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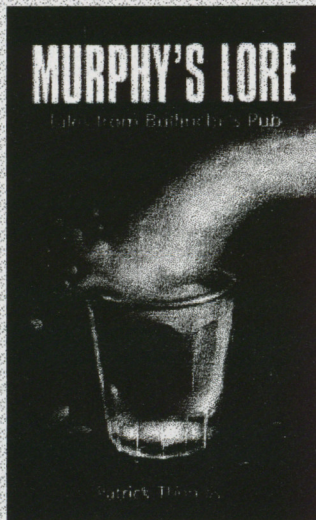
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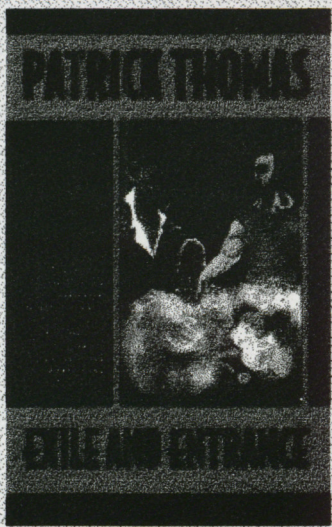
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*in*nu*en*does* (noun), 1 : insinuations, hints;
2 : victims of the immune system destroying TADS virus, forced to live in sterile environments (called "Bubbles"); victims have three stages followed unequivocally by death, often from something as simple as the common cold or the flu.

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From the Editor's Desk


Like in Allen Steele's classic novel *Orbital Decay*, the surprise promised in my last editorial is... THERE IS NO SURPRISE! Actually, here's what happened: I started a new job in January of 1997. This meant more work, more hours, and less time for *Pirate Writings*. Knowing this, I had planned on the issue you now hold in your hands being a double-sized one—therefore achieving my four issues per year. I was going to do it like an old ACE Double; two covers, two everything. But, when I thought about it, and discussed it with others in the field, the general consensus was that my subscribers would not be happy. Then there was the problem of people whose subscriptions expired with this issue. Why should they get a freebie and the rest of you don't? Well, another good idea gone to shit.

Some good news: the contracts have been signed and production has begun on *The Best of Pirate Writings: Tales of Fantasy, Mystery & Science Fiction* edited by yours truly. The release date is mid-98 and I will inform everyone of price, etc., as the date gets closer.

As fall fades and winter engulfs Long Island I find my spirit waning. I suppose it's the cold, all the plants dying, everyone hermiting indoors like squirrels. I already miss camping on the beach at Montauk, Sunday afternoon BBQ's... I guess that's why "they" say that absence makes the heart grow fonder—well F—beeeeb that! It's depressing to me. Ever notice that there are people you see all Summer and don't see once during the Winter? The pools are closed, the BBQ covered, all the chairs put away—makes me feel old. Then there's Christmas looming like an ex-girlfriend with an attitude, and the scramble begins as to where am I eating, when, why aren't you eating with me—kind of takes the fun out of it all—I think I'll stay home and have a TV dinner (with some fine wine, of course). Well, all I can do now is wait for the Tulip and Daffodil bulbs to sprout.

Finally, I recently learned that a friend of mine's father only has four months to live. While I do believe in some force that binds this crazy world together, let's call it God, I'm not a religious man... except when I need help. My prayers, whatever they are worth coming from me, are with him. God speed.

Shit, I wouldn't blame you if you threw this rag away. Who wants to spend \$4.95 to get bummed-out. Read-on and try to enjoy... and I'll see you in spring!

Best 

PIRATE WRITINGS

Tales of Fantasy, Mystery • Science Fiction

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Letters

Dr. Mr. McFadden:

I would like to make a plea on behalf of all your subscribers: Please run the *Surreal World* Column in every issue. While I understand that what Mr. Carr writes about is not intended to be "news" I find his column extremely interesting.

I am a scientist and teach astronomy at a local college and I was surprised to see that Mr. Carr not only painted a picture of mystery in his last *Surreal World* column (SW: Martian Mysteries - PW#14) but a factually correct interpretation of some of the biggest puzzles Mars has to offer.

Let's see more...more often.

Sincerely,
Wayne Kendel

[Interesting you should write, Wayne. When I originally came-up with the concept of Surreal World it was designed to be a magazine! That's right, I was going to start a magazine called Surreal World. But, I decided to make it a column and Kevin has done a great job. What do you think readers? Every issue?]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

I like Miniature Golf! You got a problem with that? Just cause you think it's boring doesn't mean other people don't enjoy it. I participate in the tournament that airs it's finals on ESPN. It's a national tournament that is taken very seriously. I didn't appreciate you making fun of it in your last editorial.

Sincerely,
Pissed-off Golfer

[Well...if you read my editorials your either a subscriber or you buy the 'zine off the rack... so, the customer is always right. Sorry... asshole. Get ready for the next Dale Hoover episode.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

Pirate Writings #14 was the first I ever saw and boy do I feel cheated. I picked-up the issue at a local B&N, brought it home and read it cover to cover. Where has this magazine been all my life? It has it all! Enclosed is a check for \$50. Please sign me up for a

two year subscription and send me as many back issues as you can via the Back Issue Bonanza ad on page 64 of issue #14. I look forward to reading your fine magazine for years to come.

Always,
Christine Marsh

P.S. - Don't get to depressed about the state of man—yes *Pen International* is a bit much, but each to his/her own.

[PW does have it all. In fact, when I first started the magazine the sub-title was The Best of It All! Thanks for your support and I hope PW continues to provide you with what your looking for.]

Dear Mr. McFadden:

As always, I enjoyed all the fiction in the most recent issue (#14) but the exceptional standout tales for my tastes were E. Jay O'Connell's "The Listening Box" and Steve Hamilton's "The Silence." Both of these stories expressed so much turmoil, intrigue, and narrative power in such a subtle fashion. Each of the authors managed to wind in so many different elements that on the face apparently had nothing to do with each other, and then all at once knotted them together in a most effective fashion. Hats off to these authors and for the unblinking eye of your editorial staff in choosing them.

Yours,
Timothy Haldane

[Thank you. I know I've printed letters of this type before, but I just can't help it. It's rare in today's world that someone takes the time to write something nice.]

Dear Mssrs. McFadden & Piccirilli:

Keep up the good job, you sexy devils!

Sincerely,
Michelle, a voluptuous fan

[Well, this wasn't exactly a letter... this note came scrawled on the back of a postcard with a picture of the fattest women I have ever seen on it. Steve Sawicki probably send it. FUCK YOU!]

•••••
Your letters and comments are welcome:
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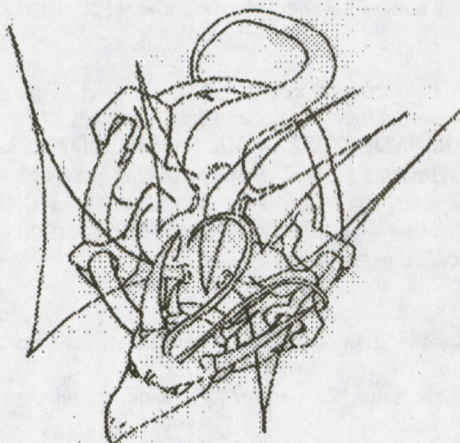
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[publication date: October 1997]

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Robert J. Randisi is a well-known author with over 300 books to his credit in the Mystery, Western, and Suspense genres. About his novel *Eye In The Ring* Elmore Leonard wrote, "If Bob Randisi's *Eye In The Ring* moved any faster you'd have to nail it down to read it." We hope to see Bob within the pages of PW again very soon.

Like A Stranger

a
"Nick Delvecchio"
story

by Robert J.

Randisi

Illustrated by
Robert M. Copley

1

Strangers come into your life every day. Some stay strangers, some become friends, some hover in that neverland between those two as "acquaintances." How often, though, do strangers come into your life claiming that they're not strangers, but old friends?

But I should start at the beginning, shouldn't I?

I was only home a few moments when there was a knock on my door. It had become a familiar knock after over the past few years so I knew even before opening it that I'd find Samantha Karson—aka Kit Karson when she was writing her romance novels—standing in the hall.

"It's here," she said, immediately. "I got copies in the mail today."

"What's here?"

"The book, you dope," she said, moving past me into my apartment.

I'd been living at the Sackett Street address for about six years at this point, and for about half that time Sam had been my neighbor. During all that time she had been writing her romances, but lamenting about the fact that what she really wanted to write was mystery novels.

"Oh," I said, "that book."

"Here," she said, and held it out to me.

It was a hardcover novel, where her dozen or so romances had been paperback originals. The title, *TOO BLONDE TO BE DUMB*, was something we had gone round and round about, and I had been surprised when her publisher agreed with her that it was a good one. Her character, a private investigator named Nick Dellesandro—nee Bernadette Nicole Dellesandro—was a thinly disguised female version of me.

"Open it to the dedication page."

"Which one is that?"

"No," I said, "it's not that I don't remember his name. I never knew a Dave Hollins."

"Well," she said, "he said he's get back to you. Are you going to read the book tonight?"

She wouldn't let me read it while she was writing it all those months, and now that it was out she wanted me to read it in one night.

"I'll start it tonight, Sam," I said. "I don't know when I'll finish it."

"Well, all right," he said, "but I want to know what you think... honestly."

"I'll tell you," I said, "honestly. By the way."

"Yeah?"

I held the book up and said, "Congratulations. How about I buy you dinner to celebrate?"

"Your treat?"

"I said I'd buy, didn't I?"

"My choice?"

"Naturally."

"You're on," she said. "I'll be ready at six."

"I'll knock on your door."

She left, closing the door behind her, and I opened the book to see what she had written inside. She'd used the very first page of the book, which was blank. She had written:

*To my best friend, Nick,
Thanks for believing in me, and for
always being there for me. I love you.
Sam*

Well, I guess I loved her to, but as a friend, you know? And we were friends, the best of friends, and she had been there for me even more, I thought, then I had for her.

I put the book down, feeling a tightness inside, feeling glad that Sam was my friend, and then wondering who this other fella was who was claiming to be my friend?

That was the first time I heard of Dave Hollins.

It was far from the last.

She looked exasperated, reached over and flipped a couple of pages, then stopped.

It read: *To my good friend Nick, without whom Nicole never would have been born.*

"I'm touched," I said, then aware that it might have sounded less than sincere added, "I'm really touched, Sam. Thank you."

"Well, you really helped me a lot, Nick."

I closed the book and looked at the cover. It was a reproduction of a photograph of what the cover artist thought was a typical Brooklyn street, since the series was set in Brooklyn.

"Is this..." I started to ask.

"Your copy," she said. "Keep it."

"You have to sign it," I said.

She accepted it back, looked around for a pen—I had to go into my office to get one for her—and then took a moment to think before signing it and handing it back.

"Don't look at it until I leave," she said, hurriedly heading for the door.

"Okay."

When she got to the door she opened it, then turned quickly and said, "Oh, a friend of yours was here."

"Was where?"

"Here," she said. "I mean, he knocked on my door after knocking on yours."

"Did you get a name?"

"Yes," she said, "his name was Dave Hollins."

"Dave Hollins?" I repeated, frowning. "I don't know any Dave Hollins."

"He said you and he were buddies in high school," she said. "In fact, he said 'best buddies.'"

My frowned deepened.

"I don't remember any Dave Hollins from high school. Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, he didn't," she said. "God, Nick, if I had a best buddy in high school I'd sure remember their name. Shame on you."



Over the course of the next few days I heard about Dave Hollins, my "buddy," two more times. Once from my father, who said he called his house looking for me.

"He said he was a friend of yours, Nicky."

"So you gave him my address?"

"Why shouldn't I give your address to an old friend?" my father asked.

"It's okay, Pop," I said, "don't worry about it."

The next day I heard from my brother, Father Vinnie.

"A friend of yours dropped by the church, Nicky."

"Who, Vinnie?"

"Dave Hollins, from high school."

"Vinnie, do you remember a Dave Hollins from high school?" My brother had been a year ahead of me.

"No," Vinnie said, "and he didn't look familiar, either, Nick. You don't know him?"

"No."

"What's going on?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I'm going to find out."

I looked up Dave Hollins in the phone book, but there was no listing. I called a few friends from high school, but no one had ever heard of him. In between doing these things I tried reading Sam's book. I say I tried because it just wasn't something I'd normally read. She'd written what she called a "Hard-boiled" private eye novel, but it all seemed pretty silly to me. I couldn't tell her that, though. Hey, some editor had bought the book and published it, so it must have had some merit, right? I'd always been able to see the talent in Sam's writing, but I bet if she went in a different direction she could write something really special.

Hey, what did I know? Maybe mystery fans would love it. For her sake I hoped so. Now all I had to do was think of something diplomatic to say to her that wouldn't convey how I really felt.

I left Sam's book half read and continued my search for Dave Hollins.

I went to my old high school in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn to look up Dave Hollins. I had just about decided that he didn't exist when I found him in the school records. I knew the girl who worked in the office because we *had* gone to school together, and she'd ended up working there. She was an Irish girl named Shannon, and she let me look through the records.

"I never heard of him, Nick," she said, when I pulled his records.

"Well, here he is." I dropped the file on her desk and took a look through it. He appeared to have been an average student, maybe a little below, and didn't appear to have played on any teams. I'd played baseball, football and basketball, and I knew he hadn't been in any of those teams. According to his file, he hadn't even been in the chess club.

"Shannon, can you pull the yearbook?"

"Which one?"

I checked the date that he had graduated.

"Ours," I said, surprised. "He graduated with us."

"I'll get the book."

She pulled it from a set of shelves and opened it on her desk. We leafed through it together. There was only one photo of Dave Hollins, and it didn't say anything underneath it. Dave Hollins had apparently had the most unremarkable four years of high school of any student I'd ever know.

"God," Shannon said, "It looks like even the geeks had nothing to do with him. Why's he going around telling everyone that you and he were friends?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should ask him."

"How?"

"I'll check the last address you have for him. Maybe he still has family there."

She got a 3x5 index card and wrote the address down for me. Hollins had lived three blocks from where we lived, where my Dad still lived.

"Thanks, Shannon. I owe you. How about lunch?"

"Dinner."

"All right, dinner. I'll call you."

"If it's okay with you, Nicky, I won't hold my breath."

I went to the address on Dave Hollins' file and found a house much like the one I had grown up in. It was brick, a single story, attached on one side with a driveway on the other. As far as I knew I had never been there before in my life.

I went to the door, hoping that at least his mother or some family member still lived there. I was quite surprised when a man about my age opened the door in response to the doorbell.

He was balding prematurely, and was overweight, but there was enough resemblance to the photo in the yearbook for me to know that this was Dave Hollins.

I opened my mouth to speak but before I could say a word his face split into a big grin and he grabbed me, yelling, "Nicky-D!"

He hugged me tightly in a bearhug, pinning my arms to my side. He was not that strong and while I could have broken the hold I suffered the embrace until he released me and stepped back.

"Goddamn it's good to see you, Man." He was speaking very quickly. "Come on in. How'd you find me? I've been trying to find you for days. I talked to your father, and your brother—hey, Vinnie's a priest now, huh? That's great! Come on, in, follow me..."

He kept talking a mile a minute as I followed him into the house, waiting until I could get a word in. I closed the door behind me and followed him to musty smelling but neat livingroom. The house smelled as if he never opened a window.

"...place looks the same, hasn't changed much since my Mom died last year."

"I'm...sorry—" I said, but that was all I was able to get out.

"Ah, it's okay," he said, cutting me off, "she was old, ya know? Hey, you want a brew?"

"Uh, no—"

"Some coffee? I can make some instant."

"No, thanks. Listen, Dave—"

"Come on, sit down," Hollins said. "We've got to catch up on old times, huh?"

"Well, uh, actually, no, we don't."

"What?" He looked puzzled.

"What I mean is, uh..." I tried to think of a delicate way to put it. "As far as I know, uh, Dave, we don't have any old times to catch up on."

"What are you talkin' about, Nick?"

"Dave—uh, Mr. Hollins, what I'm saying is..." I finally decided to just go ahead a blurt it out. "I don't know you."

"Huh?"

"I don't know any other way to put it," I said, gently. "I don't know who you are."

He stared at me for a few moments with the look of a hurt puppy on his face, then smiled, as if he thought I was kidding.

"Aw, c'mon! You're pullin' my leg, right?"

"I'm not kidding."

He stared at me.

"You're not?"

I shook my head.

"No."

He remained silent for a few moments, then slid his hands into his pocket and said, "Well, I guess I look more than a little foolish, huh? I thought we were friends, Nicky."

I made a helpless gesture with my hands and said, "If we were and I don't remember, Dave, I'm really sorry, but to tell you the truth, I checked with some of the other people I know from school, and *nobody* remembers you."

"Your brother," he said. "I talked to Vinnie the other day—"

"He doesn't remember you. I'm sorry."

He stared at me, his expression unreadable, now, maybe a cross between disappointment and disbelief.

"You really don't remember?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry," I said again, "you're a stranger to me," and then left the house.

What else could I do? I wasn't going to pretend I knew the guy?

What else could I have done?

I thought that would be the end of things with Dave Hollins, but I was wrong.

Two days later Sam was in my apartment wanting to know if I'd finished her book, yet.

"Almost."

"How do you like it?"

"I don't want to say anything until I'm finished."

"You hate it."

I frowned at her.

"I don't hate it," I said, "there are just one or two things..."

"Like what?"

"Well...you have your Nick get into fights—"

"Women don't get into fights?"

"That's not it," I said. "Here, look, page..." I grabbed the book. "...one twenty-eight. She knees this guy in the face hard enough to break his jaw."

"And that can't happen?"

"Sure, it can happen...but afterwards, she doesn't even limp."

"So you're saying it's not realistic?"

"I guess that's what I'm saying...but like I said, I'm not done. I don't want to talk about it, anymore."

"All right, all right, I'll wait until you're finished."

She walked to the window and looked out.

"Who are you looking for?" I asked.

"The mail man. I'm waiting for a check from my agent. Hey!"

"What?"

"That's your friend, down there."

"What friend?"

"You know, that Hollins guy."

"I already told you he's not my friend."

"Well then, why's he down there looking up at your window?"

I crossed the room to stand next to her and look down. Sure enough, Dave Hollins was on the street, hands in his pockets, looking up at my window. The look on his broad face was not a pleasant one.

"Hey, Nick. You got your very own stalker?"

"I'm not going to stand for this," I said, and rushed from my apartment. By the time I got down the two flights of steps, though, he was gone. I looked both ways, but he was nowhere in sight.

