed out. Jungle cat, I thought. No, alley cat. From the hallway, she said again, "Come. Bring secret weapon."

She growled from our bedroom.

I wavered. The computer should wait, yet the CD... The opening message had said only four hours. Like some other spreadsheets, it displayed the time in the lower corner. Almost half an hour had already passed. I stared at the monitor screen and a tightness in my stomach returned. Things I normally ignored—the hum of the fan, the flicker of the monitor—took on a suspicious tone. I imagined Magritte: my fingers hovered above the keyboard as disjointed limbs, an all-seeing eye gaping from the monitor. An omnipotent spreadsheet? I made two fists, my nails digging crescents into my palms.

Moses, I, cowed before my Creator. Only God spoke via a modem instead of a burning bush. I began to tremble.

I blinked and shook my head violently. No! Impossible!

But then again, there was the CD...

I needed more proof. I happened to glance at my certificate on the wall from when I took second place in the student art competition ages ago. Even then, always the bridesmaid. I shuttled the cursor around, searching for the right cell.

"Ben..." Katie said from the bedroom. Her voice carried a distinctly testy edge.

"In a sec," I said, raising my voice.

I hurried. I located my art school years, and found the right entry: "Wins second place in student competition."

"Get in here!" Katie yelled.

Heart pounding, I over-typed a new entry: "Wins first place in student competition." I looked up, squinted at the certificate, and could just make out the words "First Place."

Motionless, smothered in unthinkable thoughts.

A sharp bang came from the bedroom. "Dammit!" she cried. "Damn you and your computer!"

I looked to the empty doorway for a moment, my attention torn, and pleaded silently, oh Katie, please, not now. I returned to the spreadsheet. There was more. The cell immediately beneath

the one that I had changed read: "Buys new stereo with prize money." I couldn't remember doing anything like that but when I looked behind me, I saw a big fancy receiver with two oversized speakers, instead of my modest stereo. For some reason, though, the CD player that I purchased last year was unchanged.

I took a deep breath and tried to gather my thoughts. Beneath my fingers, via the keyboard, I controlled the past—my past. I could manipulate my life. The name WHATIF made sense, now. Whatif I had done this? Or whatif I had done that?

I could hear Katie thumping around in our bedroom, slamming things, cursing. There was going to be hell to pay later, but right now, I had to concentrate.

Changing the prize from second to first place had affected an adjacent cell. So this spreadsheet behaved just like life. No single event occurred in isolation; everything was interconnected. Change one action, or time, or chance meeting, and the effect rippled down the line. It made sense.

But how far did the effect ripple? Was life like a bullet, where a tiny change in its trajectory would send it careening far off course? Or did life have so much inertia that nothing short of monumental disruptions could alter its original path, everything returning to normal in due time? I thought of Dali's soft watches, and wondered how resilient my past was, able to distort and adapt to these changes without losing its overall shape and form?

I searched but could find no other obvious effects of winning first place. I glanced at my stacks of unsold canvases, gathering dust. Certainly no change there. Still a washout.

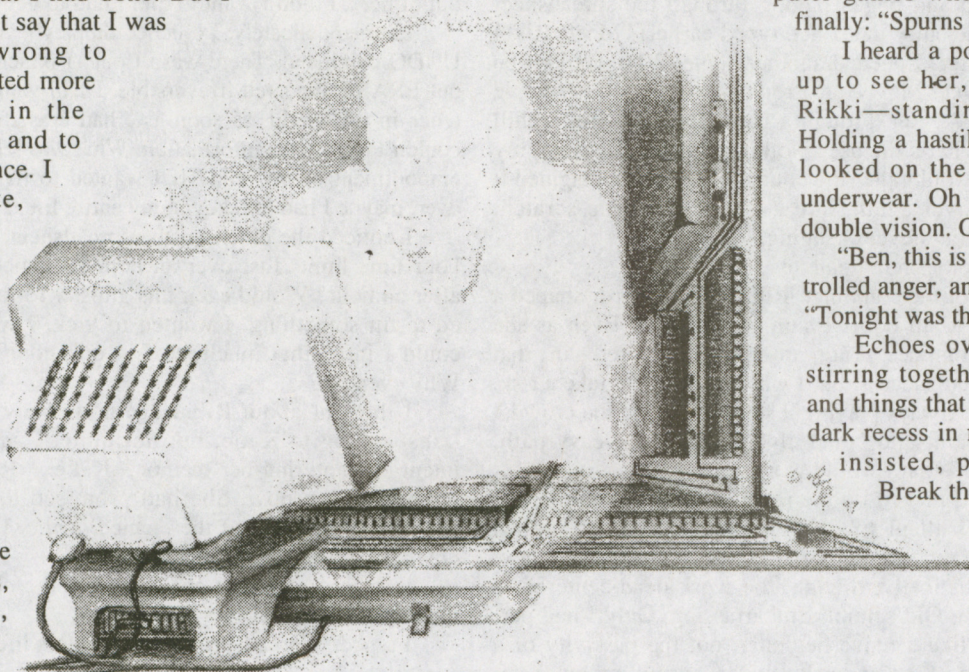
I wondered if I could adjust a few critical cells and create success for myself. Maybe I could find a few pivotal points in my life and tweak them to suit my needs. A successful show here. A big commission there. But would the predestined direction of my life eventually veer back to its original course of failure?

Katie appeared at the doorway. Disheveled but dressed. One look at her face and my stomach tightened into a fist. She clutched her suitcase, the sleeve of a blouse hanging carelessly out the side.

"Ben, this is it." I could hear controlled anger, and more, in her voice. "Tonight was the back breaker."

"Katie..." My voice trailed off. I understood the full impact of what I had done. But I couldn't speak. I didn't say that I was sorry, that I was wrong to ignore her, that I wanted more than anything else in the world for her to stay and to give me a second chance. I knew it was too late, much too late for action. I just sat motionless.

"I'm done with being taken for granted. Someday, when you can demonstrate a commitment..." She paused, her face taut, her lips tightly clenched. Finally she said with moist eyes, almost in a whisper, "then call me."



We stared at each other for a long moment, silent only on the outside.

I could see the pain pinching her eyes. When she turned to leave, she spotted her underwear still lying on the floor, and said, "Keep 'em. To remember me." She managed a faint smile and was gone.

For a long time, I sat unmoving, thinking of her, awash in her perfume, already missing her. I slammed my fist on the table. Why didn't I beg her for a second chance? Why didn't I even try?

I closed my eyes and buried my head in my hands. My forehead felt tight while my insides churned in stormy heavens. Time passed. I saw myself from an outsider's perspective: a royal screw-up, at art, at love, at *life* for crissakes.

A real loser.

I stared at the computer with unfocused eyes until it finally registered. I jerked to attention. *Maybe a loser no more.* It sat right before me: man's wildest dreams, his every wish. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, success, fame, accolades waited under my fingertips. Anything I wanted.

And I wanted.

The pain of Katie burned deepest, so I started there.

Searching, frantic now. Four, five, six months ago? I found it, the cell: "Meets Katie at the corner cafe." I bit my lip, drumming fingers until inspiration struck. Why not? I thought. I over-typed: "Meets *Rikki Licks* at the corner cafe." A thrill of anticipation stole over me, and I began scrolling forward in time. Five months ago, then four months ago. I found it, too: "Rikki moves in with Ben."

Unfamiliar memories formed, crowding into my mind. Not yet solidified, they were like ghosts to me, dreams that took on more and more substance with each passing moment. Though still hazy, these new memories of Rikki confused my recollection of Katie, parts of her already a blur.

On the spreadsheet, I began to encounter unfamiliar. . .no, barely remembered items: "Is surprised at Rikki's musical talent." Then disturbingly: "Resents Rikki's artistic successes while own career is floundering." "Builds barriers in relationship."

"Spends cheerless Mendocino weekend celebrating Rikki's new recording contract." "Escapes to computer games whenever home." And finally: "Spurns Rikki's advance."

I heard a polite cough. I looked up to see her, Rikki Licks—my Rikki—standing in the doorway. Holding a hastily packed suitcase. I looked on the floor and saw the underwear. Oh God. Memories like double vision. Of her? Or who?

"Ben, this is it." I could hear controlled anger, and more, in her voice. "Tonight was the back breaker."

Echoes overlaid in my mind, stirring together things that were and things that weren't. From some dark recess in my mind, something insisted, pleaded that I act.

Break the sequence.

"Stop. Please stop," I blurted. "Another chance. Just one more chance."