The mail man was, though.

"You better get in there," I said to him. "You got a desperate woman waiting for you."

"I try to satisfy them all," he said, "but it can't be done."

I stayed on the street until the mail man came back out, then went inside. Sam was at her mailbox and I stuck my key in mine.

"Yes, it's here!" she said, triumphantly. I had a mailbox full of bills, and was somewhat less enthusiastic than she was.

"Did you talk to him?" she asked.

"He was gone when I got down here."

"What's his problem?"

"As far as I can tell he never had any friends in high school," I said. "Maybe he still doesn't."

"So he picked you?"

"Maybe," I said, "but as soon as I get a hold of him he's going to unpick me."

I went to Hollins' house again but he wasn't there. When I got back home he was nowhere to be seen. There were a couple of messages on my machine so I pressed the button to play them back.

"Nick, it's-a you father. That guy came around again yesterday. He wasn't a-so friendly, this time. He said some-a bad things about you, like you forget-a you friends. Whatsa his problem, Nicky, huh? Call me."

Pop was born in Italy and when he was upset his accent came back. I'd ring Hollins' neck for getting him worried.

The second message surprised me. It was from Hollins,

"Hey, Nick, old friend? I'm gonna give you a chance to make it up to me for not remembering me. I got somebody with me who apparently you're real friendly with. She's a real pretty blonde with nice big tits. The rest of this message is on her machine, ol' buddy."

That sonofabitch, he had Sam...or did he?

I rushed from my apartment to her door, which was ajar. Bad sign. I went inside and there was one message flashing on her machine. I pressed the Play button.

"Nick? I'm sorry, he knocked on my door and—" Sam's voice was cut off and Hollins came on. "Sorry, that's all you get to hear, ol' pal. Want more? Meet us on the roof...now!"

On the roof? My roof? What the hell was he doing?

I left the Sam's apartment and ran up the steps to the roof. Sure enough when I got outside he and Sam were there, and the sonofabitch was smiling. They were standing to close to the edge to suit me.

"I love technology," he said, showing me a cellular phone in one hand. "Your girlfriend was kind enough to give me her number, so I could convince you to join us."

Sam was standing just to his left, her posture stiff.

"Sam, come over here by me."

"I can't, Nick."

"Why not?"

"He's got a gun."

He brought his other hand out from behind his back now and she was right, he was holding a gun. It was a flat automatic, small but deadly. He spread his hands now, phone in one and the gun in the other.

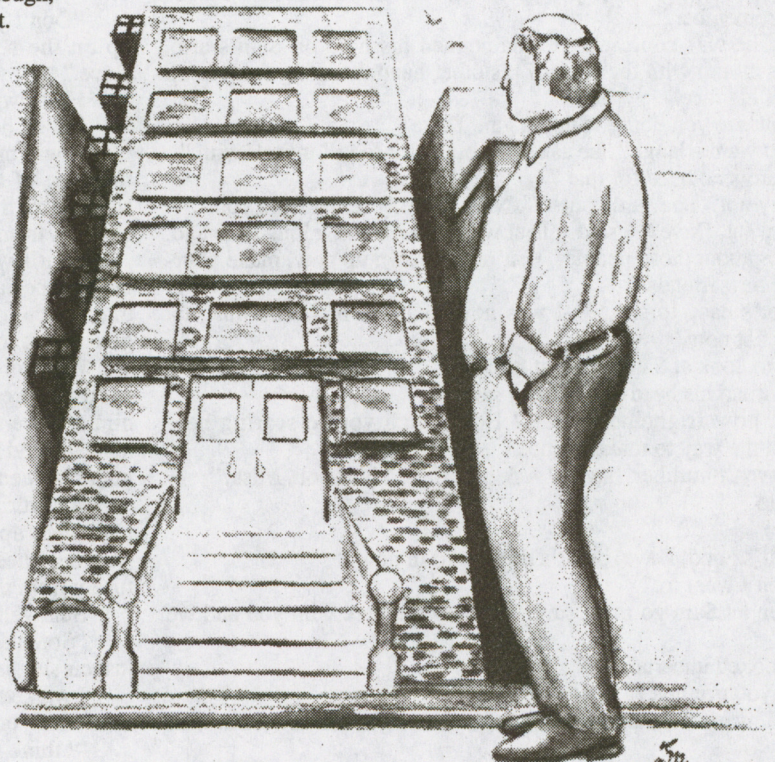
"Okay, Hollins, what's it going to be? What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Hollins asked. "What did I ever want from any of you but a little friendship?"

"Come on," I said, "this is some grievance from high school, is that it? We're a long way from high school, Hollins."

"Dave," he said, "my name's Dave. I can't believe you still don't remember me."

"What's she got to do with this, Dave?" I asked. "Let her go."



"No." He dropped the phone to the ground and used his free hand to grab Sam's arm. He looked like a dough boy standing next to her, but a dangerous and maybe deranged one.

"You don't remember all the times in high school you talked to me, do you?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, man...I don't."

"After a football game or a baseball game, after we won you'd come off the field and yell 'Come on, let's party.' You'd be looking right at me when you said it!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Whenever we won a game I yelled that to the crowd, never specifically to anyone. Did he really think I'd been talking to him? Was that what he based this whole fantasy friendship on?

"Dave, come on," I said, "I yelled that to everyone."

"To me!" he shouted. "You look right at me. 'Come on,' you said, 'let's party.'"

Sam was watching me, her eyes wide with fright. She didn't scare easy, but this guy was off his rocker, and that frightened her.

It scared me, too.

"Look, Dave," I said, soothingly, "why don't you put the gun down. Let's go down to my place and talk about old times."

"Old time?" he asked. "Now you want me to believe you remember old times?"

"Maybe you can make me remember them, Dave. You know, as a matter of fact, I think I do remember you, now. You've put on a little weight, man. You were kind of thin in school, weren't you?"

He frowned at me, I guess wondering if I was speaking from memory or not.

"And your hair line, it used to be right here, didn't it?" I ran my forefinger along my forehead, where his hair line had been in his yearbook photo.

"Yeah, that's right," he said, "it was. I started losing it last year, when my Mom died. She...she was the only family, the only friend I had. When she died I had nobody."

"You should have called me when she died, man," I said. "I could have helped you out."

"I called," he said, "I called a lot of guys from high school. It took me this long to get to you."

"Jesus, Dave," I said, "you should have called me first. We were buddies, remember?"

Now he was confused. He maintained his hold on Sam's arm, wiped his mouth with the back of his other hand, bringing the gun up in front of his face.

"What are you doing with the gun, Dave?"

"You wanna laugh?" he asked. "I bought it to kill myself with."

"There's no need for that."

"Why not? You said yourself, Nick, nobody remembers you."

"So what, Dave?" I said. "That was high school, a long time ago. Who cares about those people? You're all grown up now, make yourself some new friends."

"That's easy to say. I—I was never able to make friends, not then, and not now."

"Dave, look at Sam. Look at her!"

He turned his head and did as I said.

"See how frightened she is? How much you're scaring her? That's not the way to make friends."

"I haven't hurt her, have I? Ask her. Have I hurt you, Miss?"

"N-no..."

"See?"

"That's good, Dave, but it's time to go in now."

"I don't want to."

"Then let Sam go in," I said. "I'll stay out here with you and we can talk."

He looked uncertain.

"Do you promise?"

"I promise," I said. "Just let her go. She's got nothing to do with this."

"You care about her, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "I care about her a lot."

"See? That's all I've ever wanted, somebody to care about what happens to me."

"I care, Dave."

"Really?"

"I do."

Hollins hesitated a few moments, then suddenly wrapped his arm around Sam and pulled her close to him. My stomach lurched when he pressed the gun to her neck.

"Don't do that, Dave!"

"Why not?"

"What's it going to solve?"

"Maybe you'll feel bad," he said. "Maybe you'll wish you'd been nicer to me. Maybe I'll shoot her, and then myself."

"And then what? Maybe I'll just forget about you."

"Huh?" He looked confused.

"When you're gone people forget about you. Is that what you want?"

"N-no."

"And what about your mother?"

"What about her?"

"If you kill yourself, who's going to remember her? You said she was all you had, so I guess you were all she had, right?"

"R-right."

"Then you don't want her to be forgotten, do you?"

"N-no, I don't."

"Well, that's what'll happen. If you die, nobody will remember either one of you."

Dave Hollins stood with the gun pressed to Sam's neck and thought it over.

"Put the gun down, Dave. We'll go inside and order a pizza. What do you say?"

Again he hesitated, giving it some thought. He waited so long I thought I had him, but then the expression on his face changed and I knew I'd lost him again.

"No! You're lying." He backed up a few steps, bringing himself and Sam closer to the edge of the roof.

"Dave, look at what you're doing. Look at this scene, man. Don't you recognize it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you ever watch television? Whenever the bad guy ends up on the roof he goes over the edge—and that's going to hurt, Dave."

He frowned.

"Look how close you are to the edge already."

It was my last chance, and I took it. He turned his head to look at the edge of the roof and I charged him. He was taking a couple of steps away from the edge when he heard me. I knew when I was several feet from him that I didn't have enough time.

That's when Sam moved. She simply went limp and Hollins, not being especially strong, couldn't hold her. I dove and hit him in the midsection as he was trying to bring the gun around. We both staggered back towards the edge of the roof, and for a moment I thought we were going to rewrite the script. I thought the bad guy *and* the good guy were going to go over, but his knees went out from beneath him and we tumbled to the roof. As we hit the gun was jarred from his hand and went skidding away. I rolled away from him towards the gun, regained my feet before him and snatched it up.

As I turned to point it at him he was on his hands and knees, trying to get up, when Sam charged him and smashed him in the face with her knee. He cried out and fell over, unconscious, bleeding profusely from the broken nose.

Sam yelled in pain and went down, holding her knee.

"Sonofabitch!" I didn't know if she meant Hollins, or if she was just cursing from the pain.

I walked to her and crouched next to her.

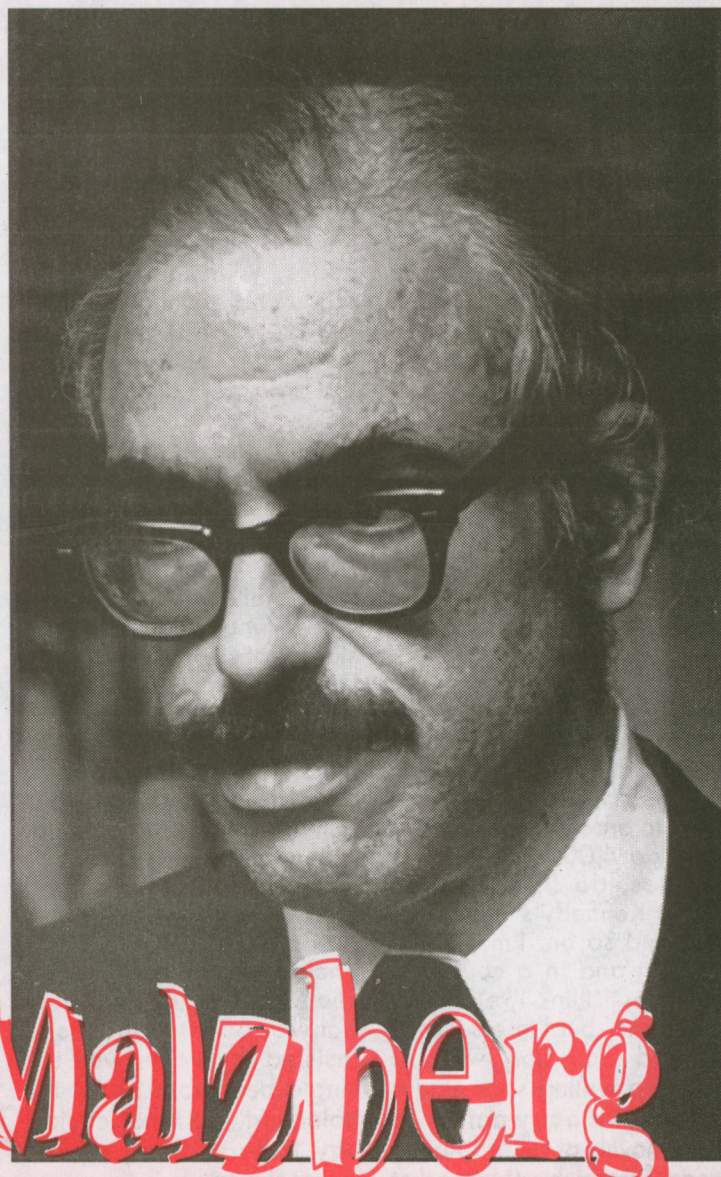
"Are you all right?"

"I think I broke my knee, Nick."

I knew her knee wasn't broken, just bruised, so I smiled at her, put my arms around her and said, "Put that in your next book." ▲

When I was in college, most of the science fiction magazines I read had a Barry Malzberg story in them. Who was this man who was writing as fast as I could read? There had to be a committee producing these wonderfully imaginative tales that made me want to daydream and write. When years later I actually met Barry (one man, by the way) I was immediately struck with the intensity of his presence and warmth.

The oldest of two children, Barry N. Malzberg was born in Manhattan, July 24, 1939, grew up in Brooklyn. He has managed to stay in the vicinity of New York City every since. He's kept busy from the day he learned to read, with a bibliography that could fill the space of this interview by itself: 274 published works from 1988 through May 1991 alone, then a collection, *Passage of the Light*, containing three novels and five short stories, and an additional 50 or so stories.



An Interview with:

Barry N. Malzberg

BY LINDA D. ADDISON

PW: Were you one of these people who learned to read before they went to school?

BM: I can't ever remember not being able to read, but as they say the brain can not recall when you didn't have language. I learned to read very early. I was an accomplished reader by the end of the first grade.

I began to write as soon as I learned to read. I wrote

my first short story in first grade. It was a barely transmuted account of falling in a snow bank. The act of writing is inseparable from the act of reading, like the push pull of sex, you do one, you do the other. I wasn't truly a reader, unless from the beginning I was trying to reproduce. It was always fiction. I needed the transmutative experience. Which is what happens to

most fiction writers. As children they feel helpless, and they deal with that helplessness through control, through the imagined alteration of experience. That's what fiction is.

PW: What did you read growing up?

BM: Everything. I began reading science-fiction with the June 1951 issue of

Astounding, just shortly before I was twelve. I read the Penrod books by Booth Tarkington with great pleasure, which my father got me. I read the *Caine Mutiny*. I read *From Here To Eternity*, *Black Beauty*. I read everything.

PW: Tell me about the transition from high school to college when you wanted to write literary stories.

BM: I continue to want to write literary short stories. People should take heart from my experience because I don't think anybody who was ever any good showed less promise than I did in the beginning. I became very good, very quickly. I wrote my first decent story, *Sense of the Fire*, when I was 25 years old at Syracuse University. *Final War* came only three or four months later and that was good. There is nothing that I wrote before September 1964 which I would care to publish.

PW: How do short stories come to you?

BM: They occur all at once. I've never had any trouble having ideas for short stories. A lot of these stories are work to order, theme anthologies: do 4,000 words about witches, do 5,000 words about Kennedy's assassination and so on. I'm a good novelist and in a couple of instances I think I've been a great one, but I'm essentially a good short story writer. I grew up writing short stories and really not wanting to write novels at all. If I hadn't been forced by the market and circumstances to write novels I would have been perfectly happy to write thousands of short stories.

PW: You've done quite a few successful collaborations, how do you make them work?

BM: I was going to say it's a lot like sex, but that's not a good example because sex usually turns out the same way, it's just a question of finding the right fit. Each collaboration is different. I work with Pronzini in one way and Carter Scholz in another and Kathleen Koja in a third way. Pronzini and I outlined our novels in great detail and wrote alternate

chapters. One of us did a final draft and the other did one more draft. With Kathleen Koja we just did segments. She could start it and I could finish it. Or I could start it and she could finish it. Simple and spontaneous. With the one story that Scholz and I did, he rewrote my first draft. With Harry Harrison I rewrote his first draft. So it all depends.

PW: While re-reading your novel, *In The Enclosure*, it occurred to me the theme is slavery.

BM: That's what it's about. One of the greatest impressions that's ever been made upon me was by someone who has read my work, a professor of English I met at the SFRA, the Science-Fiction Research Association, annual meeting in Missoula, Montana, June 1976. She said she had never read a work of fiction which got the holocaust the way *In The Enclosure* did. I mentioned *The Last of the Just* by Andre Schwarz-Bart and she insisted my novel was the single best work about the holocaust. So what could I say to that. But yes, it's about slavery.

PW: I was struck by your book because even today there's a lack of a mixed ethnic culture in writing especially science-fiction.

BM: It's an unfortunate climate where a white man can not write a novel from the point of view of a black man or a black woman or a woman. A climate in which only Jews can write of the Jewish experience and only a woman can have woman protagonists. I don't believe in that.

I wrote a story in 1990, of which I'm very proud, nobody's noticed it. It's called *Turpentine* and takes place on the Columbia cam-

pus in 1968. It's narrated by a very angry black kid, in his early 20's. I think I got it, I'm fair to that kid. It's more than ventriloquism, I think I have a right and I wrote that story as well and I got that kid as well as anybody could.

PW: Did things happen in your life to allow you to write without boundaries?

BM: One of the things that influenced me was being a young book reviewer on the radio, WMCA in New York, when I was in my early teens. In many of those live broadcasts I had discovered at an early age that you got far more attention speaking in opposition. If there were fifteen kids eagerly taking turns saying how wonderful the book was, you got more attention by saying it wasn't so good. And ever so much more than that if the author of the book was there in front of you. So in that sense writing against the grain got more attention. I felt that I could write anything I wanted and if it was good enough, I could publish it.

PW: Were your parents very open?

BM: No, my parents weren't open. Just a couple of weeks ago before a Philharmonic concert, I was asked if I got my love of music from my parents, and I want this on the record, the first piece of classical music that got into the house was brought in by me. Our record collection was *Mary Had A Little Lamb, Farmer In The Dell* played on a one dollar child's phonograph. There was nothing. I found it myself. My parents were very much like Silverberg's parents and Norman Spinrad's parents and what Jewish parents were like in New York City in the 40's and 50's.

They had Reader's

Digest condensed books and Charles Dickens, which had been given to them for their wedding, and *Stars Fell On Alabama*, *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins and the collected stories of Poe. All the books had been gifts or misguided attempts to make book lovers. I will say that my father brought me the Penrod books, and said, "I think you will like these." He was so very right. Without him I don't think I would have ever read those books.