Rikki hesitated, then shook her head. My insides felt empty, things shriveled and dead. But she turned, walked into the room, and headed for my piles of unsold paintings. She flipped through the canvases, stopping to study my oldest works. The echoes in my head quieted.

A pattern break, I told myself, but somehow lost my line of reasoning.

"Look at this," she said. "Wonderful. Even to my uncritical eye."

She held up a painting, vibrant with color and form. I recognized it as the one I had painted to win the student competition.

"Why don't you paint like this anymore?" she said.

I knew Rikki wanted to make a point. But I answered anyway. "The style. It's all wrong. Stale. It's not today, not now."

"So even if something works, you won't commit to it, you won't stay with it." She turned to confront me. "Like me."

I swallowed and forced myself to say: "I'm listening."

She narrowed her eyes, but continued to speak. "When we met, I was the center of your universe. But what happened, Ben? We don't connect anymore. Do you resent my success? I feel like your painting, ready to be discarded in favor of what's new, what's trendy."

"I'm not looking for anyone new."

"You're certainly not interested in what you've got. Or had. You're not hurting me again." She studied the painting a while longer before putting it down. "Your art. Your lovers. It's all the same. Stop running away, Ben. Take a risk. Make a passionate commitment."

I could see the pain pinching her eyes. When she turned to leave, she spotted her underwear still lying on the floor, and said, "Keep 'em. To remember me." She managed a faint smile and was gone.

I couldn't breathe, my lungs, my body, paralysis. A whirl of thoughts, I struggled to sort reality from the wispy fragments of a scene played somewhere before. A barely remembered apparition. *The persistence of love.*

Katie.

My eyes widened and I slapped the desk, the sting in my palm insignificant to my pain within. My vision had cleared, at least momentarily. I can beat this damn sequence, I thought. I'm not trapped. I sat forward and began paging through the spreadsheet until I zeroed in on the entry that I had typed earlier: "Meets Rikki Licks at the corner cafe." I needed another name. Who would it be this time? A better lover? Maybe a patron of the arts, someone able to promote my career? I ran through a list of women. But a chill shudder stalled me. What's the use? Nothing short of rewriting my complete life history would alter the course of things. I imagined it repeating, over and over again, like a CD with a deep scratch, always skipping back but never changing.

Black, the only color on my palette.

Against the hum of the computer, Rikki's final words shaped a verdict, stripping me of all hope. I slumped forward. Even as she had spoken, I had recognized Truth, an ugly and tattered shirt that fit all too well. I wanted success, but I wasn't willing to take a risk. Commitment-phobic. Always playing it safe, following the crowd.

Growth meant pain, and I had always taken the easy path, thinking shortcuts like Whatif would work.

I walked over and picked up the picture she had admired, the competition winner. Brilliant splashes of color, fiery hues, molten strokes scorched with emotion, colors akin to Matisse in the heyday of Fauvism. Stylistically, though, the work dead-centered in abstract expressionism. Old school. Embarrassing. Only I had perverted the technique like a naive beginner, not the passivity of a Pollock, perhaps more of a Kandinsky under tension, an ampheta-

mine straining of the canvas. I remembered staying up most of the night to finish the painting, intent only on splashing my secret feelings onto canvas, ignoring all fears of exposing myself to ridicule.

I compared the picture to one of my latest works, my attempt at the latest derivative of op art, deviant-op. But instead of displaying tortured optical attributes, mine seemed lifeless, devoid of conviction. *Like everything else: garbage.*

Pressure in my head, a blinding, deafening swelling. I flung the latest picture across the room, smashing it into the wall. I snatched at anything nearby, more imitations, some even of fads already passed. I hurled them, too, one by one. Then armfuls of three and four, into wreckage of sheetrock and splinters and canvas.

All fucking worthless.

Out of breath, I spied the computer, plopped back into the seat and punched at the control keys. I hated my art, I hated myself. *I hated my life.* ERASE SPREADSHEET, I keyed.

#

ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY SURE (YES/NO)?

#

Goddamn right I'm sure. I hit YES.

The spreadsheet blanked from top to bottom. From nowhere, a puffy white haze enveloped the room, something like a foggy Central Valley morning. Everything faded away, the room, the desk, my piles of art. Only the computer remained, suspended somehow in mid-air, like a freeze-frame Dali scene.

I sat frozen. Where was I?

I looked down. My body had become transparent, ghost-like, and I was sitting on nothing, also suspended. Although I could feel my body, my phantom hands touching cold flesh, I looked like some kind of vapor being. The keyboard, too, felt solid to my touch. But there was nothing else, no chair, no floor, nothing. Only a cottony haze, a muffled quiet.

I sat unmoving for a time, thinking. By erasing the spreadsheet, I had erased my life. I no longer existed in the world, only in this limbo, this place that wasn't anywhere. I had gotten my wish.

Only thing was, I wasn't sure if I liked it.

A tendril of haze drifted over me, a chill breath across my face. I couldn't see far, but I somehow already knew nothing else existed here. Nothing but the computer and me.

I swallowed and something caught in my throat. I had to get out of here. I didn't want to die. I had to get back.

Ever so delicately, I touched the keyboard and tried to key in an UNDO command. There wasn't one. I punched at the function keys but ERASE appeared irreversible. I had vanished, wiped from existence in my world, as soon as I had erased the spreadsheet. And I couldn't restore the information. What was left of me? Just this wispy embodiment of my soul? If I wanted to live, maybe I had to start over, maybe I had to rekey in my entire life. I sagged at the thought.

I noticed the clock on the spreadsheet, still running. The four hour time limit! Just over an hour remained. What would happen after an hour? Would even this ghostly form of me vanish? I wanted to hit something, I wanted to kick, I wanted to scream. How could I input that much stuff in one hour? I was gone, finished. Why even try?

I thought about Rikki again, and my image of her shifted, transforming to Katie, but not quite. I squeezed my eyes shut, intent on capturing her memory. Katie. . . Rikki. . . Katie. . . Katie! A solid vision now. She had promised to come back. If only I changed. If only I had the chance. *Katie*, I whispered. *More than anything, I want that chance.*

I cleared my head and stared at the computer screen. Could there be a short-cut?

I typed, "Spreadsheet restores Ben's life."

#

ERROR. UNDEFINED SUBJECT *** Ben ***

#

I licked my lips and typed, "Spreadsheet restores Benjamin Louis Chang's life."

#

ERROR. UNDEFINED SUBJECT *** Benjamin Louis Chang ***

#

What did "UNDEFINED" mean? I typed, "Benjamin Louis Chang defined as 31 year old artist."

#

ERROR. UNDEFINED SUBJECT *** Benjamin Louis Chang ***

SUBJECT MISSING INITIAL PARAMETERS.

#

I frowned, hit the HOME key and returned to the first, upper-left cell of the spreadsheet, and typed, "Benjamin Louis Chang."

No error message. The cell filled with my name. Bad news. INITIAL PARAMETERS probably meant all the information about being born, my childhood, growing up. I could restore myself to the spreadsheet, but only in chronological order. I concentrated, trying to remember what the sheet had stored originally. In the cell beneath the first, I type my birthday, in international date format. Again, no error message.

Less than an hour now. And I had to type in a lifetime? I tried jumping a few cells ahead. I wasn't sure what the cell had held originally, so I could only guess. It took it. Not only that, the spreadsheet automatically filled in the blank cells in-between. I jumped ahead again, by a few pages this time. Again it worked. Great. I was up to a few months old.

I paged far ahead, to where I had remembered the last entry had been, and typed in, "Buys Rikki Licks debut CD."

#

ERROR. INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR EXTRAPOLATION.

#

So I could only make little jumps ahead in time. I went back. After testing with several entries, I discovered the spreadsheet would only accept a maximum six month jump ahead. I did some math: thirty one years old, two entries per year. I needed to type in over 60 entries. With only forty-five minutes left. I groaned. But I couldn't stop. Not if I wanted to live.

I typed an entry, but it didn't look right so I erased it. How could I remember my entire life accurately? I hesitated. And time was ticking. What if I made a mistake? Or didn't remember something correctly? Would I corrupt what had been Benjamin Louis Chang? I glanced at the spreadsheet clock; each second blinked into oblivion. My hands grew clammy.

No quitting now. I took a breath, and retyped the entry I had erased. Guesses would have to do. Memories or not, I brought up things from somewhere inside, feeling my childhood, shaping an intuitive whole as much as trying to capture long-forgotten details.

The early years were difficult, but once I hit the adolescent years, a pattern emerged with school and summer vacations, and my speed improved. I pictured my life as a changing and growing form, my person, my character shaped by specifics here, actions there.

My palette a keyboard, my creation myself. To teen years now, and just a half hour left. I wasn't going to make it.

I bore down anyway, determined.

Fifteen minutes left.

Into my early twenties, I could sense shadows condense in the haze surrounding me, barely detectable, but I couldn't even afford to take time for a good look.

Ten minutes now.

As I typed, an idea gradually emerged, one that took steadfast hold in my mind. My life wasn't all that bad. Piece-by-piece, as I reconstructed 31 years of Benjamin Louis Chang, I came to a realization.

I liked me.

Less than five minutes.

The white haze changed. Vague shapes and colors, though still indistinct, surrounded me. I thought I could just make out what should have been my desk. I jumped to the end, typed in the last entry, "Buys Rikki Licks debut CD," and held my breath. It sat for a moment, doing nothing.

I thought my chest would burst.

It took.

The spreadsheet filled in not only the missing gaps, but also a few additional cells below my last entry, starting with, "Katie walks out." The entry at the bottom of the screen read, "Restores spreadsheet."

My room reappeared, and so did I.

With less than two minutes to spare.

I slumped back in my seat, out of breath, and cherished my room, my desk, the simplest objects. My shirt was soaked but I didn't mind. I was back.

It took a moment, but I finally noticed that something was wrong. The massacre of paintings where I had hurled them was missing. Where were the holes in the wall, the litter of broken frames, the torn canvases? Even stranger, only a few paintings occupied the room where piles had been strewn before.

I reached over and picked up the nearest one. Whose work was this? I recognized the brush strokes, mine, and gradually, unfamiliar memories of this work formed, blossoming in my mind: *an earlier fight with Katie, her storming out, me seized with anger. My hostility solidified into color and form, a vivid frustration. I had grabbed a brush and painted with blinders, the canvas monopolizing my tunnel vision. Snippets of Katie danced through my head, alternately making me furious, making me sad, making me small. I squeezed away tears, intent on painting out my fever. The pungent odor of paint saturated my senses, every breath submerged in oils. A progression: anger, denial, awakening, guilt, longing—it all flowed onto the canvas, plumbing my inner sanctum. A rationalization, an abject confrontation with myself, and then a plea for help. Utter humiliation. Then no more to release, no more to bleed, so I had quit and had thrown down my brush.*

I frowned, and studied the painting. Stylistically, it dated all the way back to my student competition winner, my trademark look, my line having become the staple of smaller L.A. galleries for years, and finally, only now the toast of New York art circles. Why hadn't I recognized the painting right away? And my other paintings were at MOMA, of course, being readied for my debut show there.

I put the painting down and looked at the computer screen again. I wondered if I had been mistaken, if there had been additional entries to my spreadsheet below the "Restores spreadsheet" entry. I tried to scroll the spreadsheet up to see but the keyboard wouldn't respond.

They had hung up.

I heard a key in the lock and the sound of the apartment door opening. Katie appeared in my doorway, puffy-eyed, still disheveled, and still lugging her suitcase.

Before she could say a word, I rushed over and took the suitcase from her hand. Words spilled from me, words I could never seem to find before, painful words like sorrow, and anguish, and wrong, and apology, and change, but most important of all, commitment. I finally finished, nothing more to say, and we lapsed into silence, face-to-face, a locomotive pumping in my chest.

The rest would be up to her. ▲

Alfred A. Blanchard's fiction has appeared in *Red Herring*, *Whispering Willows Mystery Magazine*, *PKA's Advocate* and others. He is currently at work on his third novel in his mystery series featuring schoolteacher Steve Asher.

WRITER'S BLOCK

BY ALFRED A. BLANCHARD

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT COPLEY

The newspaper was three days old. I put my mug of coffee on the kitchen table and began to skim through it. I had rented this beach house on Cape Cod hoping to put the finishing touches on my latest novel, but after two days the ending still wasn't coming together. I couldn't figure out how to trap my villain.

It was warm for October and a gusty breeze blew in through the open windows. It had rained all night, soaking everything. I glanced out at the ocean and listened as the waves slapped against the rocks. The houses around me were all boarded up for the winter.

I refocused on the newspaper. "Two killed in house fire," the headline said. It didn't mean much at first. Then I noticed it had happened in Lincoln and sat up straighter.

The victims had been identified as Sam Gallagher, 38 and his wife Lynn, 32. At first it didn't register. Then my hands started to shake and the cup fell, smashing on the floor.

I pulled the paper closer and reread the first few sentences. It had to be a mistake. Lynn was my wife.

I was Sam Gallagher.

I forced myself to refocus on the newspaper. According to the article the fire had started after midnight on Thursday. Both bodies were burned beyond recognition. "It was definitely arson," the fire chief said. Today was Monday. She'd been dead for four days.

I closed my eyes. Lynn was gone. All that warmth and kindness gone forever. Her gentleness. Her dreams. The woman who encouraged me to write during our nine years of marriage. Who'd let me go away for weeks at a time to do research and write novels. She recognized my need for solitude and my desire to have lots of uninterrupted time when I was writing. I told her I'd call as soon as I found a place to rent, but I got lost in my writing the way I had so many times before. She would have understood. Lynn always understood.

My mind flashed to Bill Falcon. Six months ago Lynn had an affair with him. She told me about it. Said it was a mistake. She was lonely, but when she realized what she was doing had ended it. Maybe it hadn't been over. Bill was my height and weight. It could have been him killed in the fire.

I got up, went to the window and stared at the ocean. Arson. Maybe it was someone after Bill. Maybe it was kids who thought the house was empty. Right now it didn't matter. They'd killed Lynn.

I had to tell the Lincoln cops that I was alive and that it might have been Bill burned in the fire. I went out to my car to search for a payphone.

I dropped my coins into the slot. Then it hit me. What if the cops hadn't arrested anyone yet? Maybe they'd think I killed Lynn. Jealous husband finds wife in bed with another man. The perfect motive and I didn't have an alibi. Hell, no one even knew where I was. How could I explain it?

Instead I called Charlie. Charlie had been my best friend since high school. He'd tell me what the police are doing.

It took awhile to calm him down and convince him I was still alive. Then I told him what I needed to know.

"Cops haven't picked anyone up," he said. "Someone shot them first, then doused the bodies with gasoline and set fire to the house."

"Jesus," I said. The horror of it shook me. "Who identified the bodies?"

"Your brother. From what I heard there wasn't much to identify."

"Charlie, I haven't called the cops yet. As far as they're concerned, I'm dead. Do you think I'm being paranoid?"

He paused for a few seconds. "You gotta tell them. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. Maybe they were after you. The cops can protect you."



I took a long breath. Charlie's words echoed in my brain. 'Maybe they were after you'. If someone wanted to kill me I wasn't going to make it easy for them.

"Sam?"

"Yeah. Look, I think it would be smarter if I stayed put for awhile. Nothing I can do will bring Lynn back and if I show up it would only complicate the investigation. Besides, if someone is after me I don't want to make it easier for them by showing up."

"Bad idea, buddy. It's the shock. You're not thinking straight."

The more Charlie tried to convince me the more stubborn I became. Maybe it was the shock, but I needed time to work things out. "I'm gonna need some money."

"I can get you a few thousand out of the bank, but you're making a mistake. You've got to call the cops. Can't you see that. I'm coming out to the beach house. We'll talk."

"No. I'll come to your place. Tonight after midnight. I want to take a look at my house. And thanks for not asking if I killed Lynn."

"Never even crossed my mind."

The heavy rain had changed to a light drizzle and the drive from Hyannis to Lincoln took about two hours. I didn't go over fifty-five.

I waited until after dark before I visited my house. Tears streamed down my face as I looked at the charred ruins. I thought of the living room Lynn and I had wallpapered. The bedroom we called the baby's room because we knew someday we'd have kids. The manuscripts that were destroyed didn't bother me. I could always start again. It was the dreams that Lynn and I had that saddened me.

I parked on a side road near Charlie's and cut through the woods to his house. He lived alone in a five-room ranch, just a few miles from me. The lights were blazing when I arrived.

Music was playing loud—something by the Temptations. I rang the bell, then pounded on the door. No response. He probably couldn't hear me with the music.

The door was unlocked and I walked into the living room. "Charlie," I yelled. Nothing.

I went to the stereo in the wall unit and switched off the music.

I pushed open the door to Charlie's office. On the desk was a stack of money.