PW: What did they think when you decided to be a writer?

BM: They said what any parents of that time would say, "That's nice, what are you going to do to make a living? Go to law school, stay in the civil service, write all you want. It's a wonderful idea, express yourself." They neither encouraged nor discouraged me. I don't think they had much of an idea of what the hell I was doing, but in later years my mother actually read a few of my novels, the mystery and suspense novels, with something approaching pleasure and my old man was impressed by my reviews. They lived long enough, dying respectively in 1979 and 1982 to see the arc of my career, as it were. After the Joyce Carol Oates review of *Going into the Night* appeared in the New York Sunday Times, my father's doctor talked to him with new respect. I said to myself, if not to my father, if this pain rattled, miserable expedition which I call a career has at least given an old man a little pleasure then maybe somebody got something out of it.

PW: What would you like to do if not write?

BM: If I couldn't be a second violinist in the NY

Philharmonic, which is my all-time ambition, I'd like to be an assistant director in the theater and sit beside the director, watch rehearsals and whisper in the director's ear. Have no responsibility and lots of opinions.

PW: You learned to play the violin, didn't you?

BM: In a manner of speaking. Strong men cry, helpless children flee. I was a self-taught violinist. I had a violin. I had the instrumental music classes in high school and I figured out where you put your fingers to get a note. I began at thirteen or fourteen and taught myself just badly enough that by the time I got to a teacher it was hopeless. As an early teacher pointed out, "We would have to begin by teaching me not to play, by unlearning everything you've already learned and since that's impossible you will continue to be hopeless but we can make you less hopeless."

PW: Did you create any original work?

BM: It could be said that everything was original, incalculable, never to be heard again. But no, I never composed anything. With

many gaps, I've played in orchestras for over thirty years. High school orchestras, college orchestras, community orchestras. Bad ones, good ones, not so many good ones. Played second violin. Not too shoddy.

PW: What makes you cry?

BM: Everything. The human condition. A world where Scott Meredith is a doctor of humane letters, in which Newt Gingrich is a powerful politician, in which the President of the United States turns out to be just a cheap hustler for his party. This is unfortunate. Michael Rabin, a great violinist dying at thirty-five, Arlene Auger and Tatiana Troyanos, great singers dying of cancer cruelly at 53. Leonard Bernstein, dying and being lost to us at 72. Isaac Asimov being cut off at 72. As Arthur Clark said in his eulogy in *Locus*, we've never needed Isaac more than we do right now.

PW: What makes you laugh?

BM: Not many things literary make me laugh. I like the last scene of the movie, *Mother*. I thought the film, *Mr. Saturday Night* with Billy Crystal had one scene

which had me falling on the floor. The scene where he's doing the Depends commercial. He says, Viva, I left such a deposit. You should see what I left in these pants, he says. And of course they close down the set and fire him. That was funny.

PW: Why do you often end your short stories in a non-traditional way, with a question?

BM: That is the quintessential Malzberg ending. I found as it comes over me like a great light. I grasp for the light and suffused by a knowledge I can barely articulate everything goes away like that. Oh, it's tantalizing, but of course that's exactly what life and death are. We don't know, but not to know is to know. The question is the answer.

PW: *Understanding Entropy* is a spiraling cycle of a story that pulls together all the questions and points of view you have in your collection, *The Best of Barry N. Malzberg*.

BM: There's a lot more in that story than even I took to be when I wrote it. It's pretty good. It does so in 2,050 words and quits. I should have won the Nebula and

the Hugo for that story.

PW: What do you have in the works?

BM: I have 20,000 words of a novel which would be a sequel to *Underlay* if I finish it and I'll do it when I'm ready to do it, if at all.

PW: So Barry Malzberg, the question man, give me a question to end the interview with.

BM: It's not mine, it's my favorite line, from my favorite play by one of my favorite writers, *The Last Analysis* by Saul Bellow, produced on Broadway in 1964 and it failed, reproduced off Broadway in 1971 and failed. It's still a great play. Philip Bummidge, the blown to pieces, broken down old comedian, who is the protagonist and the center of the play which involves his desire to cure his problems by re-enacting his birth before a convention of the American Psychiatric Association. Bummidge screams at the second act, writhing on the couch, "Oh God, oh God, why can't I live without hope like everybody else?"

PW: Thank you, Barry. ▲



The Nicholas Caper marks Ardath's second appearance in PW. Her first, "Cage of the Heart" will be featured in the upcoming anthology *The Best of Pirate Writings*. Ardath is the author of more than 100 books, and her tales have graced the pages of most of the fiction magazines.



The Nicholas Caper

By Ardath Mayhar

I am not an elf. I may look like one, sound like one, be able to handle tools like one, but I am as human as they come. That was why they picked me to investigate.

For generations, St. Nicholas had, in his various disguises, managed to keep the children of the world happy at Christmas. Even after religion was a dead issue, there was one canon left, faith in Santa Claus. Even the skeptical Americans seemed completely convinced.

When that elven ultimatum arrived at U.N. Headquarters, it came as a shock.

My boss was in charge of, well, it is better if I don't even mention that. We deal in what I will call questionable negotiations. He called me in as soon as the Secretary-General informed him of the terrorist demand, and he dropped it right into my lap.

"Lars, the elves at the North Pole are holding Saint Nicholas hostage, stopping toy production until we agree to give them full media coverage, exclusive film rights, and forty billion credits toward making a movie of the situation they have created. The risk of having every child and parent in the civilized world hounding us makes that look like a bargain."

"What situation are they talking about?" I asked. So maybe they were holding old Fuzz-Face hostage, along with all the toys made so far this year. How could that justify such a demand? We could push the civilian toy factories to their limits and fill the demand, then fake it with the kids. It was only August, after all.

"It's worse than that." Nadramadia's narrow face was pulled into a frown. "They're threatening to off the old fellow. The economy wouldn't tolerate the death of Santa Claus, Lars. International currencies would crumble. World trade would go the way of the Dodo. Funding for our jobs would be out the window; even the U.N. might not survive."

I thought about that for a minute. Since all the nations signed the Accords that gave the U.N. supreme authority over international relationships and policies, local governments and armies have shrunk. We deal with all the big matters. They take care of everything at home. Without us, the world could easily go back to the bad old days of nuclear wars and hand-to-hand combat, except in the Morituri arenas.

"The only reason there hasn't been a general panic," Nadramadia went on, "is the fact that the elves left a loophole. They want a secret investigation of the entire Nicholas empire, which will, they insist, uncover dark and terrible truths that may shock the world."

Illustrated by
Robert M. Copley



It sounded like typical elvish hysteria to me, but I nodded noncommittally. I had a feeling I was about to be assigned to a cold climate.

"You know as well as I that only you are capable of infiltrating the elvish ranks and setting up a covert operation. We must know, before we commit the resources of the U.N. on either side. If the truth is something we can use to our profit, it will come out. If not, suppress it. Make up a story that'll get us off the hook.

"Of course you will report to me via satellite every forty-eight hours. I will know what you learn, but you must inform no one else."

I knew the look in those cruel little eyes. Nadramadia intended to profit personally from my investigation, no matter what I found.

"I'll need some high-tech underwear," I said, looking nonchalant. "Those damn elves don't feel the cold, and there's nothing like chattering teeth to blow my cover. I'll need something that'll keep me warm but unobtrusive enough not to show under those idiotic costumes. Short pants and little vests just don't hack it in that climate, as far as I'm concerned."

He looked impatient. "Skin colored Thermals should do it. Don't bother me with trivia ... get up there without arousing suspicion. I expect us to have this under control well before Christmas. And if it is unmanageable..." I caught a glimpse of his shark-like grin..." we must know in time to fake it. Get cracking!"

I managed to nod. "You'll hear from me soon." I half saluted. He likes that sort of shit.

Getting to the North Pole, even in these days of Instaport, is not easy. There is no Receptor Station there. Nicholas does not hold with devices that might disrupt his schedule with unheralded health and safety inspections and other conveniences of modern-day life.

I couldn't blame him. Waking at three a.m. to find a government inspector peering down your drains or going through your computer files never becomes easy to deal with. The least important civilian can easily find himself in the spotlight.

I had to find a route as old fashioned as Nicholas. I finally found a freighter that supplied research stations inside the Arctic Circle and signed on as a cook. I hope their indigestion gave them as much trouble as my seasickness did me. As soon as we reached the northernmost station, I jumped ship and went in search of an Eskimo with a dog sled.

You might think, in these days of sophisticated technology, such a mode of travel would be obsolete, but the people who live in the Far North are not fools. A team of dogs can be fed on the fat harvested from seals, independent of imported solar devices or chemical fuels. A traveler can

be sure mechanical failure will not plague his journey. Dogsleds are not only available, they also do not show up on the sensors surrounding the North Pole, since Nicholas has become so paranoid about visits from outsiders.

Elves being extremely talented at arriving unexpectedly, I felt if I dropped onto the scene without any warning, it might nail down my false i.d. as Itinerant Elf, Spec. 4, Antique-type Toys. There was a constant labor shortage among the toymakers. That was, perhaps, one thing that had driven them to seize their employer and make demands on the U.N. Overworked elves can be dangerous.

I'd be welcomed by my 'brothers' and set to work at once, if my plan went well. Of course, it didn't.

The Eskimo from whom I bought my sled and team would have made a good used car salesman, back in the days when that mode of transportation was at its peak. The sled was passable, though worn and mended, but the dogs were past their prime. Far past their prime.

They began dying on me before I reached the outskirts of Nicholas's enclave. I had to throw out every bit of luggage except for food and my tools, which I packed on my back as I ran alongside the sled, cursing and sweating in my Thermals.

By the time I arrived at the Snow Wall surrounding the Pole, the last of the dogs were staggering, and I cut the poor beasts loose, fed them the rest of the seal fat, and forged ahead afoot, though I knew heat-seekers were aimed at preventing intrusions. The Yeti that Nicholas imported as guards caught me before I reached the top of the wall.

I will never get used to Yeti. Besides their stench, they are ill-tempered and foul-mouthed. I learned several terms I had never heard before as they hustled me, bound, to the Sitting Room of the Nicholas mansion.

As we hurried through the compound, which was surrounded in its

turn by another Snow Wall every bit as thick as the outer one, we passed many elves rushing about carrying swatches of material and muttering measurements to themselves. Others trundled barrows filled with metal and wood and aluminum and plastics toward the huge factory spouting smoke into the cold blue air of the Pole.

Still others huddled in groups, watching us pass with suspicious expressions. I hoped that my tools (carefully selected and completely familiar to me) would convince Nicholas I was what I claimed to be.

The house was impressive. Turrets reared against the sky, their windows shining like ice. A wide doorway opened into a foyer. The Yeti on my left nudged me into a doorway on my right, and I pushed through heavy velvet (perfect for deflecting draughts) into a chamber filled with warmth. In the capacious chair beside the flames was not the round, red-nosed Immortal I had expected to see but a wizened old elf.

Then I remembered Santa Claus was being held hostage. While that had not troubled me, before, now I found the thought chilling. With him, no matter how hostile he might have become, of late, you knew where you stood. With these rebellious minions, who knew?

The small figure drew itself up. "And who is this?" asked a shrill voice. "Where did he come from? And how did he get into the Kingdom?"

The Yeti snarled a reply in its uncouth language, and the elf nodded slowly. Then he turned his gaze to me, and I felt as if that needle-sharp gaze penetrated to my bones.

But evidently this elf was near-sighted. "You are a toymaker?" He leaned forward.

I cleared my throat, thought longingly of Nadramadia in terms of some of my new vocabulary, and said, "I am Lars Temkin, Itinerant Elf, Spec. 4, Antique Style Toys my specialty. I thought to find work with St. Nicholas, but things are not as I expected."

The ancient elf grimaced. "I am Uwe Leissen, elected representative of the League of Toymakers and ruler, pro tem, of the North Polar Kingdom. It is true that we need workers in your specialty, but we must investigate you. These are troubled times, and you will understand."

I tried to look guileless. "If you need my work, then let me begin," I said to him.

"Ah, no. It is not that simple. But soon...soon. Arrgha!" The last was directed toward the bigger of the two Yeti. "Take this person to the detention cells. But make certain he is comfortable, else I shall hold your feet to the fire again."

The Yeti grumbled something obscene and hauled me around by the arm, going down flight after flight of stairs.

The cellars were dry and warm. We followed a long corridor lit by oil lamps to a door studded with metal. The Yeti heaved; the panel creaked open, letting the darkness beyond it creep out into the corridor. He grabbed one of the lamps and thrust it into the dark hall ahead of us. Doors lined the way, each bolted and barred from the outside. Cells, I thought dismally.

At the end of the hall a door stood open. The Yeti hurried to it, and before I could protest he had pushed me inside and shut the door. "Uwe said to make me comfortable!" I shouted.

"Hrumbarrhfr!" replied the Yeti.

The cell was not as dark as I had thought, for the guard had hung the lamp in the corridor; strips of light entered the louvers at the top of the door. Once my eyes adjusted, I could see there was a bunk (musty) with a pile of blankets (also musty).

The walls were of stone. Here the bed-rock came so near the surface that the cellars had been cut directly into it. This eliminated the possibility of digging my way out. With that great pile of a house above me, I had no chance of getting a transmission to the satellite, though the transmitter was still safely in place in my capped tooth. I bit down savagely, and the feedback shrilled through my head.

For the moment, there was nothing to be done. I lay on the bunk, propped my feet on the pile of blankets, and stared at the light-striped ceiling. After a time, my eyes became accustomed to the dim illumination. There were narrow slots let in both side walls, allowing heat and air to circulate between the cells. If there were a prisoner in the next cell, I might strike up a conversation!

I opened my mouth to speak...but then I closed it again. Some instinct told me that if nobody knew I was here, I might overhear something. The one in that next cell might know something.

Hours passed, and the lamp went out. I hoped the Yeti would not allow me to starve, but I knew the kind too well to hope very much. That would amuse him mightily, and he might even compose one of his kind's filthy songs about my demise.

Lying there, perfectly still and silent, I began to hear breathing beyond the slot in the wall. Snoring? The sound was exactly what my grandfather had made, burbling through his beard as he napped after lunch.

Could it be that I had been put into the cell next to the hostage, himself? Maybe the old fellow might talk in his sleep? Then I sighed. Such luck would be incredible. In my business, you learn to do without any faith in luck.

I must have slept, for I woke in total darkness, disoriented and confused, until I remembered my

circumstances. Something had awakened me; I was trying to identify it when I heard the murmur of voices in the next cell. Though they were low, there was an edge to the higher of the two that reminded me of scoldings I had been given, back in my childhood. I went to stand directly beneath that slot, listening hard.

"...and you should have known! Nothing lasts forever, particularly the slimy caper you've been pulling for the past three or four centuries." The voice was a woman's, a bit shaky, and I visualized pictures of Mrs. Santa, round-faced, plump, and docile. Evidently, her pictures were not accurate.

A deeper rumble began. "There was no reason to think this would happen! Those damned elves I should have gone to gnome labor long ago. They may not be the craftsmen the elves are, but they're a lot easier to handle."

"And do you think the world would never have caught on?" Her tone was sharply skeptical. "You can't run a good con too far, Nick. I grant you, the Church was ripe for extinction. Philosophy had degenerated into pure hedonism with a dash of humanitarianism smeared over the top to make it look good. The time was ripe for Materialism to take over, but why did you let Him into the con? My word! You should have known He'd let you down, in a pinch."

I leaned against the wall, breathing shallowly so as not to be heard. Him? That could only mean that St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children, had leagued himself with the Dark Angel!

I shuddered, thinking of the gifts he had left in my home over the years. Every one of those had been guaranteed to rouse the acquisitive instinct in young and old.

But Nicholas was speaking again. "And how do you think even an Immortal could keep Him out of anything he took an interest in, Woman? I didn't notice you telling him, 'No, we just don't want to get tied up with you, Mr. Lucifer. Sorry about that and good-bye.'" He managed to achieve a mincing tone that almost made me giggle.

Before he could reply, I heard the sound of Yeti feet flapping down the corridor. Stronger light flickered through the louvers. Doors opened and closed. In a few minutes, my own door opened outward, and a pair of Yeti blocked the way.

One covered the cell with light from his lamp, while the other removed the pail I had used for sanitary purposes and replaced it with

another. After that (with a Yeti you would KNOW it would be only after that) he set a covered tray beside the door and moved out. Shit first, food second!

I refused to think of Yeti hands preparing the meal of reindeer meat and tough bread, with a pitcher of water. When I was done, I felt the water pitcher carefully, but it was too light to become a weapon. The tray was metal foil, however, and that gave me an idea.

They had not searched me, though they did take my pack of tools when the Yeti brought me down to this dungeon. I carry, habitually, a selection of tiny vials of chemicals of various useful sorts. When the time came I thought could escape from my cell, but first I needed to listen more to the couple in the next cubicle.

For a bit I heard nothing but occasional mutters about the quality of the fare. At last they finished, and I heard a ripe belch.

"Do you think He will try to help us?" That was Mrs. Nicholas again. "Do you think He ever had any intention, once he got what he wanted? I swear, Nick, you are a great baby! Now we are in the soup, and He isn't even suspected of being involved. And those triple-damned elves are going to make a fortune from the film rights to this mess, if they succeed in their demands."

I sighed softly. Nicholas interrupted my thoughts. "As long as nobody figures out what we were really doing, we will be all right.



Cheating on elf labor—even with the civil rights violations — is no terrible crime. Nobody really cares about elves, these days. It's this religion business that would stir up a stink, if it got out."

She snorted. "I always told you that you were going too far. Slipping materialism into the place of the older beliefs was one thing. Setting yourself up as the new Deity was something else, and you did it so subtly that nobody realizes it. Except for Him, of course. He laughs every day, I'm sure, when he thinks of the way you fixed it up for him to skim the cream off humanity without taking a risk of offending That Other One."

I leaned against the wall, for my knees had gone out from under me. I thought of generations that had accepted, as an article of faith, that this Immortal would come every Christmas. I thought of the old faiths, now gone forever. The bastard had sold us a bill of goods all the way. Even the modern acceptance of the 'fact' that Lucifer was only a literary figure was a lot of bullshit.

I was going to get to the bottom of this caper, one way or another. When I was satisfied that this ersatz saint had been leading my kind down the primrose path for centuries, things would hum.

I might have learned more if I had remained imprisoned, but most of the conversation was accusation by Mrs. Nick and defense by Nick. Listening to spouses squabble is a miserable pastime, and I had no intention of wasting mine. I had to get in touch with Nadramadia soon — he would be chewing his nails, if I didn't. If I got out of this thing alive I would have to face him. He could be a nasty bastard.