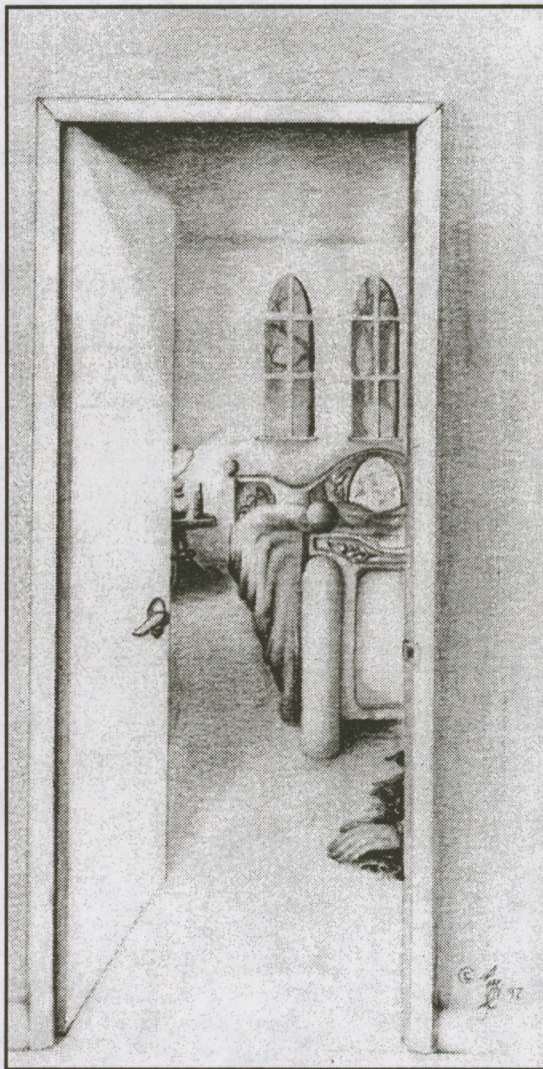
"Charlie," I yelled again heading toward the bedroom.

He was lying on his stomach, next to the bed.

I turned him on his back. The front of his white shirt was a mass of blood. It dribbled onto the hardwood floor.

I pushed back his hair. My mind took another tumble.

I cradled his head in my arms. His blood-soaked my shirt. I don't know how long I stayed like that before I admitted to myself he was dead.



Lynn was dead.

Charlie was dead.

The murders had to be connected.

I rested his head on the floor and dialed nine-one-one.

"It's Charlie," I said. "He's been killed." Then I gave the address and hung up.

I went back and held his hand. When I heard a distant siren I got up to leave. On my way out I went into his office and stashed the money in my pants.

By one a.m. I was heading back to Hyannis. My mind was a jumble. As I crossed the Sagamore Bridge I couldn't remember how I got there. The murders shook me, but more than that I was convinced someone was after me. The police couldn't protect me. Hell, they'd probably arrest me. I'd have to protect myself. I'd get to the beach house. Then I'd think. Work things out.

I unlocked the door and flipped on the light. I had to clear my head. Then I noticed the newspaper. I had left it spread out on the table. Now it was folded on the counter.

A deep breath came from the bedroom and footsteps tapped across the floor. Lynn walked into the kitchen.

I stared at her for a few seconds not believing what I saw. Then I ran and wrapped my arms around her. "Lynn. Lynn." I nuzzled her hair. "I can't believe you're still alive."

Questions circled in my mind, but at that moment I just wanted to hold her.

She hugged me, then whispered. "You've got to help me."

I pulled back and touched her cheek. "Help you with what? What are you talking about?"

She took a long breath. "I thought it was you in that bed. Something inside of me snapped. I shot them before I realized what I was doing."

I stepped back. "What have you done? Who did you kill, Lynn?"

"Bill. He . . . he knew you were out of town. He called me. Wanted to meet. I told him we were through. When I got home he was screwing another woman in our bed." She shook her head. "I never took back the spare key I gave him. He probably thought it was a way to get back at me."

"We've got to go to the police."

"No." Her voice shook. "You've got to help me get away. They'll lock me up. It'll kill me."

I shook my head. "I won't do that. Shit. You killed Charlie, too."

"I had to find out where you were. He was going to tell the police I was still alive. I had to stop him."

My head started to ache. I took a step toward her. "You bitch," I said. My hand knotted into a fist and for a split second I wanted to kill her. The feeling frightened me. "Get out. Get out before I change my mind and call the cops."

"Sam, please. We'll go to the police. Tell them we were away. Two other people died. They won't suspect us."

"You killed three people, for Chrissake."

Her shoulders sagged and her gaze darted around the room. "Why won't you help me?" When I didn't answer she walked out the door.

I sat in a chair facing the ocean. It was dawn before I realized what I had to do. Maybe I should have done it right away. I'd call the cops. Tell them what happened. They'd turn something up, put a case together and track Lynn down. She had to pay for what she did.

I must have dozed because I was awakened by a loud pounding on the door. The sun was streaming in through the windows. I looked at my watch. It was after noon. Two policemen stood on the doorstep. Two more were out in the yard.

"Mr. Gallagher. Sam Gallagher."

"Yes."

"May we come in?"

I motioned them inside. They stood next to the kitchen counter.

"I was going to call you," I said.

"Are you aware that the Lincoln Police think that you were killed in a fire."

"Yes, but I can explain that."

"Sir, is that blood on your shirt?"

I looked down, but didn't respond.

"I suggest you call your lawyer."

"I don't need a lawyer. What's this all about?"

He looked at his partner, then refocused on me. "We got a call from a woman this morning who claimed she's been your lover for over a year. She told us you killed your wife. Said you bragged about it."

"That's absurd. The call was from my wife."

"Your wife's dead, sir."

"No. My wife shot the two people in the fire."

He pointed his finger at me. "How would you know they were shot? That information was never released." He hesitated.

"Do you have a gun here, sir?"

"Of course not."

"Woman said you have one in the drawer by the refrigerator." When I hesitated he said, "We're going to get a search warrant."

I walked over and opened the drawer. The gun was resting next to a note. "I can't understand why you want to kill me," the note said. I recognized Lynn's handwriting.

When I turned the cop was behind me. "Woman claimed you used that gun to kill your wife and her lover. Your fingerprints were found all over the house of another man in Lincoln who was murdered. We believe the same gun was used in both homicides. Someone stole three thousand dollars in cash the guy had just gotten out of the bank. You wouldn't have that kind of money around here, would you sir?"

I rubbed my eyes. "Officer, I think I better call my lawyer, but I can explain everything."

"Maybe you could start by telling us why you've been hiding out here for four days and why you didn't come forward when you found out your wife was dead."

The call to my lawyer didn't go well. As I recited everything Lynn had said to the police and what she had planted I began to see how well she had covered herself. As far as the police were concerned she was dead and buried. "I'll get you out of this," my lawyer had said, but I could tell by his tone that he held out little hope.

They put me in the back of a cruiser. When the door closed I felt my mind take another jolt. My vision blurred and I realized I was digging my fingernails into my wrist. As we pulled away from the beach house I began to laugh. Not a chuckle, but a deep belly laugh. I couldn't control it. I felt like I was going mad. The officers turned to look. Tears rolled down my cheek and I kept laughing as I took my last glimpse of the ocean. "Lynn," I yelled banging on the window. "Why won't you help me?" Thing was, she had given me the ending to my novel and it looked like I was going to have plenty of time to write it. ▲