I hunkered down beside the foil tray and crumpled it, dropping it into the metal pitcher. From the lining of my jacket, which lay on the bunk, I removed several vials of different chemicals and put them ready to hand.

Anyone who longs for the exciting life of a spy never has lived it. Most consists of waiting for unpleasant and dangerous things to happen. I spent some time constructing a barrier, turning the bunk on its side and padding the thing with mattress and blankets.

That left me with hours to go. I had no wish ever to see a Yeti again, and yet I found myself anticipating the sounds of their flat feet in the corridor. By the time I heard them, at last, I could have kissed their ugly mugs.

Instead, I took up my position behind the overturned bunk, opened the chemical vials and set them ready for my hand. The pitcher, with its close-fitting lid beside it, was waiting. The panel opened at last and one Yeti stepped back while one leaned forward to reach the bucket.

That was when I dumped the chemicals onto the foil, slammed on the lid of the pitcher, and flung it at the door, ducking at once behind my flimsy protective barrier. The world seemed to explode. My ears rang, and my nose stung with acrid fumes. Shards of shredded metal zinged and clanged off the walls and into flesh. I heard yells and moans from the two Yeti, as I dived over the bunk and peered into swirls of smoke.

The lamp had fallen, and burning oil was curling across the floor. One of the Yeti was lying flat, his fur beginning to singe. The other was leaning against the wall behind him, clawing at his eyes and moaning. I almost felt sorry for it, as I sped up the corridor. They had left the door open at its end, which I had expected. Yeti have never been nit-pickers, for which I was grateful.

The flights of stairs were lit, so I made good time getting out of the cellars. I stopped before reaching the ground floor, however, and ducked into a service corridor that led, as I had suspected, to a complex of storage rooms, pantries, and shafts fitted with dumb waiters. From the quiet that reigned (as testified by the lack of bustle echoing down the shafts) I assumed that it must be late evening or night, though, being August, it would still be light outside. The cooks and the other servants were taking time off, anyway. I climbed into the largest dumb waiter and hauled myself upward by tugging on its cables.

The kitchen into which I emerged looked large enough for cooking elephants, if any of that unfortunate species had still existed. Ranges fired by coal, by wood, and by solar power stood side by side, demonstrating the development of technology over Nicholas's reign. Even as I stared about, footsteps sounded in a passage, and I opened a massive oven and slid inside to escape being seen by a tall elf wearing formal attire. The butler, I assumed.

He moved crisply toward the other door at the back of the kitchen. I longed to crack my oven a bit and see what he was doing, but I didn't dare. I listened as he opened the back door and a muttered conversation came to my ears.

Individual words... "Betrayed!" "Never dreamed..." "Have to risk it!" made me think there might be a revolution within a revolution going on.

I wondered if they had any notion of what I had just learned...but I doubted it. Elves are conservative and loyal to a fault. It requires a great deal of painful pressure to force them to actions like those they had taken.

I opened the oven door and stepped down onto the tile, surprising a knot of small figures huddled in the shelter of the range looming near the doorway. The butler turned, his hand going to a rack of knives hanging on the wall.

I shook my head. "I am no enemy of yours or of those you are plotting against, believe me. I have been sent here to find the truth, and already I have learned a lot. Is there a place where we can talk?"

The butler made a swift decision. Then he opened the door and shooed his fellow conspirators out into the snow. "Not for a group. But we two can go to my pantry, and there you can tell me about this. Come!"

Nuska was a frightened elf. Once we were in his sanctum, he locked the door carefully, put the key into his pocket, took it out again and hid it under the starched mat on his desk. He sighed deeply.

"You have good reason to be cautious," I began. "Do you know the demands the conspiratorsthe original ones, I meanhave made on the U.N.?"

He nodded. "They are already filming. They shot the arrest of St. Nicholas as it happened, though they used hand-held holovee cameras and the quality isn't all that good. Still, they thought having real-life footage to splice into the film would be a good thing. The show is just an excuse, however. They wanted to assure better working conditions and wages for the workers here.

"We've been working as slaves for generations, getting only our keep and clothing; we decided we were no longer going to accept that. When we approached Nicholas, he set the Yeti on us, and they ate three before we could run away."

He cocked his head and peered at me warily. "We had to...subvert...the Yeti. With Marzipan, if you can believe that. Any of the beasts would betray its own mother (if it could recognize her) for that stuff. This allowed us to take the Nicholases captive."

"But now you are dissatisfied with the way the revolution is being run?" I asked him.

"Demand for money in a situation that should deal solely with humanor elfrights is degrading. Uwe and his people have made us seem greedy and disloyal, a thing no true elf can bear."

I could see I was dealing with an idealist. I had never met one, and only reading about them in histories and novels had prepared me to accept their existence. "There is a very simple way to solve your dilemma," I told him. "Being the butler, I assume you have keys to every lock in the house?"

He nodded. "Then take me to Nicholas's private office and help me search it. I suspect we will find material that will make matters clear."

He stared at me for a moment. Then he nodded. We went by way of service stairs to the top of the house. A white-painted door yielded to a large key on his key-ring; we slipped into the room beyond and locked the door behind us. The office was not large; filing cabinets lined one wall behind a huge desk.

"You go through the cabinets. I'll tackle the desk. Look for anything that mentions any connection with" I shivered slightly"Him."

Nuska stared at me, his green-tinged face the shade of pea soup. "Him?" he quavered.

I nodded and opened a drawer. Behind me, I could hear the elf rummaging through files.

It took a long time. I thought many times that I had found something, but those turned out to be comments in letters or quotations from literature. At last Nuska gasped and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Would this be what we need?" he asked, holding out a stiff parchment covered with wax seals of several colors. He had paled to a faint pistachio, and his hand shook as I took the document.

I glanced at it, and my heart went cold. It was the contract I had hoped to find, though I had also hoped what I had heard, what I suspected, might be a terrible mistake. Now I knew it was not.

"Whereas the undersigned have agreed to work in concert for the subversion of the population of the planet presently titled Earth, and whereas..."

I read it through, though it required an effort. It was the agreement between St. Nicholas and Lucifer, familiarly known as the Devil, laying out in detail their mutual plan for leading humankind astray. Evidence! Unshakable evidence!

The signatures were bold and clear, though Lucifer's was somewhat marred by a scorch-mark.

Nuska, reading over my shoulder, shivered against me as he jangled his keys. "You are right," he said. "We must take this to Uwe at once. This will make him abandon his demands and focus on this ugly truth."

He was correct. Elves are loyal and conservative. Perhaps they are the last holdout, on this mixed-up world, of moral virtue. Mankind cannot say the same. That is why I decided, when asked, to remain with them in their Polar Kingdom, making Antique-Style toys that would be delivered by rotating shifts of elves, in the absence of their usual delivery man.

Once the contract was passed around the council advising Uwe Leissen, the elders agreed it was a damning document. A general meeting was called, and all the elves in the complex gathered in the meeting hall to hear the truth and to decide what must be done.

I listened impatiently to their interminable arguments. Some were still fond of their former master, no matter what his crime. Many had festered with resentment for years and were obstinately against hearing anything in his favor. The majority, shocked and horrified, remained undecided.

At last Uwe sighed and turned to me. "You are a man of the world," he said. "As a man, you can make hard decisions. And as the man who uncovered this damnable plot, it is your privilege to decide the fate of the Immortal who has forsworn his own nature and the trust everyone had in him. Decide, Lars Temkin, the fate of St. Nicholas."

That was what I had been waiting for. No thought of Nadramadia troubled me, as I said, "Shoot the bastard."

So they did. ▲

We have but Souls on Loan -William R. Ford, Jr.

In this blighted place
that you and I call home
dim lit, both twilight face
we sit at night alone
with nothing but the endless lot,
the called out soul we own
I'll tell and hear, and wander near
at the stories we have sown.

But in this blighted place
that you and I call home,
we've nothing but the visions glare,
we have but souls on loan.

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Mines of Moria is Anthony's second fiction sale; his first going to Charlie Ryan at Aboriginal. Intrigued by the title, I read this story as soon as it arrived and bought it the same day. This is short fiction at its best. Anthony lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky where he has worked as a bouncer, private investigator, DJ and a small business owner.

MINES OF MORIA

by Anthony J. Howard

Journal Entry the First/En
Route to Ceti Alpha

Art is life.

Through it we define who we are and our place in the universe.

Every sculpture recreates our physical forms.

Every painter redefines what we see and how we see it.

Every piece of literature is our thoughts and every song our voice and every poem our deepest, innermost emotions.

Art is our way of becoming our creator by forming something from nothing, something beautiful, something horrible. But something.

Art does not imitate life.

Art is Life.

(All journal entries from the personal comlogs of Dr. Dawn Bisceglia, PhD, Art Historian of Excalibur Project, Jonas Braun, Commanding)

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

The silver space ship traced its way languidly across the gray sky. Back and forth around the great expanse of stone until finally settling in a cloud of fine ash between a pile of jumbled rock and the foot of the mountain. The underside of the saucer opened and a small tracked vehicle scurried forth. Shapes in dark blue jump suits soon followed and began to move busily about, erecting metal posts with lights and small shelters for the stowing of various pieces of equipment.

For one planetary cycle they worked, artificial lights illuminating their labors. At dawn on the second day, they trudged up to the great stone face of the mountain. In a long line they moved up to the plateau, around the mud basin, to the enormous stone doors that stood there. One by one they looked up at the portals that towered over them and then passed through the hole that had been cut neatly through.

One of the last paused a little longer than the rest, her eyes seeing something the others had missed.

"Speak, friend, and enter," she said to herself. And then passed inside.

"I'm sure you've all had time to get acquainted with one another during the long voyage here, and I'd like to thank you for your patience." Dr. Braun, the expedition leader was standing atop a pile of crates and speaking to the assembled members of the team, some thirty in all.

"Introductions would seem superfluous given the inordinate amount of time we've spent in close quarters, but I would like to welcome Dr. Bisceglia to our team." Eyes turned to a dark haired woman near the back of the small room. "As some of you will already know, she is an expert in the area of art history, and given the inordinate amount of carving and artificial coloration associated with this particular site, we thought it worthwhile to include someone of that specialty on this expedition. Please give her every assistance. Now, since most of us will be living and working inside the mine site, a few words of caution are in order."

"Excuse me, Doctor." A hand shot up near the back.

"Please, call me Jonas. When you say 'doctor' in this room, everybody looks."

Laughter spread across the room.

"Margaret Grinolds, Geology."

"Yes, Margaret?"

"Has it positively been determined that this is a mining site? I was under the impression that the actual purpose was unknown."

"You are quite correct; no positive determination has been made. That assumption is based on the initial expedition's assessment of the machinery found here. Due to their limited resources, they were unable to stay long enough to provide conclusive evidence for that hypothesis, but for want of a better theory, we are working on the assumption that this is some sort of mine."

Dr. Braun smiled.

"At least until one of you brilliant young minds proves otherwise."

Again the polite laughter.

"Now, until the survey team completes their work, I would like everyone to confine themselves to the clearly marked and mapped areas. That includes everything on this level and most of the one below. I'm sure you'll find plenty of material for your various researches until the survey and cartography sections complete their work.

"Dr. Yeh, our resident biologist, can be found on board the ship in the event of a medical emergency or for reference. Our

tech support will have databases and containment fields up and running as soon as possible, so bear with them. This room will be the common eating area, and I understand that the crew will be setting up some sort of lounge/entertainment area in our old quarters shipboard. First staff meeting will be tomorrow at 0800 standard, and I hope to see all section heads there. Oh, and remember to keep your transponders with you at all time."

Dr. Braun smiled again.

"Now go forth, and conquer."

"Hi, I'm Mike Bellows. I'm with the survey team."

He was handsome and rugged, with a smile that could have been used to sell toothpaste, and she warmed to him instantly, despite herself.

"You're the art historian, aren't you?"

She didn't answer, waiting to see if any cracks would show in his cool approach.

"I've been on several of these digs before, but I can't remember ever meeting an art historian before."

She stared into his perfect blue eyes and stayed silent.

"Is there something about this one that makes it special?"

She smiled knowingly and said, "It won't work."

"I beg your pardon?" he replied. But she just smiled and walked away, leaving a very handsome and confused young man behind her.

Journal Entry the Second/En Route Day 2

(The following is downloaded directly from Excalibur Mission Briefing, Dr. Jonas Braun, author.)

Ceti Alpha 2 is an M type planetary body. It circles a G7 type star at approximately .98 AU with .89 Earth masses and .83 Standard Gravity. It lies at one extreme of what is commonly known as the gray zone, a series of systems in the Gamma Quadrant of the Fourth Sector. The gray zone stretches for well over 700 parsecs in length, three parsecs in depth (Earth relative), and 10 in width at its widest point.

The region is unusual for its abundance of habitable worlds and total lack of indigenous life. Every planet in the zone suffers from a total collapse of the native ecosystem. To term the condition 'catastrophic' is to belittle the extent of the damage to the environments of over 450 worlds.

While the affected planetary bodies vary in size density, orbital location, stellar types, etc., they have two factors in common. The first is their suitability to support life, and in many cases evidence that life at one time existed on them. The second is the presence of enormous quantities of fine gray powder that for want of a better term is referred to as ash, although this is a misnomer, as no evidence of combustion exists. Rather, the ash has replaced, either as a result of some catastrophic occurrence or as a cause of it, the entire range of organic and semi-organic matter of the affected planets, thus leaving them, quite literally, as swirling balls of lifeless powder, totally devoid of, and incapable of supporting, life.

(For possible exception, see notes of Galactic Survey Team Maximillian, Encyclopedia Ref. ALC52901-A, "The Suspected Presence of Silicon Based Life Forms in the Crust of Alpha Hydra 3.)

She spent the first few days just wandering. The site was truly awe inspiring in its immensity. Whoever had created the tunnels and chambers had taken great care in creating an environment that was as stimulating as it was functional. Every grand sweep of a chamber was calculated with an artist's eye toward its

effect on the viewer. Entire series of rooms were linked by color and effect. If this were truly a mining complex, then its creators had possessed souls of incredible beauty and delicacy. Chasms that dropped off to underground streams were carved and colored on each side as if to lend them beauty that they might otherwise have lacked. In other places, obviously natural caverns had been left in pristine condition, and the whole, when viewed over the period of days, left her breathless. As the survey teams mapped new chambers, new wonders were revealed. In some places ancient machinery was discovered that, like the passages, were things of beauty as well as function. She fell instantly in love with the long lost creators who had worked so hard to leave so much. It was if Michelangelo had been a miner, and the mountain, his canvas.

She had found only one flaw in the otherwise perfect beauty of the entire system. In one chamber, on the deepest level, a shaft had been drilled, or dug, or burned, she supposed, that looked out of place in a room given over to subtle sweeps and gentle angles. The walls were slightly luminescent and hinted of deepest green.

"Some type of natural luminescence," the geologist had assured her. "Low levels of radiation well within normal for such sites," she had said, her eyes never leaving the hand-held instrument. "If we find no other entrances to lower levels, we'll explore that drop in a week or so."

"Doesn't it look unusual to you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Where it's located. Doesn't it make you feel like it's, well, out of place?"

Margaret had shrugged and put away her instrument.

"A lot of things here seem out of place to me. Look at the statuary in L-9. I mean, what's the point of putting that in what's obviously a cargo loading area?"

The Geologist shrugged again.

"I mean, I like that sort of thing as much as the next person, but what's the point?"

When no answer had been forthcoming, Margaret had shrugged one more time and walked away.

She watched the scientist leave and then frowned and shook her head.

"Pearls before swine," she thought, unkindly. "Like pearls before swine."

Her only distraction was Michael of the survey crew. He always seemed to end up across from her at mess time, and nearby in her off hours. She had even seen him trying to wade through the dreadful "A Treatise on Art" in the ship's library. She had considered complaining to Dr. Braun, but decided instead to ignore him. If he was that interested, then maybe she'd talk to him after all, and if not, well then he'd just get bored and go away. Besides, she had to admit that he was attractive, in a macho, insensitive sort of way.

Journal entry the Fifth/En Route Day 6

(Mission Briefing, Cont.)

A great deal of speculation, nearly bordering on the mythic, has sprung up about the gray zone. Early explorers were dismayed to find even a few planets in close proximity in such a wasted condition. The extent of the zone was not fully known until well over a hundred years after its first discovery, since colonization efforts were quite naturally shifted to other areas. Not until the advent of the Galactic Cartography Corp was a serious effort made to map every star system within Humanity's zone of control.

Early speculation ranged from a purely natural if unknown

phenomenon, to the presence of some planet eating microbe, to an interstellar war that laid waste to the entire region. Several star spanning cultures, or rather the remains of such, have been found, but nothing indicates that these cultures possessed the technology capable of such destruction. In fact, no evidence exists that the various starfaring cultures were even aware of each other, much less involved in conflict.

Some religious scholars have attempted to portray the civilization in the area as some sort of interstellar Tower of Babel or Plain of Armageddon. Of course no evidence exists to support such a hypothesis, but for adherents, none is necessary.

For every interstellar civilization that existed within the zone, evidence of four none spacefaring cultures is present. And, of course, the vast majority of previously habitable worlds contain no traces of civilization at all.

To date, no convincing evidence for any of the multitude of theories has surfaced, although it is hoped that this expedition may bring new material and information to light.

"Well, it's definitely a mining site," interjected Roberts, one of the engineers. "The construction is consistent with an active operation that followed fairly standard mining techniques."

Heads nodded around the table.

"And while I would question some of their choices for supplemental passages, they certainly seemed to be gifted, if somewhat eccentric engineers. Some of the work is almost brilliant, if perhaps a little flamboyant."

"Perhaps they intended to live here once the mining was completed?" interjected an anthropologist.

"That is certainly possible," replied someone from the archeological team, "but we've seen no evidence of living quarters or such amenities as extensive plumbing. And I would add that I've never known of a culture that lived below ground if it could help it."

"I would tend to agree," added one engineer. "With the exception of the inordinate amount of effort put into the beautification of the working areas, it shows no evidence of any purpose besides mineral extraction."

Dr. Braun nodded.

"Well, perhaps our art historian can grant us some enlightenment."

The attention of the staff meeting turned to Dr. Bisceglia. She looked up from her sketches. Everyone waited expectantly.

"No," she said finally, and went back to work.

The room was silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said no. I don't have any idea."

"You don't even have a theory?" someone asked incredulously.

She looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"They were artists," she said finally. "In every sense of the word."

And then she went back to her sketches. Eventually the meeting went on without her.

Journal Entry the Sixth/Ceti Alpha Day 15

Today I viewed the mining equipment of the Ceti Alphans. I use the word 'viewed' just as I would in reference to visiting a gallery or an exhibition of a new artist or the premier of a feature film.

Over a hundred machines filled a large cavern on the second level of the complex; they were parked in neat rows, the orderliness accentuating the individuality of each piece. I wandered

among them for hours in quite contemplation, slowly absorbing the shape and form of each one.

The engineers chatted and buzzed around me, remarking at the lack of uniformity exhibited by the collection. Many of them felt that perhaps this was some museum style display or display of models as in a trade show. But I am convinced that neither theory is correct. Each one will prove to be as functional and efficient as the one we tested, even though each one is as individual as the Ceti Alphan (or Alphans) that operated it.

After a few hour's work, the test machine hummed quietly to life. Silver treads pulled its sleek body forward and back, while a large energy projector glowed to life. It is some type of non-vein burner, I am told, designed to open passages without regard for the presence of valuable ore.

The engineers expressed curiosity at the design of the broadcast unit and shields. It is not that they are inefficiently located, quite the opposite, but they see no need for the extra effort of asymmetrical placement of the projectors, requiring more shielding and a longer carrier. To them, because the design does not add to the efficiency of the machine, it is wasted effort.

The chief engineer seemed surprised when I asked what the machine would look like in operation. After several false starts, he finally described the color and shape of the energy field, and how it would affect the material through which it dug.

I stood back from the machine and closed my eyes, imagining what it would look like burrowing through the virgin rock, hollowing the heart of the mountain. Suddenly I could see. It became a knife, white hot, burning a wound that would never heal. And when I opened my eyes, the machine was gone, replaced by the beautifully crafted knife, a working piece of art, that remained.

The tech crew began to dismantle it for further study. They scurried across it like rats shredding a Monet to pad a nest, or tiny vandals dismembering the colossus.

I stood and stared, tears streaming down my face, until someone, I think it was Dr. Braun, came and lead me away. The stares of the technicians and sound of gnawing followed close behind.

They sat across the makeshift desk amongst scattered crates and boxes in the storeroom that Dr. Braun had claimed for his office. He made a show of reading a hard copy of her latest

progress report, his antique spectacles propped on the end of his nose, although she was sure he had already read it at least twice before she had arrived. She realized with a start that she felt like a primary school student that had been called into the Principal's office.

Dr. Braun finished his perusal and leaned back in his chair. He regarded her with a warm smile.

She regarded him with silence.

"Your report is very, um, interesting, dear."

She did not bristle, or reply. He frowned, then continued.

"I must confess to no small amount of surprise at some of your conclusions."

Still she waited.

He leaned forward and flipped through a couple of pages.

"The conclusions concerning the purpose behind the, um, beatification of the mining operation seem fairly straightforward, and while I'm not qualified to remark on the quality of the artwork created, your critical appraisal seems to follow fairly standard criteria with which I am familiar."

He cleared his throat and flipped through to the end of the report.

"The conclusions you draw about the final fate of the original inhabitants, however, well, I must say that I don't follow your line of reasoning."

He took his glasses off and leaned back in his chair.

"Before I enter this into the official record, would you care to expound upon them a little?"

"Am I to understand that if I don't, then my contribution will not be included in the official report?"

Dr. Braun looked pained.

"One of the duties of the Expedition Leader is to see that nothing enters the official record that is, um, ill conceived." He raised his hand quickly to cut off her reply.

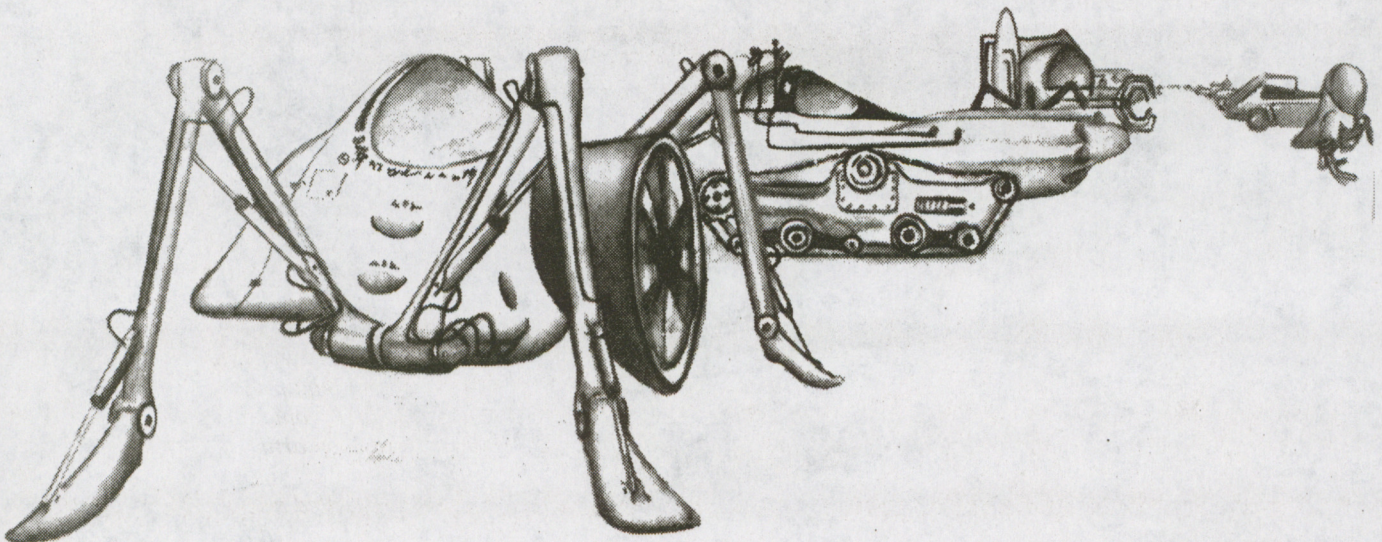
"Which is not to say that your conclusions fall into that category. Normally I would simply read the report and either accept or reject it upon its merits, but..."

"But?"

"But your particular, um, specialty lies outside my area of familiarity. And I felt it necessary to ask you to explain some of your theories in a more direct manner."

She let a few heartbeats pass.

"All right, but before we begin there is one thing."





"Yes?"

She leaned forward for emphasis.

"Don't call me 'dear'"

"All right, I can accept the conclusion concerning the socio-political system as derived from your interpretation of their art, but doesn't the possibility exist that this site represents an aberration within the greater society as a whole? Some sort of artist's colony perhaps?"

"Of course it's possible, but remember that the incorporation of artistic themes included the design of the mining equipment. And not just in post-production modification as one would expect if the machinery were produced outside the artistic community and later modified, but in the design stage as well. I believe you'll find that the engineering report attached as an appendix will support the hypothesis.

"Besides, historically, pockets of fringe culture tend toward a uniformity of thought, if not style, and the variety of influences shown in the artistic expression of the Ceti Alphans would indicate inclusion in a wider culture."

"You can state that categorically?"

"Of course not. I base it as much on..." She paused to find the right word. "Intuition as on anything else."

"Intuition?"

"Yes. The interpretation of artistic expression is based as much on the response evoked in the viewer as it is on the technical ability of the creator. The cave drawings of a primitive culture can be just as moving, if not more so, as the elaborate painting of a more advanced culture."

"But you assert in your final conclusions that 'the destruction of the Ceti Alphans was sudden, probably violent, and without warning.' And that the culture was probably destroyed from without, most likely by an interplanetary, or at least extraplanetary, agent."

He looked up from her report.

"That's a pretty specific conclusion to be based on intuition."

"That conclusion is not based on intuition, but on an analysis of known data. Look around you. We know that the Alphans incorporated their art into everything that they did. Everything. Yet nowhere do we find any indication of impending disaster in their art. Cultures that fear or even suspect that they are in danger of extinction always reflect this foreboding in their artistic endeavors.

"Take the works of Bosch on Earth. The culture at large was fascinated with the proposed second coming of Christ and the Apocalypse. An expected devastation that didn't occur, but was nonetheless incorporated in a great deal of the art work of that period."

She leaned forward for emphasis.

"We know that the mine seemed to be operational right up until the time that their civilization was destroyed, yet we find no indications of a sense of foreboding in the one medium that would almost certainly contain it.

"It seems reasonable to conclude therefore that since they were obviously advanced enough to recognize the threat of some sort of impending ecological collapse, a threat from within so to speak, yet they obviously did not, that the end came quickly and without warning, and most likely was caused by some outside agent or event.

"The presence of many other inhabitable worlds in the so-called grey zone would indicate that a similar fate befell those worlds as well. And since it seems unlikely that this planet out of

so many others would be the source of whatever calamity befell the rest, it seems safe to assume that the cause of the disaster was extraplanetary."

"So something came and just swept them away?"

"It would appear so."

He regarded her in silence for a moment.

"Technologically advanced civilizations just don't disappear."

It was her turn to regard him.

"This one did."

He found her outside. She was sitting on a thermal blanket draped over a chunk of stone that long ago had fallen from the cliff face. She sat facing the enormous stone doors, her back to the mud pond, her head tilted back, staring at the engravings, her voice journal beside her. She didn't seem to notice him.

He crossed to her and sat beside, staring at the doors, but seeing nothing in the seemingly random patterns and shapes. They sat in silence for awhile.

"Is this what art historians do?"

She turned to look at him, but did not reply.

"Stare at things until their eyes blur?"

She looked back at the doors.

"We're much like scientists in that regard."

"How is that?"

"Everyone thinks what we're doing is a waste of time," she turned back toward him. "Until we tell them something they didn't know."

He looked down at his hands.

"I apologize. I didn't mean to offend you. It's just hard for me to see what you're trying to do. I mean, art has its place, I suppose, but, it seems to me that what we're trying to do here is figure out what happened to these people. And I guess I just don't see what good it will do, knowing what they painted on their doors."

He saw her smile in profile, and realized she was more beautiful than he had thought.

"That's because you have no concept of what art is."

"Well, what is it?"

She laughed.

"I've spent my whole life answering that question. And you want it in a hundred words or less."

She laughed again.

"Okay, how can I say this. Art is the expression of what we see and feel. What we think. It's how we pass on our vision. The words become literature. The emotions become poetry. What we see becomes sculpture and painting. What is on that door is something that they thought was important enough to show to all the world. And anything that important to them is something we need to know."

"What if it's just decoration?"

"Then we will at least gain insight to their psychology by knowing what they thought was decorative."

He turned his attention back to the doors.

"So what does it say?"

She sighed.

"I'm not sure, but do you see how bold the patterns are at top? How striking the colors? And then the shapes change, to sunbursts and whorls. And halfway down, the way the interplay of light and darkness gives a sense of, I don't know, of grief?"

He nodded slowly.

"I think it says, 'These are the Mines of Moria that we have carved from the unyielding rock. And these are the stones that we

bring forth into the light of day. And these are our numbered dead, who have given their lives that the harvest may continue.”

He was looking at her, with wonder in his eyes.

“You can see all that?”

“Yes.”

She turned to him with a smile.

“Or it might just be decoration.”

They found a small storage room and made love on the floor. He held her close and called her Dawn and tears made her cheeks salty. They kicked their clothes and gear into a corner and lay together on the smooth stone and enjoyed the feeling of their heat leaching into the floor. She rolled onto her side and listened to his breathing, slowly running her fingertips across his smooth skin, caressing his chest, gliding her hand down across his stomach, and circling his navel. She marveled at the perfection of it, at how the diversity blended smoothly into the totality of the form.

God is a master sculptor, she thought. She rolled onto her back and stared at the distant, dimly lit ceiling.

They remade themselves in everything they did; even their mines were like them, smooth and clean, blending one form with another. They even drilled like artists, following the veins with an eye to symmetry.

Except for the hole.

They had blended art into their work. Inseparable. Every cut was made with an artist’s hand. Everything was a part of the larger vision. Everything.

Except for the hole.

It had dropped from the floor of the chamber without regard for form or beauty or aesthetics. It was strictly functional. It didn’t belong. As if it hadn’t been made by them at all.

As if it had been made...

...by something else.

She leaped to her feet and grabbed for clothes. He raised onto his elbows, a sleepy look on his face.

“What...”

She jerked on her pants and his shirt.

“The hole, when are they going to explore the hole?”

“What hole?”

“In the green room. When are they going down it?”

“Today. Now. Sometime.”

She grabbed his arm and jerked him to his feet.

“That’s what killed them. Whatever’s in the hole.”

Then she turned and sprinted down the corridor, her lover close behind, pulling on his pants as he ran.

She was only heartbeats behind him when he turned and screamed for her to go back. Out of the unnatural hole something boiled. Something dark and terrible that swallowed the light completely and surged forward. It had covered half of the room when it reached him. He had stared without comprehension for an instant, then turned and screamed at her as he took the first panicked step away. The darkness enveloped him and she had one split second’s view of the skin and flesh peeling away into ashes, leaving only the rapidly drying bones still trying desperately to save her.

She staggered backwards and sprinted through the passage, slipping and falling as she jerked to a stop, then clawing frantically at the portable force wall. It sprang up as the blackness charged towards her. The wall crackled and flared and the low power warning began to beep. She stared at the charge needle as it dropped quickly to the red. She had time to curse the darkness, and the machine, and then she ran away.

* * * * *

An eternity later, she crawled from her hiding place, waiting until the distant hum of machinery had faded. She had almost died, there in the darkness. She had heard footsteps and eased herself from her hole. As she started to call out, he, she, it, whatever, had turned so that the metal of its face was visible. The body was of Margaret the geologist, but the face was of some Ellisonian nightmare, all wires and lenses and strange devices.

Only the paralyzation of terror had kept her from betraying herself. Her body locked rigid and her throat tightened, rebelling against a scream too large for it to admit. Soon the thing had turned away, continuing whatever errand its new master had prescribed. For the first time in her life she wished someone was dead.

Finally she groped her way through silent passages, afraid to try to find light, but equally fearful of what darkness she might blunder into without knowing.

That would, perhaps, be best, she thought.

She finally found her way to the small room where they had made love. His face came back to her as she felt along the floor and found their clothes and gear. Tears once again ran down her face and splattered on the floor.

“I am so sorry,” she said to the darkness.

With hand torch and laser, she made her way back out, and risking the light, began to walk toward the exit.

Journal Entry the Last/Ceti Alpha Day 31

I sit atop a pile of rocks near where we touched down. Our silver saucer now juts against the darkened sky, truly phallic in its new dimensions.

The darkness poured out the great stone doors of the mines, slid across the mud flat, and oozed down the mountain nearly two cycles ago. The darkness, like an oily cloud, covered our ship and began to make its changes. A short time later, the surviving members of the expedition marched out the neatly cut hole, down the trail, and into the darkness. For two days they worked, dim shapes moving arrhythmically in the unnatural twilight, doing their master’s bidding. Now they move toward my perch, their new machine parts gleaming evilly in the moonlight. I have watched them from my perch for several days, but until now they had ignored me.

I soon realized that it, whatever it is, was not interested in doing to me what it had done to the rest, at least as long as I didn’t interfere, and that without access to the ship, escape or communication with the Net was impossible. So I spent these last days in final contemplation of the legacy of the Ceti Alphans. I am still amazed at the simple beauty and quiet elegance of their work. And if anyone had told me that such a highly developed industrial civilization would have been able to remain true to the artist within, I would not have believed it.

I hope that the shades of their dead will forgive me for thinking myself worthy to add to their creation.

I wish that I could have just a fraction of their talent. I wish that I could borrow their soul, if only for a moment, just long enough to prepare a fitting memorial, one that could tell the story of how they died, with the skill that they told the story of how they lived. But how can I do that? How do I write the eulogy of a race of artists that lived here so long ago, loving, creating, until that Thing came down from the stars, fresh from its last kill, and devoured every living thing on this planet? Everything down to the organic molecules in the soil. And how do I explain what I do not know? Why did it choose to wait here, deep in its hole, until we blundered along? Why did it not make the Ceti Alphans

into what it has made us? Was it sated from its long conquest of the stars? Did the inhabitants lack some key piece of technology that it needed to leave? Something that we unwittingly provided? Or was it simply tired, and wanted to rest, weary from its mission of death among the stars?

I do not know, and the truth be told, I do not care.

Instead, I have spent over half the charge of the laser and what has turned out to be the last hours of my life in an attempt to carve from the mountain my last and only artistic endeavor. It is a figure, burnt black from the heat of the pistol, that looks without hope toward the heavens. I call it "self portrait in stone," and I hope that the dead are pleased since only they will ever see it.

My laser pistol and journal are my only companions.

I do not think that anyone will ever hear this. I seriously doubt that...whatever they are...will bother to download my journal into the Central Net. As a matter of fact, I doubt the Central Net will exist for much longer.

The stars are making a rare appearance. They gaze down upon me, unblinking in the thin atmosphere. I try to look at them with an artist's eyes, but all I can think of is the darkness, and when my eyes fall to the pistol, the burning light.

Soon they will climb to my perch and find nothing except my ashes and this journal, with the spent laser beside.

I wonder how many worlds will join me.

I wonder how long before it once again burns a hole and hides, deep under the ground. I wonder if this time, it ever will.

"To be, or not to be." For me there is no question.

They are coming.

The End is Near.

And there is something that I must do. ▲

Star Song

-Carol I. Ullmann

Connect-the-stars,
the patterns
in my dreams
are answers
to my schemes
often gone wrong
diluted into song
but echoing the rhythms
of the stars, unbarred
bared to my naked eye-
and my naked, entreating hand
my sleepy soul stretched out upon the sand
dreaming of a song
a long, long time from now.

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SHORT

ANNETTE FUNICELLO WEARS FALSIES

Michael Bracken

The mouse killed him.

That's not the way the news shows reported it of course, but that's what really happened. I know. I was there when the mouse pulled the trigger.

It was a sweltering Florida day and perspiration clung to me inside the dog suit. I'd been up all night comforting my wife while she puked her guts out in what we later learned was an early bout with morning sickness, and I'd had to walk the last two miles to work when my aging Japanese import committed hari-kari on the two-lane road leading into the theme park's service entrance. I was in no mood to entertain spoiled children and harried parents, but I'd spent at least two dog years working with hangovers so I knew full well how the idiotic smile on the dog's head masked any personal feelings I might possess.