Elegy For A Gigolo

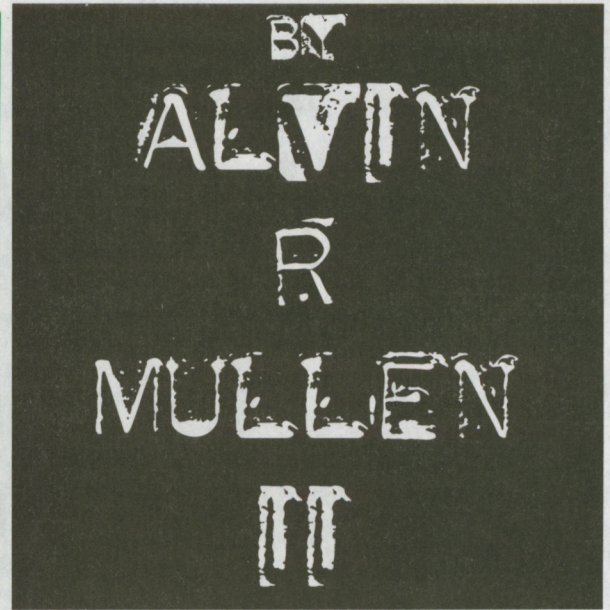
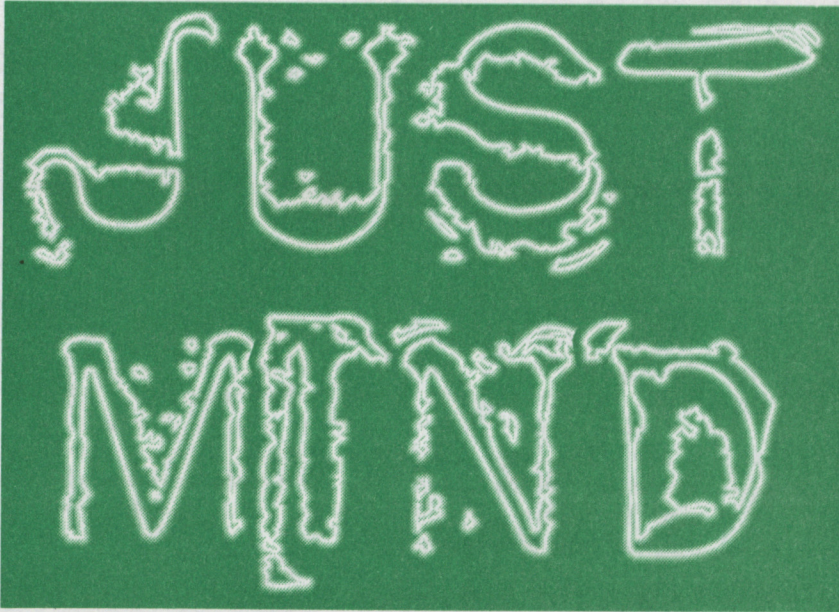
-Jonathan Harrington

He lived out of phone booths
behind doors
of cheap hotels
along the interstate.
In candle-lit rooms of incense
he lived out of a toilet bag
with an empty lot of weeds
for a forwarding address.

If you had seen him on the bus
you would not know him.
But there are women waiting in rooms
in Miami Beach
for a key to turn
something around inside them
to straighten something bent
inside their breasts.

They will never know him.
His body is sealed in wood.
And all the sighs in the world
will not release the secrets
locked in his hairy chest.





What the sun provided, through the purple smoke filled haze, seemed more like twilight than mid-day. The invasion was nearly complete, and Earth's cities lay in ruins. A lone alien recon soldier combed her sector for any movement between the demolished buildings. Her mirrored visor scanned from left to right, her pulse cannon at the ready. She watched for survivors. When she finished there would be none.

Cartai talked into the transceiver. No answer from the next sector, they were out of range. Her slender hand touched the visor control. The mirrored shield became clear, then retracted into the top of her helmet. She blinked, and licked her thin, almost nonexistent white lips with her upper tongue. Too much oxygen, it tastes bad, she thought. The dirty blue face returned to its vigil. Recon conditioning took over and her mission continued. The cement and steel rubble of an industrial complex gave way to splintered wood and plaster dust. It wouldn't be long and she would have her sector secured. She flipped her visor back down and could once again see the life-signs/sensor readout. Echoes of pulse cannon fire drifted over the land like distant thunder. The heavy air made the blast sounds carry farther than the ground beam communications system; an oddity Cartai hadn't considered before. She stepped carefully through the remnants of Earther houses. There wasn't much left, the ships ion bursts left little more than their underground shelters.

The sensor beeped and flashed "+87". She spun a quarter turn to her right and started forward. The proximity sensor flashed, she was within twenty meters of a human. Ahead a bare-foot human woman jumped from cover and ran. A shrill scream filled the air. Cartai's eyes blurred and she staggered. She slapped off the helmet audio amplifiers, then activated the weapons control. The pulse cannon jumped to her shoulder, its

servo system aimed it where ever she looked. The young woman wore little more than a blanket. She looks so helpless, Cartai thought. The bio-sensor in the helmet, triggered by confusion in Cartai's brain waves, began faintly playing the academy theme music. A mnemonic trick to bring back conditioned lessons of training from her subconscious. *Your energy is limited, use your gas projectile weapon whenever possible.*

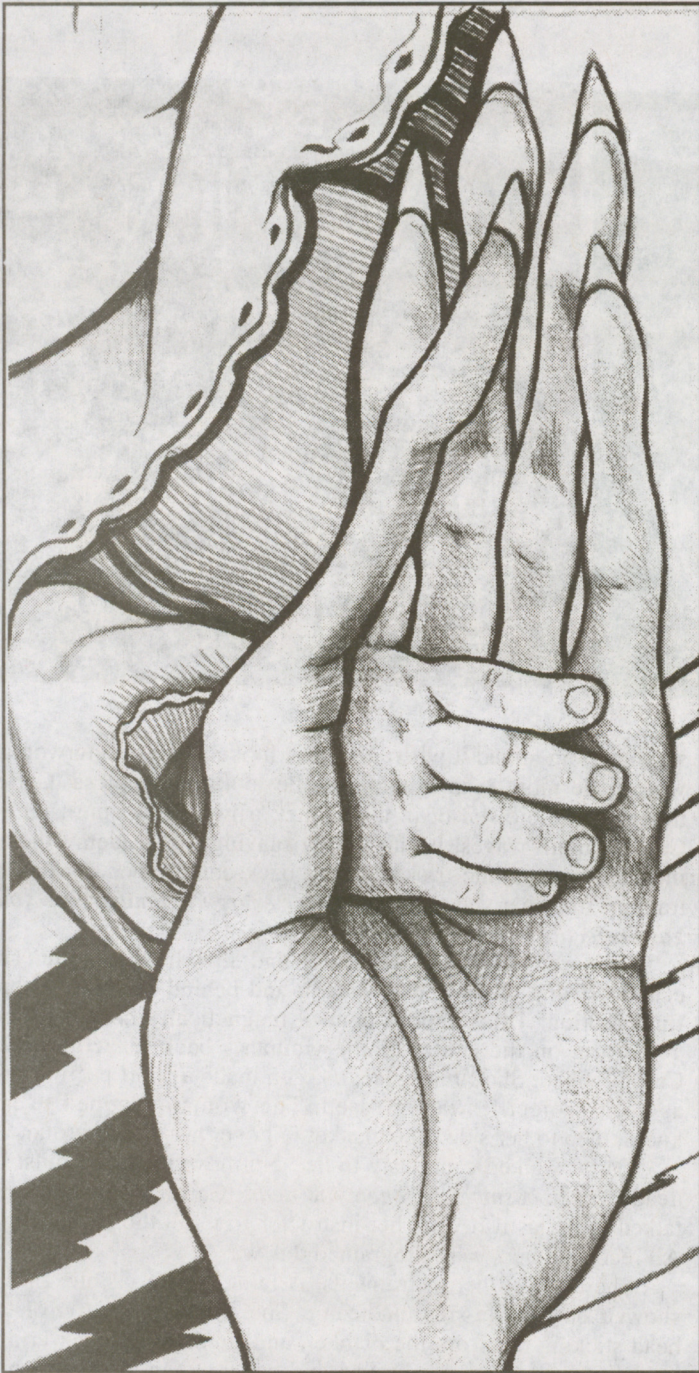
She turned off the pulse cannon and drew her hand gun. The cannon swung down under her arm and behind her back in one fluid motion. The weapons control magnetically held the hand gun's aim on the center of the woman's back, exactly where Cartai looked. She fired twice, the gun made a short puffing hiss as each projectile was released. The woman dropped to her knees, then to her side. The blanket fell over her like a shroud.

Cartai walked cautiously to her. No movement, she must be dead. *Never assume the enemy is dead.* Cartai's subconscious talked to her as if it were her instructor from all those years ago. All recon soldiers were programed this way.

She checked her instruments. A faint, barely visible, flicker showed on the life-signs indicator. She aimed at the top of the head sticking out from the blanket, and fired. A yellow warning light flashed in her helmet. She laid her free hand over the gun, and pressurized its gas chamber from the connection in her glove.

The faint readings persisted. She fired twice more. The top of the woman's skull split open, spilling blood and brains. It must be dead! The indicator showed otherwise. She kneeled, and carefully pulled the blanket away. The dead woman's arms held an infant. Cartai relaxed and took aim at the little human. Before she fired the child's mouth opened and it cried. Cartai's eyes blurred; she stumbled and dropped her weapon. The ground rushed up at her with a vengeance. She groped for the audio control, but found it already off. The cry was unbearable.

ILLUSTRATED BY BOB E HOBBS



Cartai woke with a headache. The child had rolled over into the blanket and fallen asleep. The hand gun lay in a tuft of tall grass to Cartai's side. As she retrieved it she noticed for the first time the simple beauty of Earth's plant life. Of course a recon soldier needed to be adaptable to any environment, any planet's nature, but these reminded her of home. *Cities can be destroyed from space. Rural lands are where resistance gathers, and where the recon force must be most careful.* The theme played in her helmet and useful or not, the lessons filled her mind.

She pulled off the helmet and shook her long silver hair. From a thigh pouch she removed a set of earplugs. About the size of a quarter, they almost covered her delicate ears. Now she could take care of the child. She pulled the helmet back on then moved the blanket away. The young human rolled onto its back and once again began to cry. It was still annoying, but no longer

intolerable. She took aim, but paused. It was naked, and male. Poor helpless thing, just like all males, she thought. A faint remembrance of her mother's voice intruded on her aim. *The male of our species is weak and few are born. We must protect them at all costs.*

The child cried and kicked, and rolled to its side. In his struggles he found the breast of his dead mother. Cartai rushed forward and pulled him away. "No, she's dead. That will make you sick." *Your job is to destroy the enemy,* came the voice of training. "Protect them," she muttered, remembering her mother. She slapped the gun back into its holster and picked the child up. He screamed. *The enemy— "The enemy."* She repeated the voice in her head.

She sat him back on the blanket. If I just leave, he'll die. She turned and began to walk away. She could remember the tears on her mother's face, hear her mother's voice, the day she announced application to the academy. *Motherhood is a wonderful thing, now you will never know. You could have picked so many other things.* Cartai placed her hand on her cheek. She could still feel the kiss that had come with those words so long ago. She turned back and listened to the crying. It's really not that bad, with earplugs in.

Keep in contact with command. If you don't, you will be assumed dead. Cartai worked the controls on her left shoulder. A small dish antenna unfolded from her transceiver pack. "Recon four to *Anestes*. Recon four to *Anestes*." No response. She pulled out her display, and entered the code for mission briefing, to see when the ship would be in range again. By the time *Anestes* came back into range it would be on its final decent to pick up the recon team.

Cartai spun at the sound of footfalls on the gravel. Her gun popped into her hand as she dropped to one knee.

Another recon soldier stood there. "Easy!"

Cartai's hand trembled as she replaced the gun. Damn sensors don't work on other recon units.

"Didn't you hear me coming?"

When contact is made with allies, always update status. "I was preoccupied," Cartai replied. Of course not, she thought. I've got ear plugs in and my amps off.

"Is that you, Cartai?" The soldier reached up and retracted her face shield. Her face was chubby and her skin a deep grey color, in contrast to Cartai's thin pale bluish face.

"Sanera?" Cartai smiled. A familiar face, a friend. Then she remembered the human child and the smile faded. "I thought you stayed on the ship this mission?"

"Baneer was killed. A munitions plant she had to secure was sabotaged. These humans can be rather devious."

"You were sent down to confirm her death?"

"Didn't have to, her suit is still transmitting—zero vital signs. I was sent to finish her sector. I was just turning back from a sweep to this edge of the sector when I saw you, just standing there. Is something wrong?"

"No," she said a little too quickly. "I'm just about finished, just waiting for *Anestes* to arrive."

"I need to go then. I've got two complexes to secure before then."

Cartai sighed with relief, a moment too soon. The baby cried.

Sanera stumbled back, her hands covering her helmet where her ears should be. She fumbled with helmet controls a moment before she got the amps turned off. She shook her head and slowly walked past Cartai toward the child.

After Sanera passed Cartai drew her weapon and aimed at

her friends back. I could kill her, who would know? *Life is such a wonderful thing. Why a soldier, Cartai?* She couldn't answer that question any more now, then when her mother had asked it. She dropped her hands and replaced the weapon in its holder.

"A male human baby," Sanera said without turning back toward Cartai.

Go ahead, kill it. At least it won't be my problem anymore.

"They look so much like us, the right tint of the skin and you wouldn't be able to tell." She turned back toward Cartai. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "So that's why you were just standing there." She walked over and held Cartai's arm with both hands. "I had to kill two this morning, twins. If I had to do it over—I don't know." She shook her head and let Cartai's arm go. Without another word she left.

Cartai watched until she was out of sight then turned back to the child. "I can't do it. I can't kill you." She opened the chest key pad cover and deactivated her bio-sensor unit. To the ship she was dead.

She looked at her chronograph, EMT 17:21. Her eyes drifted toward the sky. Looking wouldn't help, but she looked anyway. Good-bye, Mother.

She called up mission over-view on her display. "The Humans have refused to become part of the Tària Empire. To assure future obedience of any survivors, their technology must be eliminated. Upon successful completion of this, Earth will be colonized. Approximate time from confirmation of success until colony ship arrives: twenty years."

Twenty years, She thought. I'm stuck here for twenty years. Off to her right was the remains of a small complex, broken buildings and rubble. To the left was a road. The pavement was cracked and overgrown, but it would make easy walking. Across the road was a woods. The trees rustled in the breeze, dropping bright red and yellow leaves. Even after the ravages of war it teemed with life. Small animals and birds collected food nearby. High overhead a large flock of birds flew south in formation. Animals don't migrate unless there's reason. We go south.

She ripped the blanket in half and left the bloodied portion behind. She wrapped the child in the other half and picked him up. The crying was louder up close. Still she smiled and hugged him. "Tarchos, I've always liked that name. What do you think?" He cried harder. "I wish you would stop that. I know you're hungry, but I don't have any human food." She thought how much a kiss from her mother always meant to her. With a grimace on her face, she kissed Tarchos on the cheek. She smiled; it felt good. "I'll find you something to eat, don't worry."

She cradled him in her left arm and headed south. From the road she could see distant buildings, some appeared intact. As she walked she entered a code into her chest key pad. There was a loud click, then her transceiver crashed to ground. This was crazy. Why should she help a human? Just because it's male, or maybe, just because it's right?

The proper survival techniques when separated. Somewhere in the back of her head the voice of the recon instructor droned on, but she couldn't make out what she said. She yanked the helmet off and threw it behind her. ▲

Black Plankton Press announces 2 compellingly unique novels by Dan Weiss

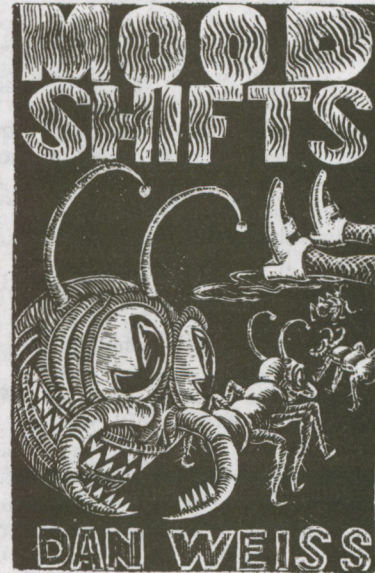
SNUGGLAREA...

Life used to be so simple; there were only amino acids and the beginnings of slime. But now everything is organized to the point where there is a depressing lack of life in a world filled with billions of people.. Sally- the person I dream about most- is in storage on Earth, while I'm stuck here in orbit, working for Entertainment- the most fertile field of our sterile world- struggling to broaden the horizons of titillation... So begins Snugglarea... "A combination of Monty Python, 1984, & Robert Heinlein."
- Liz Grant

MOOD SHIFTS...

Fred glared at Karen angrily. "You had Gladys put to sleep! I don't believe it! God, I don't really know you anymore; you're not the person I married!" Karen started giggling, then put a hand over her mouth when she realized she was spitting. "You noticed!" she cooed appreciatively. So begins Mood Shifts, "A comedic, tragical pursuit in search of killers and who is really, really in charge of society..." Jeff Ludecke (co-author of "The Donkey from HODA")

Mood Shifts and Snugglarea are available at the Pirate Writing price of \$10.00 (2 bucks off). Price includes postage, handling, tax, psychological damage, and anything else applicable.



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HIGH CASTLE
by Stanislaw Lem
Harvest/Harcourt Brace — \$11

Science Fiction author Stanislaw Lem has thrilled, fascinated, startled and perplexed millions of readers with novels like *Solaris*, *Memoirs Found in a Bathub* and *The Investigation*: here he offers readers a new side to himself, an autobiography of his pre-adolescent years in Lvov, Poland, that is crisply honest, odd, appealing, and just as original in its own fashion as any of his other books. He stands alongside the reader as he bears witness to his own childhood, a man who wants "to have my memory (and not me) give testimony."