I'd been working with the new mouse for about a week, but I'd never been on break with him and I'd never seen him with his suit off. During our first break taken when a supervisor ordered us into the break room after watching me aim a left hook at a precocious seven-year-old who stomped on my over-sized shoes until he connected with my big toe and damn-near crippled me I asked the mouse why he didn't take his head off.

He just shook it and smiled his inane smile at me.

"Aren't you hot in there?"

He shook his head again and leaned back against the wall.

The supervisor interrupted my interrogation of the mouse and reamed me out for taking a poke at the kid.

"I missed him. What's the crime?"

"You're lucky his parents didn't see you."

I shrugged.

"There'll be a written warning waiting for you when you punch out tonight. Two more and you'll be collecting unemployment."

Under my breath I told him to be fruitful and multiply. I'm sure he didn't hear me because he turned his back and walked away.

I pulled off the over-sized gloves, dug through my pocket for change, and fed a pair of quarters into the soda machine. I rolled the cold cola can against my forehead, trying to cool off. It didn't help and when I finally popped the tab, half the cola sprayed into my face.

I found a few paper towels and tried to dry myself.

There wasn't time to strip off the suit and really get clean, so I did the best I could.

The mouse watched me the entire time. We were alone in the break room, so I tried again to jump start a conversation. "You got a Minnie at home?" I asked. "Any little mouselings hanging around?"

He shook his head.

"You talk?"

He shook his head again.

It was my luck to team up with a mute.

"Break's over," the supervisor said when he returned. I'd just then taken my first gulp of warm soda. "Before you go back out there, I want to warn you to be on your best behavior. Walt'll be visiting today."

He'd visited once before stood right next to me and had his picture taken just like one of the paying customers, careful of course to turn away from the camera so his freezer burn didn't show. It wasn't an event I looked forward to repeating. In fact, the only good luck I'd had that morning was avoiding the Anti-Freeze picketers at the front entrance.

"Is this a public visit or a surprise?" I asked.

The mouse straightened up, patted his clothes smooth and stood waiting for me.

The supervisor shrugged. "They don't tell me a damn thing."

As soon as I had my head on straight, the mouse and I returned to the front entrance. Nearly a dozen tax exemptions rushed us in a haphazard flying V. I dodged their initial assault, deflecting most of them toward the mouse. I had my fans, though, and two of the little sub-humans insisted on clinging to my legs as their parents snapped instant memories with their disposable cameras.

The crowds continued streaming in, some of them oblivious of the picketers out on the highway, many of them visiting the park despite the protests. It had been two years since the big thaw and it was safe to say the public was giving Walt the cold shoulder. Led by more televangelists than you can shake an Arbitron rating at, the public had overwhelmingly decided that the only thing more culturally divisive than sucking out unborn fetuses with a vacuum is reviving frozen multi-millionaires. Followers of the Anti-Freeze movement picketed all thirteen of the theme parks and Walt's existence had been threatened multiple times.

SHORTS

Walt was featured on the covers of *People* and *Refrigeration Digest*, Jay Leno made jokes about stuffing grandpa in the deep freeze and only thawing him for holidays, and Sally Jesse Raphael discussed the sexual proclivities of someone who'd been frozen stiff. Ted Koppel even hosted a *Nightline* debating whether the thawed could legally vote, and, if they could, how that would affect the polls in Chicago where the dead had once won the state for Kennedy.

Except for the resurrection of Christa story I learned in Sunday School and still wasn't sure I believed I'd always assumed dead, after all, is dead.

When Walt finally arrived that afternoon, surrounded by his sycophants like icicles hang from the eaves, I'd spent too many hours in the hot sun swatting away mosquitoes. I was not in a good mood and his arrival was unlikely to improve my day.

He rode the monorail in from the parking lot and walked directly toward us from the station. I stepped back so the mouse stood between us.

The mouse extended his arm toward Walt as if to shake his hand. Then I heard a quiet pop and Walt fell to the ground clutching his chest. As security guards radioed for assistance, the mouse turned and I saw a gaping hole in the front of his right finger, the white glove burned by gun powder, though I wasn't sure then that's what I was seeing.

I tackled the mouse halfway up Main Street, pinning him to the ground while children cried. They didn't notice the commotion surrounding Walt, they only cared about what I was doing to the mouse. Walt didn't make it back to the freezer in time, and they entombed what remained of him out in California. Authorities couldn't prosecute the mouse for murder—Walt had been declared legally dead years before but he did serve three months for possession of a concealed weapon. I still received the written reprimand for aiming a left hook at the kid earlier that day and my wife gave birth to an eight-pound-four-ounce boy the following winter.

We named him Walt. It's a small world after all. ▲

TROPHY

E.H. Wong

Malcolm stalked quietly, anxious not to alert his prey. Thin morning sunlight pierced the canopy of trees above and showered the forest floor in calico light. He admired his camouflage fatigues and pictured himself as a revolutionary, patrolling a banana republic jungle. The thought brought a smile to his face. But one glimpse of the modified carbine he carried, with its sinister, fat barrel returned him to reality. He ignored his throat-stopping aversion to guns and thought back to his singles group training, on firearms safety, and on the dignity of fulfilling traditional male roles.

He had been tracking for hours, and knew that he followed a full-sized herd. Inside, he already thrilled with accomplishment, reading scuff marks, crushed blades of grass, and broken twigs like some scout in the old West. What a change from the boardrooms and the executive conferences of his everyday life.

Malcolm heard a twitter, then a giggle. The sounds came from up ahead. He crept forward while his heart raced.

He reached the edge of a clearing and gasped. Scattered in three cliques was the herd of women. Purebreds, too. Not mutts, not *womyn*. Malcolm couldn't believe his luck.

Some seemed too young, still teenagers, but most appeared to be in their early twenties. They all wore casual attire, in the simple yet elegant style that could only come from proper breeding. And Daddy's money. He could imagine their almost identical backgrounds: finishing

school, a coming out ball, and then matriculating at an elite Eastern school with maybe a year off in Europe. A light breeze wafted overhead. He sniffed, recognizing Chanel No. 5. Absolute class. Nothing ostentatious.

He shivered as he comprehended his good fortune. Others would kill to be in his place, about to confront *the* prize herd. As his eyes swept over the women, his entire body ached from trepidation. Malcolm took a deep breath and plunged into the open.

"Testosterone!" he cried, brandishing his gun.

The herd bolted.

Of the twenty or so women, most escaped into the brush, filling the forest with shrieks. Several stood rooted, confusion jumbling their feet. One, however, gave Malcolm a look of half-amusement, half-indifference. Without any apparent concern, she sauntered toward her departed companions. She walked with poise, and tossed her blonde tresses back, in the manner of a self-assured debutante.

Malcolm was taken.

Delicate-featured and slender, she could have sprung from the pages of *Vogue*. But there was more, an indefinable panache, a teasing manner perhaps, but not so overt to be brazen.

He crashed forward to intercept her, and raised his gun to a ready position.

She hesitated, eyes suddenly wide as if understanding

his threat for the first time. She blinked once, then darted for cover.

He cringed and fired.

The soft rubber pellet hit her square in the chest, knocking out her wind. Surprise creased her face as she collapsed while doubling over. As she dropped the ground, her chin cracked against a rock, snapping her head to one side.

Malcolm rushed to where she lay in a stunned heap. He rolled her onto her back, and cried out when he saw her chin was bleeding. He checked the gash, then sighed with relief. Nothing that a plastic surgeon couldn't repair.

Next, he pried open her mouth and discovered perfect white teeth. Good, he thought. Orthodontists were so damn expensive.

Malcolm bound her hands and feet with duct tape. As he finished, he looked up to meet a pair of deep blue eyes. Malcolm squirmed under her stare. He wondered what she saw. A balding, paunchy, middle-aged man? Or a rugged outdoorsman, manly and virile?

She struggled but the duct tape held. Without warning, she lifted her head and spat. Malcolm's heart ached as he wiped his face. A feisty one. Just his luck. But he would have to make the best of it. Anyway, he knew the risk. Her kind did not tame easily. Sometimes never.

Malcolm cleared his throat. "Uh, hello. What's your name?"

She said nothing.

"My name is Malcolm," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Again, she said nothing, but did roll her eyes.

"What's a nice girl like you doing out here?" As soon as he spoke the litany, Malcolm felt ridiculous. But he was bound by tradition.

She studied him for a long moment, then laughed derisively.

Malcolm felt his ears burn. He hadn't expected this reaction. How could he deal with absolute contempt? Malcolm swallowed and decided to push ahead. "I'm forty-seven, a non-smoker, divorced years ago. I need a companion."

A look of boredom.

"I'm the CEO of a Fortune 500 company," he blurted.

Still no reaction. A surge of panic gripped his throat.

"I've got my own private Lear. An estate in Atherton. With a full housekeeping staff."

Almost imperceptibly, she lifted one eyebrow. But Malcolm didn't miss the sign. His heart jumped. That's the key, he thought.

"Uh, also a condo in Poipu. And a cabin in Vail. Next to the slopes."

She slowly gave him the once-over, exhaled as if she had resigned herself to some fate, then made eye contact.

"You could play tennis at the club. Redecorate. Do charity work."

She was attentive now, showing interest.

"What's your name?" he asked again.

"Leah," she said.

At first Malcolm thought she sounded nervous. But then he realized how uncomfortable she must have been.

Poor thing, he thought. He took off his jacket, rolled it into a pillow, and tucked it under her head. She acknowledged him with a smile.

Now, he thought. The hunting tag!

Suddenly jittery, he fumbled in his pockets and pulled out the long flat box, nearly dropping it in his haste. She watched with an amused expression, as if their positions had suddenly turned. With an embarrassed look, he opened the box and withdrew a heavy diamond necklace. She sucked in her breath.

In the sunlight, the necklace glittered with spectral fire, three rows of large, evenly-sized diamonds set in white-gold bezels, surrounding a huge marquise worth a king's ransom. Malcolm heard a concerted "ooh" from the underbrush and knew that Leah's herd mates had not gone far.

Leah's eyes opened wide, and Malcolm could see the sparkle of the jewels reflected in her pupils. He watched her chest heaving gently, possibly a residual effect from the rubber pellet, but most likely from bedazzlement. With his heart pounding, he bent down to fasten the necklace around her neck.

She bent forward to oblige him as he worked the clasp. She looked up, fluttered her lashes, and said in a breathy voice, "Oh, Malcolm!" She looked down at the necklace again and cooed softly.

She was his. Inside, his spirit soared, oblivious to the snickers and titters which floated across the grassy clearing. He could only concentrate on his relief at finally shedding his solitary existence, on his remarkably good fortune in winning someone properly versed in her social graces, and on the glow that he would feel from now on whenever he attended a fund-raiser or an opera opening, no longer the pity of the crowd but now the envy, as his trophy woman adorned his arm for all the world to see.

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Russ came in, almost bouncing. A huge change from his norm of late. Been letting his work get to him too much. happens when you work with crazy people. I know. Of course the people he works with are his patients and would probably object to the term crazy. They might prefer the term troubled while others might like "reality challenged." Russ is a shrink, formally called Dr. Idolatrous. He hates it when I call his patients crazy but it is a word I would use to describe some of my closest friends so no insult is meant. He thinks the lot of us here at Bulfinche's are nuts, delusional even. Not a unreasonable attitude considering who hangs out here but it is unusual for a regular to be such an adamant on-believer.

Part of Russ' problem is he takes his work to heart. Russ knows only people can make themselves better but he still blames himself when they don't. In short he breaks the counselor's cardinal rule- he has trouble keeping his emotional distance, a very real liability in his line. It is a two-edged sword because his empathy also gives him an edge.

Lately Russ has been a bit depressed himself. Corrects me and tells me he is not clinically depressed, merely has a lowered affect, then laughs. His idea of a joke. I have no clue where he gets these ideas from but I wish he would leave them alone. They will only lead him down the road to social ruin.

His specialty is phobias. He has even been helping Tommy get over his agophobia with some success.

Russ sat down at my station.

"Hey, Russ. Glad to see you so chipper." I said.

"Yep, Murph. Today is a beautiful day and the world is a beautiful place. Give me a beer," Russ said, grinning. "I'm up for the Director of Psychiatry at Ringvue. Very prestigious. If I get it I would be the youngest man to ever hold the position."

"Congrats. Make sure you stretch first. You will be able to hold the position longer."

"Thanks, On top of that made a major break-through with a patient. After months of therapy he has conquered his fear of heights."

"All right. How'd you do it?"

"He," Russ corrected me. "Beat it mostly by using aversion therapy."

"You mean starting out standing on a chair and ending up on the top of a skyscraper?"

"Basically but with some visualization techniques tossed in. Yesterday we stood on the roof of my office building, thirty five stories up, and not a twinge of apprehension."

"You are a miracle worker, doc."

"No, I just showed him the way. He did the work."

"Then you are an amazing trail blazer. This one is on me." I said topping off his beer.

"How can I refuse. Cheers," Russ said. "That patient is on his way up to the eighty sixth floor observatory of the Empire State Building today to celebrate."

At that moment a electronic buzzing began.

"Russ, you got a bee swarm in your coat? Easier ways to get honey." I asked.

"Not at all. It's my cell phone. It is all the buzz. I have nothing to hive," Russ said with a chuckle. See what I mean about his jokes? Makes even my worst seem good by comparison. "Probably a client. Give them this number for emergencies," Into the phone he said "Dr. Idolatrous. Oh hi, Tony," covering the mouthpiece he whispered to me, "The patient I was telling you about."

Russ returned to the phone conversation. "Tony, no need to thank me again. Seeing you up there on the roof yesterday made it all worthwhile... You're on the observatory deck and no fear? Excellent. I am very proud of you Tony... No, Tony I don't think you should climb up. The fence is there for a reason. Tony, No!" Russ shouted into the cell phone. "I can be there in ten minutes. Five minutes then. Tony, don't do it. It is not worth it. I'm begging you, Tony, please don't. Oh dear God!"

Russ held the phone numbly to his ear for a few more seconds, then visibly cringed. He shut the flip top and let the phone drop to the bar top.

It was one of those awkward moments when all I could do was state the obvious. "He jumped?"

"Yes." Russ said, a small tremor in his voice.

"Why?"

Russ inhaled deeply, trying to steady himself. "He never told me why conquering his fear was so important and you know I never even asked more than the basic 'whys'. Just now, for the first time, Tony told me he had wanted to commit suicide for years but did not have the courage for poison or violent means. Felt he would chicken out at the last minute. Needed something he could not back out from. A suicide jump was his answer but the fear of heights kept him from doing it. Today he had no fear. Today he died."

"Are you sure? Maybe he did not do it. Maybe it was a cry for more attention. Maybe..."

"Murphy, he did not hang up. I heard the impact."

"I'm so sorry. Are you going to be okay?"

"Honestly Murphy, I don't know. Eventually I'm sure I will be but it is tomorrow I am worried about."

"What are you going to do tomorrow?"

"Have not a clue. I will worry about tomorrow when it gets here. First I have to worry about right now."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Yep. Triple bourbon, Murphy, and keep them coming."

(*New Heights* first appeared in *Murphy's Lore*. ©1997)

Bill left home on a Tuesday night in the pouring rain. He took nothing with him but the pickup truck and a six-pack. He opened a can as he headed west for the interstate, but the beer was warm and tasteless.

Rain and wind pummeled the car. He had to squint to make out the faded yellow markings, the road a wet black presence vanishing under him. Through the flick of the windshield wipers he saw Janice's face scrunched up as she screamed at him. He couldn't remember how it had started. Lately all their arguments mixed together into one unfixable mess.

Bill pulled onto the interstate, southbound. He had a vague plan to head for Vegas. He had about four hundred bucks, cash payment for a plumbing job. If he lost it all at Vegas he could find construction work down south. Somewhere hot and dry. It wouldn't be so bad.

He tuned the radio to the country station. The noise helped drown out the rain. After a while he started to sing along, overtaking the monster diesel trucks with their smoke-stacks jutting up like insect antennae.

The rain thinned to drizzle. Bill glanced at his watch, five thirty. His stomach rumbled. He'd pull off at the next all-night restaurant.

He slowed down to sixty-five, watching out for signs. A blue neon arrow flashed ahead, then vanished. Bill blinked, but there was nothing ahead but the road and a distant truck.

One mile later, he saw the arrow again, a bright blue pulse that drew his eyes. The arrow didn't seem to get any larger as he drove on, until suddenly there it was right beside him, the bright pulse of it lighting up a dirt road.

He swerved hard onto the side-road, the pickup jostling as it hit a rock. The radio crackled into silence.

A painted sign swung in the wind, "Lucy's Bar 1/4 mile. Always open."

Bill drove on down the track. When he saw the hut he almost gave up and turned round. Unfinished wood walls framed a screen door with jagged tears in the mesh. A second painted "Lucy's Bar" hung above a boarded-up window.

But a car squatted in the mud in front of the hut. He got out of the pickup, walked stiff-legged over toward the door. As he approached he heard two voices, one that sounded like an old man, kind of quivery, and a husky woman's voice. There was something in her voice that made him think of late night movies and the prostitutes back east. He paused outside the door to tidy his hair with his fingers.

The heat hit him as soon as he stepped inside. He pulled his jacket open, and walked up to the bar. No one was in sight, just the rows of glasses hanging upside down from their racks, and the bottles of liquor and beer.

"Help yourself to a drink."

The woman's voice came from the left. Bill swiveled round and saw a curtained doorway.

"Come on through when you're ready," said the voice.

With a shrug, Bill took a bottle of Jack Daniels and a tumbler, and pulled the curtain aside.

A girl of maybe eleven years old sat at a card table with a pile of black chips on the green felt in front of her. Her hair was a smooth chestnut brown, fine as water, drawn back in a

red velvet hairband. Her lips were as red as the hairband, pouted slightly.

Bill frowned. The kid's mother must let her use makeup. "Is the bar open? Are your parents around?"

The girl laughed, a husky deep laugh that raised the hairs on Bill's arms. "We're always open, just like the sign says. Have a seat, have a glass of that whiskey."

Bill hesitated. "Are you alone? I thought I heard someone else."

Outside, a car engine stuttered to life.

Bill took three steps over to the boarded up window, squinted through a crack. He saw the taillights of a car disappearing down the track.

"My company," said the girl, "just left, but I hate being on my own. Please stay."

There was something weird about the whole set-up. Bill looked at the girl, looked down at the Jack Daniels in his hand. The whiskey glowed honey-gold in the lamplight. It wouldn't hurt to have a drink or two.

Bill sat down opposite the girl. The chair yielded around him, the smell and feel of the leather catching him by surprise. He filled up the tumbler, took a long, slow drink.

The girl brought out a deck of cards and shuffled it with quick practiced movements. "Do you play poker?"

"Yes," said Bill. He set the tumbler down loudly as the girl dealt them each five cards, face down. "But I don't think this is a good idea. Your parents wouldn't want you playing cards with a stranger."

She laughed at him, her teeth showing a gleaming ivory. "Are you frightened? Do you want to go back to your wife?"

Bill started. He glanced down at the wedding band on his hand. For a second he saw Janice's face again, not angry this time but apologetic, no *pitying*. A year ago, he had come home with six red roses and told Janice he was ready to start a family. Janice had shaken her head, saying she didn't think they were ready. Bill had thrown the roses onto the floor. He didn't know what she wanted anymore. He remembered the pitying look on her face as she said sorry. He had hated her for that look.

Bill pushed the memory aside. He picked up the cards: three sixes over two black kings, full house. He laid them face down, feeling abruptly guilty. The kid couldn't be more than twelve. "I should be going."

The girl stared at him wide-eyed. "Please stay, just until someone else comes. The whiskey's free if you'll stay."

"Well," said Bill. He took a gulp of whiskey, the smooth taste turning to heat as he swallowed. He picked up the cards again. "Okay."

"Good. We'll start with draw poker, nothing wild, one draw." She pushed a stack of chips over to him. "How many cards do you want?"

"I'll stick with these." Bill watched the girl take her cards. He laid three chips in the center of the green felt.

"Your three, and another two." The girl put five chips in the center and grinned.

Bill smiled to himself. Feeling a little sorry for the kid, he decided to go easy on her. "I'll see you."

She flicked over her cards: two pairs.

Bill gathered in the chips, took another gulp of whiskey. A few hands later, he was as mellow as he'd ever been, warm right through like the best moments after sex. If he didn't focus properly he could pretend the girl was older, the red pout of her lips an invitation.

His stack of chips dwindled and finally ran out. "I guess I'm done."

The girl shook her head, her brown hair swinging hypnotically. She pulled open a drawer in the table and took out two rolls of ivory chips. "The black chips were worth a day each. These are months."

"Months?"

"For every chip you lose, you owe me a month. So far you owe me fifty days."

Bill stood up, no longer amused. "It was just a game. I have to go now."

"You can't," said the girl. "You agreed to stay until someone else came."

His knees folded under him and he sat back down at the table. He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't obey. He couldn't move them at all. He tried again—nothing. He slammed his fist down toward the table, but his hand stopped midway, opened out to lift up his cards.

"You agreed," said the girl. She leaned toward him, her breath cleanly sweet, and placed a roll of ivory chips down in front of him. "I hate being alone. I believe it's your bet."

Bill was breaking out in a sweat. All he could move were his fingers, touching the ivory chips. He strained to shift his feet, to stand, but his muscles were frozen. He pushed one

ivory chip forward, felt something else move his hand for him once he'd made

his decision.

This had to be a nightmare. He was back in the bed beside Janice. In a moment he'd remember how to wake himself up.

The girl smiled. In her eyes there was no pity, no trace of sympathy as Bill lost hand after hand.

He couldn't bluff, couldn't hide the fear that rose in him when his cards were poor. Those few times he held a winning hand, the girl knew immediately and he never won more than a chip or two.

The daylight started to brighten through the cracks in the boarded up window. Bill saw it through the corner of his eyes, but he couldn't move his head to look at it directly. His joints ached, a deep throbbing rooted in muscle and bone. When his hands lifted the cards in front of him, he saw his skin dried out and wrinkled, gathered in folds at the base of his knuckles.

He ran out of ivory chips, and the girl opened the drawer and pulled out two rolls of blood-red chips.

"You've lost sixteen years so far," she said. "Each of the red chips is worth a year."

"Please," said Bill and didn't recognize the quaver in his own voice. His fingers closed on one of the red chips. It yielded slightly under his touch, warm as his skin. He thought of Janice lying alone in the double bed, remembered the taste and smell of her body under his tongue, the sounds she made beneath him. "Please. Let me go. I've got money in my wallet if you want that"

The girl pursed her red lips, dealt the cards out. "Your bet."

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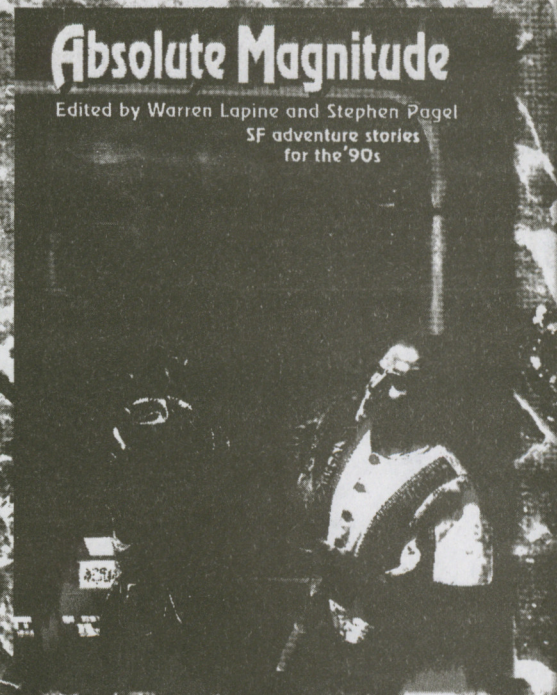
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"Rise and Shine" is a story about one of my favorite things—BEER! Frank's fiction has appeared in Fantastic, Amazing, Realms of Fantasy and Absolute Magnitude. He is a retired rocket scientist (really!) and now lives in California with his wife of 41 years.

RISE AND SHINE

*I've waited through many a long thirsty spell,
Just a-straining for all I was worth
To hear the camp lookout sing out with a yell,
"The tankship's in orbit from Earth!"*

*Then I'd dump my syntho-gin on the deck
And push through the crowd to the bar,
Where me and a thing with a pink turtle's neck,
Traded whiskeys in toast to Sol-star.*

*And we'd holler (or snuffle, or hiss) exaltation,
With hoorahs for old Earth we hold dear,
Hoorahs for the one world in all of creation,
Where a man can buy genuine beer.*

by Frank C. Gunderloy, Jr.

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

Now that you got yourself wound around that barstool, if you was to put your disc up for a couple of Kelly's reconstituted beers, I'll let you in on how them damn Myxies was the only thing kept me and my partner Moleman Myskyrch from sizzling the whiskers right offa APEC's booze monopoly. (Well now, I do thank you kindly you are a gentleman (lady?) and a scholar, as my dear ol' Daddy used to say.)

It all happened just a tick from here, when I got me a call from Moleman to pick him up in the Rigel planetoid belt. I was pushing a little skimmer-tug all my own then, pulling a couple-three barge pods, doing all right running supply drops for prospectors, and I even had a few steady contact routes for Melpomene Mining and Mucking. I mustered two good Fuzzcats who knew what barging was all about, and was disking steady tracks not getting rich, but doing OK, even after paying off the Fuzzies and putting in for maintenance at R&R every fifth run or so.

Me and Moleman, we go back to tankship days together, when we was both signed on for the long spiral from Earth, just trying to hang on to enough tracks for a stake. Now you got to know that Moleman then wasn't anything like that wasted goofus you see over there slop-sleeping with his puss in the bar-wash. Except for a touch of low-grav flab, he was trim as a dragline, with the cropped hair all prospectors wear so's their slick-suit hoods don't wrinkle, and he stood tall. He and I had kicked some butts together, I tell you, so when my alert frequency picked up a prospector beacon squealing his call letters, I was willing to burn quite a ways sub-ecliptic to take him in-lock. Turns out he'd been beaming a tight signal just for my benefit rather than trying to catch a skimmer-bus on the standard pick'n-drop route. We left his little one-seat dragger in the lock, and he no sooner had his slick-suit unskinned when he began to lay on me how he had fallen into a real disc-buster of a claim and how he was gonna cut me in for 1%, and all I had to do was barge a few loads from what to wherever for him.

Well now, standard fee for oxolith barging is pegged at 6%, so I figured he was on to something big if he thinks 1% maybe 2 will cover me. I thought at first he'd caught a couple of carats of flame eyes or a phase crystal and was going to try to make an end run past Melpomene or whoever else had staked him. No, says he, dancing around the cabin like a doodoobug dodging a spike-frog, it ain't nothing he wants to sneak out it's something he wants me to barge in. On the cuff, of course, but eventually my share will pay me back and then some. Well, buddy or no buddy, I ain't about to get sucked into another one of Moleman's schemes where I got to put my disc up front all by its lonesome. Nossir, ol' pal, I says to myself, and I'm just about to punch in a call to the nearest S-bus for his transfer, when he sticks a fist under my nose, and slow-like peels open one finger at a time. Have a bite, he says, and offers me the one thing I ain't tasted since I left Earth back in '04-d-202, and something I never thought I'd taste again.

A chunk of bread.

*When Madame O'Leary, that historic deary,
Put down on the fourth from Antares,
With her cow by her side, and French Irishman's pride,
She established the Chez Cow-Gold dairies.*

*It was her great dream, to sell victuals and cream,
And have all the prospectors for clients,
But her hopes all went dead, when she tried to bake bread,
Though she had baking down to a science.*

*All her dough just fell flat, like a mission-man's hat,
'Cause her yeast was as useless as leaf-mold.
T'was such a disaster, she snatched up a blaster,
Flamed her cow, and burned down Chez Cow-Gold.*

Sure, I know you can track a loaf of bread at any section feed-bin but it ain't the same — believe me, it just ain't the same. All you can taste is soda, or you don't taste nothing at all 'cause they just pump some flour-mush full of nitrogen to make it frothy. Listen, what Moleman handed me was a piece of *bread*. Honest-to-Shim real yeast- raised bread! I mean, even though it was just a half-singed lump from a prospector's solar oven, and was wrapped in a greasy old piece of pod-liner, you could smell that slightly sweet-sour tang, and the way it crumbled and melted to cream on your tongue when you bit into it, with a flavor like wheat dipped in sunlight, was enough to make a man get all sparkle-eyed. I tell you, there was a moment there when Moleman coulda asked me to step through the lock without my slicksuit, and I'd have done it.

You ain't figured out which one is Moleman yet? He's the one slumped over the table there, with his feet stuck out blocking the way to the relief rooms. Hard to believe, ain't it, that a scrawny stubbled-pussed drink-cadger like that might have logged polydensity dollar tracks spinning round the clock? And I, myself, as his junior but trusted partner, would not have done too shabbily on the slice due me for barging cargo for him. Well, a slice of nothing is still just zero-on-a-stick, and in the end there was nothing for me but to drag him back here to Rigel Relay, alas, broken though he was in mind and spirit. No pun intended. Pun? Well a pun is what did you say your race was again? No offense, sir (madam?) Cameleopardian? Well, I don't know as how I've ever seen too many Cameleopardians here in Kelly's Bar before. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen any. Animal, vegetable or fungus? Yes, I figured you were meat, the way you stow away a reconstituted beer good as the next man, mouth or no mouth. Just as long as you ain't no fungus. I'm as broad-minded as the next guy, but after what them Myxies did to me and Moleman, I just can't sit at the same table with no walking toadstools without losing my lock-seals. Acting so high and mighty *Myxo-MY-cetes*, if you please like they're better'n meat, and always starting some sort of ruckus. Sometimes they'll already be beating up on somebody when they come busting in the door just meanness for meanness' sake. All the Myxies know how to do is fight and grunt. (Another? Yes, but only a short one. And maybe a syntho-gin, if you don't mind. Clears the sensors, y'know)

Anyhow, after I gobbled up that piece of bread, I just stood there slobbering down my chin, while Moleman tells me he has discovered the onliest rock but Earth in all of known space where yeast will thrive and multiply, and he is gonna multiply disc tracks right along behind it. He winds this story around me like a snooze-hammock, with me still wiping my mouth and sucking at my gum line. He has come across a real whopper of a double half-dome asteroid, which ain't in itself too uncommon, 'cause most of the really big chunks split into at least two pieces after their share of the magma cooled off. But this one is differ-

ent. One of the halves is like a monster mirror, and it focuses Rigel-light onto the other half over about a square mile or so of rock-face. Only the light don't look like Rigel-light. Something in the mirror half must be absorbing some of the light in just the right way so that what shines on the other half is almost like Sol-light. What's more, the lit-up face don't look barren. It looks like it's got a couple of wisps of atmosphere.

Now I know them rocks ain't got enough mass to hang on to any kind of atmosphere, so this had to be just some kind of gas pocket with a slow leak through the surface cracks. Moleman wouldn't even have noticed if he hadn't been prospecting rock-hopper style in tow behind his little Kawasaki dragger. He just happened to spot some dust suspended when he looked back after a low pass across the lit-up region. He thought at first he'd hit a really big oxolith strike, 'cause sometimes a rich lode will seep enough oxygen to the surface to be visible if you stir the dust. Anyhow, he put down for a couple of scratches to see what he could see, and when all he got was gravel for his troubles, decided to have flapjacks and a nap in his snoozer before his next jump. Only the batter turned to dough, and when Moleman woke up he thought he'd turned, too. But how, but why, but-but-but, I says, stupid-like in all directions. Spores, he says. Spores are everywhere, and we found 'em a new happy home, he says, right down there in the clinkers. (Yes, all this talk of dust does get to you after a while. Another syntho-gin would be very nice, and perhaps a pint to chase it with, if you don't mind, Mr. _____? Mrs. _____? Mz. _____?)

Well, by now I had the Fuzzies cracking to get the pods brought about, and I was headed back along Moleman's vector full push, because the more Moleman laid on me, the more my mouth was a-watering. But Moleman, much to my pain and surprise, lets me know in short order that I am just wasting fuel. Oh, no, he says, it ain't that he don't trust me, but just to protect *us* from all the unsavories, he has hopped a very round-about route to where I picked him up, and backtracking just ain't gonna cut it. Then he scrawls out a list of hardware he says *we* need lifted out from the Rignels so's *we* can get started and tells me to meet him back here in two 7-cycles. And alone — 'cause *we* don't need no more partners. Also I should dig up a two-man slick-dome with facilities if I don't want to recycle my water prospector-style in a snoozer for weeks at a time. And with that he climbs back into his slicks and is hauling his dragger into the lock before I can manage to get unfumbled and ask him what in the name of Shim he is up to and what makes him so sure that the "we" he is talking about don't just include himself and some ship-mice he has hiding in his pocket. When the heck did I get counted in? Well, he says, looking around to make sure none of the Fuzzies can hear, you and me are going into business, and it is gonna push your density to the limit. Baking bread? I asks him, still licking the last pasties from between my teeth. No, dummy, he answers, we are going to build us the first BREWERY in the history of space, and with that he bonds his hood-seal tight under his chin and is out the lock and gone before I can get my jaw back up from my belly-button.

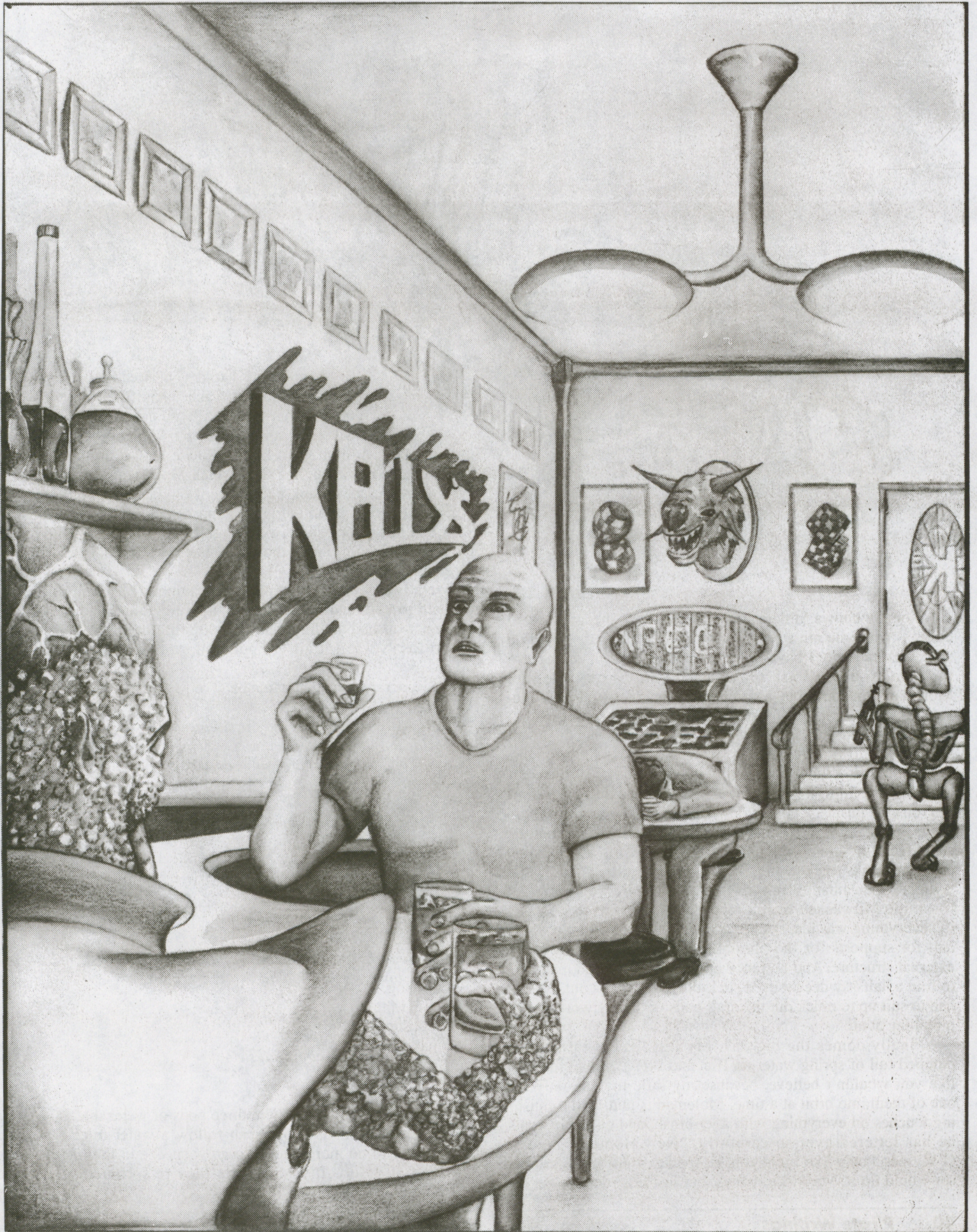
What's a brewery? It's Shim's own gift to man's delight, that's what. It's where the true honey flows, the golden nectar that makes this pitiful recon beer we're drinking taste like relief wastes. You think what we're drinking is pretty good, do you? (Well, maybe just one more to keep my voice from fading, thank you.) You got any idea how they make this stuff?