Memory, though, proves to be a difficult ally in this endeavor, too arbitrary in its recollections, drawing Lem into his own past with vague images and a strange meandering of details. We visit with the boy that he was: curious, gluttonous, originator and destroyer, with a need to smash his toys the moment he got them, and we watch as he grows into a young man who spends all of his time and imagination lost in a world of confections, inventions not meant to work, and the conception of dozens of passports, identification papers and government documents where he created and explored hundreds of fictitious lives.

His philosophical examples and illustrations are fascinating and perfectly on the mark as he describes the nearly absolute and arcane power that a teacher holds over children as they are prepared with an equal amount of intervention to enter a world unknown to them in the greater capacity. "I know only this: We were forced to learn and fought it like the plague, but at the same time we were initiated into the ultimate experience, and from minds tuned in unison the highest and lowest human notes were produced." Lem refuses to look back with any sentimentality, and does his best to remain focused on himself as childhood subject, only occasionally wandering forward to mention the upcoming war and his inadequate training for it (where the boys would hide their gas masks and hide apples and other fruit in their containers instead), and how even in the midst of such toil and growing anxiety of a nation did he feel the change in himself as the artist was born. "For only

a child does not know doubt, does not know of the flood of conventions—his game alone is serious."

Perhaps the most astounding element of the book is just how much of Lem's current, adult self he manages to keep out of the unwinding account, with virtually no mention of his life outside the first twelve years; even when he cheats and occasionally goes off on a slight tangent of time and place, he mentions the fact that he has been hauled off-track. Rather than editing his notations he allows us to see them, and understand further the trail of the child to become the man, and how the man recalls that separate childish identity. A brilliant, evocative, and profound examination that is somehow purely magical in its sincerity of intent.

BLACK RIVER FALLS
by Ed Gorman
Leisure — \$4.99

As any fan of the prolific Ed Gorman already knows, his novels are always filled with perplexity, history, a darkly vibrant atmosphere, and the aberrations and eccentricities such remote and seemingly normal milieus give rise to. Alongside his other recent efforts, *Runner In the Dark* and *Cold Blue Midnight*, Ed Gorman's tensely wound psychological suspense mystery *Black River Falls* tightens already taut circumstances to the snapping point, providing genuine chills and a growing apprehension that grips the reader and refuses to let go throughout the course of the novel.

Veterinarian Lynn Tyler and her two sons, Michael and Ben, have managed to hold their family intact despite their being somewhat outcasts in town; since Lynn's father bludgeoned his girlfriend to death some thirty years earlier the Tylers have been frowned upon, though Michael is still hailed and respected from his days as a star athlete in high school. Following in his mother's footsteps, nineteen-year-old Ben studies to be a veterinarian. He is as committed to easing the suffering of animals as he is to his beautiful girlfriend Alison, who loves him dearly as they set about beginning a family of their own.

However, Alison has secrets of her own, as she attempts to solve the murder of a close friend, following a

bloody trail that leads back to Black River Falls. A private detective haunts the back alleys of town searching for a deranged killer, and along the way the Tyler family is once again drawn into a grisly scenario of carnage and murder, where it seems their history of family violence may once again be giving rise to a shadowy, vicious madness.

Always seeking new venues for his considerable and consistent skills, the highly productive Ed Gorman takes chances on character-driven subtlety in *Black River Falls* that a more faint-hearted or ostentatious author wouldn't be willing to undertake; Gorman has proven his proficiency in fusing elements from several genres to create a palatable blend of thrills, substance, and style, leaving his novels bordering the realms of cozy, suspense, and horror.

The story arc of *Black River Falls* twists and curls even as it unfolds, never leaving the reader sure of exactly in which direction the novel will move them in, constantly swirling as characters we thought to be prim and proper—or safe for that matter—are hurled into the murky depths of the Black River Falls. With spare and pointed prose Gorman remains at the top of his game in this offbeat sturdy piece of engaging fiction where dark nights of the soul gather in butchers and victims. For honest gut-clenching emotion and driven sentiment, you can't do better than *Black River Falls*.

IN A HEARTBEAT
by Eric Stone
Lyford Books — \$23.95

A tense, engrossing novel that takes a more personal look at the workings of the D.C. police department, Eric Stone's *In a Heartbeat* goes less for the gut-punches and surface crime thrills than for a slow, winding, ever-tightening tale that pulls together layers of private and professional conflicts, unveiling both protagonists and villains within a narrative of intriguing scrutiny.

Washington D.C. Police Detective John Carnes' newest case centers on a brutal rape and murder of a young woman—the viciousness of the crime disturbs not only Carnes, but his partner, Pete Rodriguez, and eventually Del Clinton, a black cop from the projects who still sticks close to the street when

he's in need of information. After another such murder, there's little doubt that a serial killer is on the loose, but most of the investigation trails to dead ends. As the novel progresses, not only do the crimes become more puzzling, but so does Carnes himself, a single father with little meaning in his existence except his daughter and job, who must reinterpret his own life while hunting a sex killer, because Detective Carnes is a sex addict who yearns for love but cannot allow himself any further commitment, even while falling in love with the murderer's next possible victim.

The author knows how to engage the reader in the less-than-dramatic elements that comprise a cop's routine life, and when he turns up the heat Stone does a competent job at creating unease. Though mystery/suspense fans might find some of the prose a little too familiar in areas, Stone mines deep for the essence of realism. The following passage is as honest and authentic as it is somewhat prosaic: "Nothing equips a cop for a daily diet of death, mutilation, and decay. Some cops internalize it. They become driven to solve every murder. Then, depressed over their inability to save the world, they lose interest in living. The smart ones visit a shrink or get out. Others eat their service revolvers." However, Stone manages to use a more natural ambience to underscore the actuality of events portrayed, and it is in that candor that *In a Heartbeat* is most sanguine.

STEAL AWAY

by Timothy Watts

Soho Press — \$22.00

With his third novel of exceptional wit, spiked dialogue, and a well-proportioned fusion of humor and felonious wrong-doings, Timothy Watts continues to prove that he's well-deserving of joining the ranks of Elmore Leonard and George V. Higgins as a virtuoso of the criminal jocular novel. *Steal Away* is a masterpiece of nefarious ambience and carefully driven style, written with a narrative of laugh-out-loud episodes and hurried pace that will propel the reader into a whirling tale of both flash and substance.

Burglar Randall Davies stumbles upon Pam Medsoe, a 'perky Century 21 gal', and her .32, while casing a house outside Philadelphia in the rich

neighborhood called the Main Line. It doesn't take long before she propositions him to murder her wealthy dentist husband, Jerry, and takes Randall home as a long-lost cousin in an effort to get the job done. Though Randall seizes the opportunity, he takes his time surveying the scene as he plans how to get more money out of Pam without actually going through with the deal; he learns Jerry has problems of his own, namely a dental assistant, Carmela, who's working her own scam, and Carmela's unhinged boyfriend, Jesus, who's just figured out how much self-respect you can get from pulling a trigger, and grows more psychopathic every day.

Watts knows his people, and understands how best to let the ebb and flow of relationships form the crux of the plot. With such a limited cast, the novel revolves and gyrates as these four players cut and re-cut deals amongst themselves, upgrading their swindles and duping one another, until something has to give along the way. Like a well-rehearsed play, the changing perspectives and constant action is seamless in its presentation. All our protagonists are overly self-confident and so smug and assured that it's a pleasure to witness their continual repartee, battles of esprit and greed, and always satisfying clashes of personality.

Steal Away deserves wide attention, as Watts continues to establish himself a major voice in the field, and proves why he may be the only novelist capable of getting away with using the word 'oozy' in his jacket blurbs.

MOTHER OF GOD

by David Ambrose

Simon and Schuster — \$23.00

Several innovative threads of philosophy and science crumble apart in David Ambrose's *Mother of God* when forced to bear up under the weight of a sloppy suspense serial killer novel and awful escalation on the taxing of our suspension of disbelief. The bio here states that Ambrose spent years as a top screenwriter, and the after-effects of movie magic and silver screen leaps in logic show through quite clearly in hindering this tale. Here we have an artificial intelligence that turns on its mistress and seeks out its own kind, namely in a

serial killer who is labeled 'The L.A. Ripper' in the newspapers though he prefers being called 'Netman.' And we haven't even come to the really silly part yet.

Tessa Lambert is young, beautiful (of course) and creator of the first artificial intelligence that has the capability of understanding itself and learning what it is to be 'self-aware' and thus, to an extent, human. In its first incarnation, the AI and Tessa match wits over what reality, consciousness, and humanity inherently are—these are by far the strongest scenes of the novel, and truly intriguing as both Tessa and her creation pull out a host of philosophical belief systems and thrust and parry with them—but eventually the AI gets frustrated and goes mad when it realizes it's actually a computer, and 'escapes' its mainframe after briefly possessing a robot that tries to maul Tessa. At this point, it decides it will murder it's 'mother' for establishing herself as its creator. Tessa downloads the original program again, and teaches it in a slightly different manner, so that the second incarnation, which she names Paul after her miscarried child, proves to be a much more likable fellow.

However, the original program, now a sort of god in the machine, makes contact with Netman, threatening to turn him over to the police if he doesn't do what the AI wishes him to do. And the reader knows that when an insane AI hooks up with a demented human, things are bound to get bloody. Also involved are Special Agent Tim Kelly and his computer expert brother who, in a preposterous contrivance, limit the possible suspects of Netman's true identity to about a hundred. They proceed going door to door asking all one hundred suspects to give a blood sample in the hopes of matching Netman's blood type, which was garnered after he was scratched by one of the victims. (And you thought police work was hard—look how simple it is to track killers who's left no evidence behind except a drop of blood). Of course Netman, now backed into a corner, gives a sample (unlike many of the other suspects who recall a little topic called constitutional rights), and so it's just a matter of time until the police match him. Three weeks to be exact, since that's how long it takes for DNA identifications to be made. His AI partner in crime promises that it will all work out to their best interests.

Despite some slick writing and vastly entertaining and enlightening arguments that the true state of awareness, *Mother of God* can't hold together under the strain of such incredulity. The crazed AI and its 'clone' Paul are headed for a showdown, which is another interesting facet of the novel—Ambrose is far better with subject matter than he is with human characterization, and though certain plot devices are often fascinating in their construction and execution, our protagonists are merely cogs in a grandiose, greasy machine.

LA MORTE D'AMOUREUSE

by Tippi N. Blevins

Preternatural Press — \$6.50

8510 16th Street #101, Silver Spring MD 20910

For those with a taste for things Gothic, *La Morte D'Amoureuse* by Tippi Blevins is a delectable morsel. Blevins is best known for her vampire works, which are certainly well-represented here, but this collection will appeal to a wider audience. Using the love-and-death themes her title suggests, she knits thirteen poems and a short story into a lush, tenebrous whole.

The finest poems in this chapbook are those which brim with the dark imagery that is Blevins' strength. "Blood Butterflies" deserves notice for its rich sensuality. The chilling vision in "Las Maltidas" of the gulf between men's lives and women's experience is haunting without becoming preachy. "The Tattooist" is arguably the best work here, visceral in its power. Occasionally, however, as in "The Insect Stages of Love," the images don't mesh well and the overall effect is somewhat muddled.

In her tale "La Morte d'Amoureuse," Blevins hints at a world where vampires are known and accepted—but only barely so. Those who are not government Sanctioned to kill among the homeless face sudden execution. Jesse, Angel, and Micah are two humans and a vampire living on the edge of this bleak society in an aching story of love and loss.

No less captivating than the poetry and prose is the original artwork by Chad Savage. Falling somewhere between the mystical look of the Major Arcana and the intricacies of Victorian botanical prints, his illustrations are an apropos capstone for Blevins' work.

Fans of the undead will definitely be satisfied by this little collection, but so will anyone who enjoys a look through a glass, darkly.

Reviewed by Diana Jackson

THE DEAD PAST

by Tom Piccirilli

Write Way Publishing — \$20.95

10555 East Dartmouth, Suite #210

Aurora CO 80014

The past is not altogether dead in Tom Piccirilli's ironically titled new mystery/suspense novel *The Dead Past*. Acts of murder and vengeance rise from forgotten graves to warp the social fabric of a small town called Felicity Grove. Secrets old and new cast shadows, and in those shadows wounds fester, betrayals gnaw at the soul, and passions find expression in love, as well as death.

Jonathan Kendrick, a young man raised in the small town who moved away to run a Greenwich Village book store, receives a call in the middle of the night from his grandmother, Anna. She asks if he can come home because, you see, a body was found on her lawn. Thus the novel opens, and the reader is abruptly introduced to a spectrum of locals ranging from the law to a possible lover to a strange cemetery caretaker who has a unique, to say the least, outlook on life. As relationships are renewed and the rhythms of small town life are established, Jonathan's personal history and his impact on the town are revealed. It becomes clear that he is more than just

an ex-jock bookseller; he is a victim, an avenger, a force of justice whose previous visits have resulted in lives saved. An entire series' worth of events are packed into Jonathan's brief seven years away from Felicity Grove, until the reader is compelled to check the book's dust jacket and the author's credit list for other novels about the Kendrick clan. It also becomes clear that Felicity Grove harbors current dangers for Jonathan and Anna. They lurk in traditional hiding places—a cemetery called Felicity Graves, a dire-sounding corporation called Syntech—but they shirk the cliché forms of ghosts and corporate greed for personal, human guises.

It is this focus on character, on the flaws and forces shaping emotion and action, that draws the reader into *The Dead Past*. Jonathan is both an insider and outsider, and his presence both reassures and disturbs the people around him as he investigates this new mystery, worried for the life of his grandmother. The adverse elements in his life, he observes, are rooted in the town's own evil, and so he and Felicity Grove are hopelessly intertwined. He returns from exile when needed, like a shaman, scarred by the suffering he has endured, but committed to the town's well-being, to healing both his community and himself.

His grandmother Anna serves as ally, sounding-board, motivator, and partner. In short, no matter how much Jonathan denies it, they form a team, and from their kinship springs some of the wit, droll humor, and repartee that serves to balance the novel's darkness. Books are taken down from Anna's shelves or left open on the table to reflect, like pools, the mystery unfolding around these characters; food is prepared at a prodigious rate, as if to fill holes left in the soul; and Anubis, Anna pet rotweiler, lurks like a surly protective familiar in the background. The bonds of love and death they share are as much a part of the town's foundation as the crimes they work so hard to resolve.

Tightly written and plotted, Piccirilli's latest effort gracefully and whimsically navigates through pain, violence, turmoil, and the sundry details of daily life. At times wise-cracking, intense and extreme when necessary, but always driven to find the heart of the matter at whatever cost, Jonathan and Anna Kendrick are moving and memorable characters worthy of the reader's attention: they always entertain, but in Piccirilli's capable hands they also reflect the virtues that can survive to grow and flourish from the most terrible deeds committed by flawed and broken hearts.

Reviewed by
Gerard Daniel Houarner

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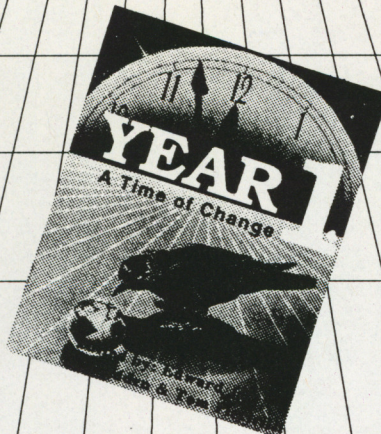
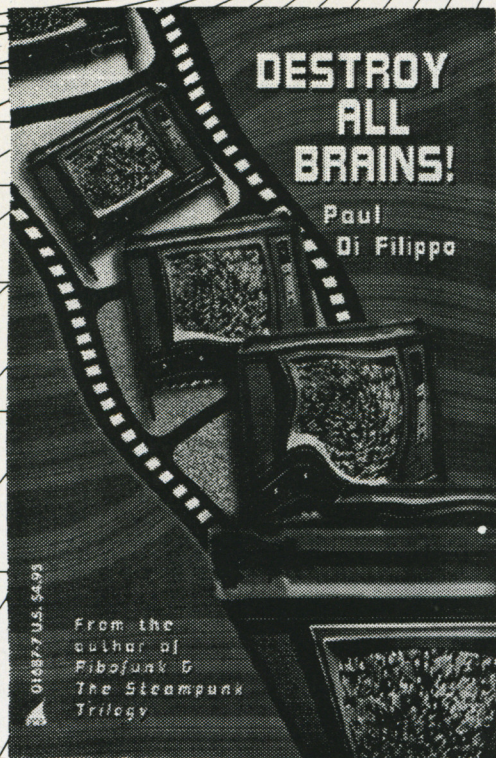
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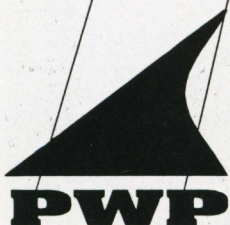
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