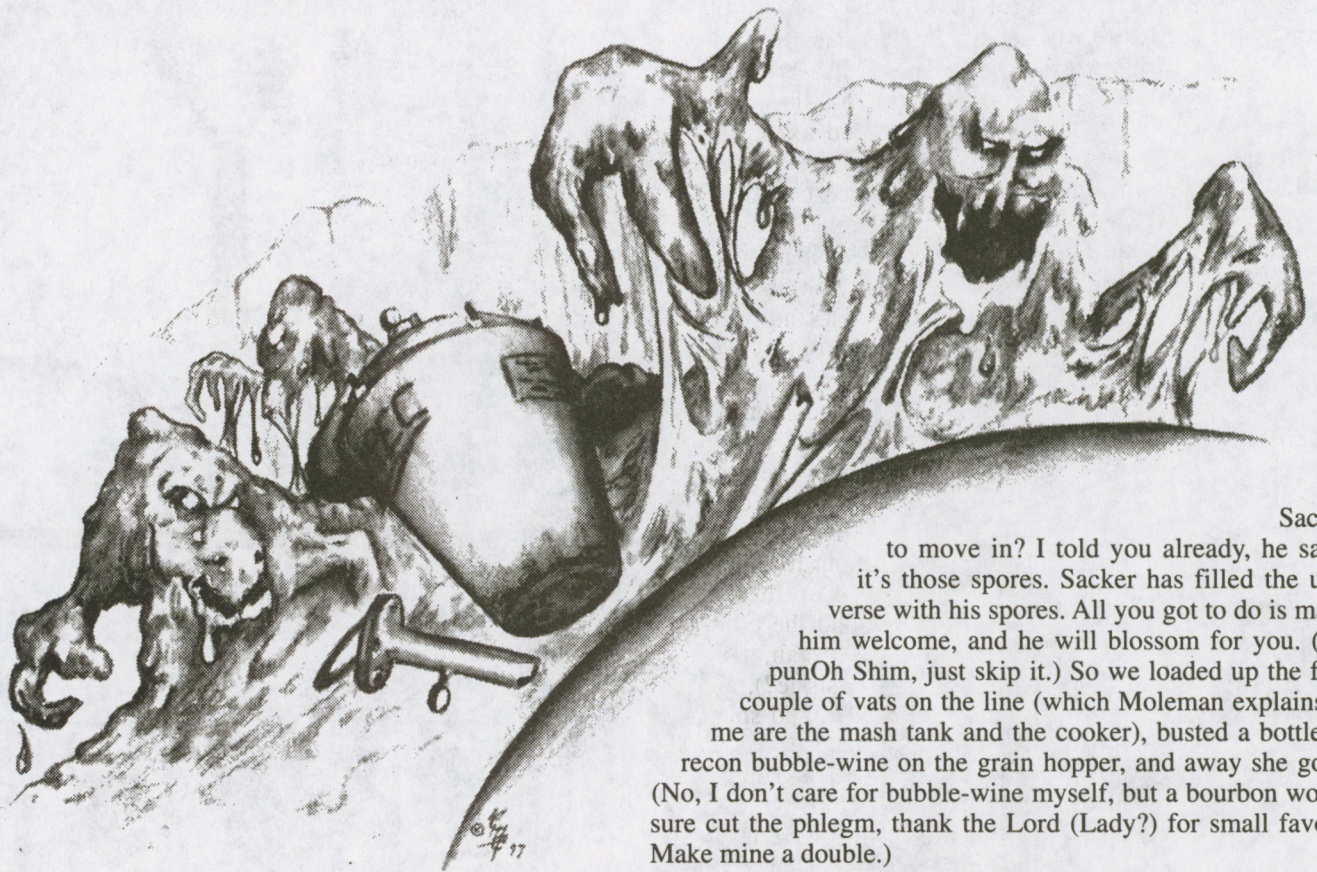
Then let me give you a sensor-load. Down there on Rigel IIIb there's a bunch of grubbies digging tar-sludge out of the shale pits, and trucking it off to a refinery, where they hack it and smack it and crack it, and out the other end of the pipe comes all kinds of chemicals, and plastics, and even some syntho-protein to fatten the hogs. And every drop of ethylene that comes through that pipeline ends up at the hydration plant where it gets converted into alky. *Synthetic* alky. So that every drop of beer or any kind of booze for that matter that gets reconstituted in this part of the known universe has to use that oil-can 200 proof stuff.

You want to try a REAL beer? An honest-to-Geezer REAL beer? Holy Shimoleon, buddy (sis?), Kelly don't sell no real beer. Don't you get it yet? You got to go to Earth to get real beer. Them cans stacked behind the bar are just empties for display. You think APEC's got tanks to waste on beer, what with the prices they can get for the hard stuff? Well, don't look at metake it up with Kelly, if it makes your flippers curl. But you're wasting your time. Kelly's a good guy, always heavy with the juice when he's mixing up a new keg, and he tracks nothing but the finest malt and hops flavors for his recon, although that ain't saying very much, I admit.

Look, Jack (Jill?), don't get on your Cameleopardic high-horse with me. It ain't my fault there ain't no real beer, and it ain't Kelly's fault, and it ain't even APEC's fault, although I admit them sons-of-bitches keep the situation pretty well aggravated with their constant track boosting. You want to blame somebody, you blame it on the Myxies and on old Sacker O'Mysees. That's right, man (lady?), Sacker O'Mysees. Spell it? Well, I ain't no officer, but I saw it on the culture vats Ol' Moleman was so proud of — S-a-double-c-h-a-r-o-m-y-c-e-s, to be exact. Yeast, you dummy, yeast! That snot-nosed little pipsqueak won't grow nowhere except on Earth. That's what I been trying to tell you. If Sacker wasn't so picky about his living conditions, we'd have us a swim in beer every rest-cycle, and shampoo the dust out with bourbon and water. But the yeast, he don't grow, and the whiskey, he don't flow, like the kiddies sing playing jump-rope. So the only earth-brewed thing a man can put his disc up for is the bulk hard stuff, whenever APEC shoots us a tanker. But me and Moleman almost cut a chunk out of their mustard, we did. Lemme finish telling you about it.

It doesn't take me much figuring before I realize maybe *we* really could bust APEC's monopoly wide open, so I red-tubes it down to Rigel IIIb, pays off the Fuzzies and am back in two weeks, with more pipes and pumps and power panels crammed into my drag-pods than you would believe. In about three months we have erected no less than a full-scale brewery on the half-dome we are now calling Little Milwaukee, and word is beginning to get around R&R, as well as most of the Rignels, that I am up to something very suspicious. Which isn't too surprising, what with the used processing equipment I have bought, and the grain from IIIa, and the dickering with dumb-ass clodbusters on IIIb to buy hops before they smash 'em to mush making recon flavors. I have also dropped behind on the Melpomene contracts and have spun my discs into the negative for all this stuff, and my credit drive is just about at stalling speed. Besides which a payment on the skimmer-tug is overdue, and I am beginning to look over my shoulder every time I push off. I can just feel trouble brewing. (No pun intended.) Well-I-Oh, Shim, skip it.





Nobody knows Moleman is behind all my shenanigans, of course, 'cause he ain't been back to R&R since the build-up started. Meantime, I have piled up quite a head of respect for the man. You don't ask too many questions out here, but Moleman turns out to be a damn good engineer, and well-educated in spite of it. (Just look at him now; you sure wouldn't guess it, would you, pal? (sweetie?) Too much uncut recon-bomb will do that to a man.) Also he is just plain smart, because the first time I show up with somebody's nosy scoutship playing hide-the-muffins over the horizon of the rendezvous, he pushes a course down and around every iron 'toid in the sector, as well as running so rich on the oxolith that the static from the ion cloud must have hung on for a week. You couldn't have tracked his course with anything less well-equipped than a battle cruiser.

Little Milwaukee wasn't fancy, and with next to no gravity, everything was just strung together and lashed in place. No call for supports for the plumbing, or tank braces, or much external structure. And no fancy quarters either. I had managed to find a halfway decent used slick-dome for lights out, but we had to suit up to muck out the drag-pods or do any work on the plumbing at all.

Finally comes the big day. My last load is three pods pumped full of spring water on IIIa, and I have a final fuel bill like you wouldn't believe, because my little tug can only lift one of them into orbit at a time. Moleman is putting the finishing touches on everything with a jet-brush, and on the big vats he has lettered ever-so-carefully, "New Home of Sacker O'Mysees," only like I told you, he spelled it just like a professor would do it. Very nice, I says, but just how do you get ol'

Sacker to move in? I told you already, he says, it's those spores. Sacker has filled the universe with his spores. All you got to do is make him welcome, and he will blossom for you. (No punOh Shim, just skip it.) So we loaded up the first couple of vats on the line (which Moleman explains to me are the mash tank and the cooker), busted a bottle of recon bubble-wine on the grain hopper, and away she goes. (No, I don't care for bubble-wine myself, but a bourbon would sure cut the phlegm, thank the Lord (Lady?) for small favors. Make mine a double.)

Well, two days later that place was humming and gurgling from end to end, and the foam was a-rising, and I had those pod-tanks polished to glory, ready to slop full for our first push back to R&R, when it all got pulled down right around our ears.

We were raided by that damn band of Myxie marauders.

*Strange forms abound; they're all around
The worlds untold are rife
With sweating, brawling, creeping, crawling
Blobs of stuff called Life.*

*Now some can think, and some just stink;
A million different E.T.'s.
But none so proud (or quite as loud),
As dread Myxomycetes.*

*They huff and puff, and act so tough,
But if the truth be told
Bravado hides their true insides;
For no-one loves a slime-mould.*

*So Myxies all, from short to tall,
Burst forth from every spore
As pirates, thugs, audacious pugs
Plain rotten to the core!*

I know now that it was them three pods of water that gave us away, 'cause fungus-people can follow a water trace that don't amount to no more than a sparrow sneeze in the middle of a Rigel-II desert. It's something they're sprouted with.

Nothing I can do about that now, and I tell you, it was Shim's own mess when they got through with us. And when they finally pushed offtaking my tug and pod-tanks with themevery bit of our brew had been drained off into those pods to boot. They fragged everything else into clank-chips, slashing about with snub-cutter beams, and old-fashioned axes, and the Myxie head-man even had a sword, would you believe. Such screaming and singing I never heard before, and they were linked on such a broad band that I finally damped my suit-ears down to just emergency frequency rather than have to put up with it. Moleman acted like he was in shock from the moment their skimmer rounded Little Milwaukee's reflecting partner. I guess he just never anticipated being smoked out by anyone, let alone a Myxie raiding party.

I'll say one thing, though. They never raised a threatening branch to either me or Moleman — and they broadcast fair warning that they were setting two atomics on delay when they left. So I hooked Moleman on behind the dragger, sighted a vector on the brightest 'toid I could make out, and left those parts on full power leap mode. About forty minutes later the atomics went. One of 'em opened up the surface pores of Little Milwaukee like acne soap, and the other one turned the reflector into 7000 years bad luck. (Yeah, it's about time to have one for the road, good buddy (sissie?), and I'll have the usual. Two APEC bourbons, barkeep, and spin it on my friend's disc here. Any objections?)

The secret is lost, of course, 'cause we never had enough tracks left over or enough room in the pods anyhow to lift in either the spectrograph or chromatograph we'd have needed to find out what made that place so special. And I ain't too sure we'd have learned anything, anyhow, 'cause if you stop to think about it, you'll realize that ol' Sacker gets along just fine back on earth without sunshine or air to puff his buttons. So it might have been some kind of special penetrating radiation, or some kind of trace gas, or a combination of things. But that don't matter now. The story's got around, and everybody knows it can be done, and sooner or later somebody'll figure out how, and then we'll blow APEC smack out of orbit. There's just one thing. Everybody keeps asking, in red letters a foot high, what made that gang of Myxies do what they did? Them as knows this story have got all kinds of theories. Some say it was APEC put 'em up to it, and think the word came all the way from Earth itself. Moleman, when he's enough out of the fog to make any sense at all, will tell you the Myxies did it out of pure cussedness, and it don't take but one run-in with a wild-haired Myxie to get you to agree with him. Say what? Why don't someone ask the Myxies? You jackass (jenny?), Myxies don't tell meat-people nothing they don't want to. And even if they did, how would our local bunch of thieving toadstools know what-for about a gang of steak-garnish half a standard away. Shee-im!

Now I want you to listen up good, 'cause I'm gonna let you in on something I never told anybody before, not even Moleman. (Cognac, innkeeper! A bottle of Cognac for me and all my vassals! This fine gentleperson (Ah-ha!) has charge of the purse, fear not! Gold you shall have, andhuh? OK, OK, just make it another bourbon. Shim, some people sure do have tight sectors.) The fact is, that raid wasn't no put-up job by APEC or anyone else in this wrinkle of the universe. When that head-man Myxie was yelling and slashing about with his sword like a berserker, and the whole gang was a-galloping and a-slashing along behind and yelling just as loud as he was,

you know what they were yelling? And more important, where they were yelling? Well, let me tell you. Them crazy Myxies were lugging a big old external vibro-speaker along with 'em, and they'd jam it down into a tank, and scream, and dance around like hop-squashers. And if you laid your helmet up against that tank, you could hear the same words booming over and over, like a pig squealing in a silo.

“ARISE, MY LITTLE BROTHERS, WE'VE COME TO SET YOU FREE!”

*Though he's long since dead, there's a poet said,
“You're a better man than I am, (Whatsisname?)”
If he were here today, he would sadly say
That there's no man free from blame.*

*It's that body heat, when you're built from meat,
That can be your sad undoing.
So your well-meant plan for your fellow man
May become his royal screwing.*

*Could another race, though it wears a face
Of fierce and cruelest features,
And with no true heart in its inner part
Better love its fellow creatures?*

*Well, to paraphrase from those finer days
When the poets brought truth from within,
“Myxomycetes and single-celled yeasties
Are brothers under the skin.” ▲*

Millennium —Carol I. Ullmann

Night,
with the stars
falling into water
at our feet.
Numerous,
Bright,
that sky falling upon us
one star at a time
drowning in the oceans
that have long since
shored us up.

Cranked Up!

A Different Tune But The Same Dance

Last time we learned that Betsy Mitchell, Chief Editor at Warner Books had written of her dismay concerning the current state of genre fiction. Shortly after that, Gregory Benford, David Brin and Greg Bear shoot out an open proposal to the SF community concerning, you guessed it, "The Sorry State of The Genre." The "Killer Bees," as they call themselves, (And wouldn't you expect SF writers to be more creative in coming up with a catchy name?) are a bit broader in their concern however and target declining literacy as the demon of the month and the real reason sales are down. The Bees plan for world literation includes such eye opening strategies as: developing a recommended reading list for various age levels, maintaining a referral list of speakers, developing a grass roots philanthropic funding base, and developing a catchy name for the program and we know how good they are at that! Remember, world domination will ultimately fail unless you're able to count on some snappy jingoistic phrasing which will keep the throngs humming as you step on their necks and shove books down their throats. And remember that the SFWA (pronounced sif-wa...snappy name that, eh?) already has a speaker's bureau which fails miserably at the task.

Now, granted, it's easier to tear down than to build up, so for me to sit here and shoot pots, after having the benefit of months of thought, may seem a bit unfair. Remember, however, that life is unfair and that we are dealing with science fictions writers here, and not just any type of science fiction writers but that archetype of the past—the "Scientist" science fiction writer. One would think, therefore, that the ideas generated from such a group would be 'sense of wonder' "WOW!" This is based on the assumption that these writers (and to

a lesser degree the field itself) does indeed maintain some kind of visionary and cutting edge insight. Well, let me bear witness here and now that there is, perhaps, no one more conservative than a writer, unless it is, in fact, a scientist. Does this explain the development of plans which require a staying on the tried and true based on a fear of losing the status quo?

CONSERVATION, IT'S NOT JUST A GOOD IDEA, IT'S THE LAW

As Betsy Mitchell noted, "The field needs new readers." This is a gimme. The question remains, "how do you attract new readers in a current environment of cable television, Internet access, fast life and a society which changes at a progressive rate and which demands adaptability at a seemingly even faster rate?" This is a question which SF writers should be good at answering, or at least you would think so. After all, isn't SF the genre of the future? Isn't it a literature of ideas? A bulwark of speculation? A veritable designer's soup of new concepts, constructs and crack cosmic coopters of convention? It is, but only if you've bought into the propaganda generated by SF's (and to a lesser extent, Fantasy's) good old boys. Nowhere is this more true, or more evident, than with the hard SF and hard fantasy writers. But more on that in a moment, as we interrupt this rant for some Important Definitions.

HELLO, I'M IGNORANT

Or so Hal Clement, Hard SF writer extraordinaire, would have you believe since he states that definitions are the playground of the ignorant and unknowing. In

any case, just so you can judge my level of ignorance on your own, let me tell you my definitions of SF and Fantasy. Any book can be considered Science Fiction if, somewhere between page thirty and page sixty, a scientist (who could be disguised in any number of ways, but who is always bio/techno/engineer based and who always rises to the role of explainer) begins a lecture on "How Things Work." A book is Fantasy if somewhere between page thirty and page sixty, a wizard (who could be disguised in any number of ways, but who is always mystic/philosophic/religiously based and who always rises to the role of explainer) begins a lecture on "How Things Work." These lectures used to be given exclusively to pre-teen boys. Nowadays, it is acceptable to talk to girls (but only so long as they bring a brother or boyfriend or recognize their subversiveness.)

LET'S BUY SNEAKERS, THE COMET'S RETURNING

Okay, so maybe the definitions are a bit simplistic. Or maybe I'm more ignorant than even I can ever know. The point still lays there that this is supposed to be the genre of the fantastic; the realm of thinkers, dreamers and stalkers of nightmares; the place where the imagination is set free by those who create places which open our eyes and our minds. Does any of this fit with the lame ideas put forth by any one of a handful of these visionaries of the future? Does any of this explain why future thinking, which is such a mainstay of SF, is so conspicuously absent in practical matters? Would those SF writers enlisted by the government to assist in the alien invasion in Footfall even believe any of this? I don't think so. Let it be known, here and

now, that I challenge these free thinking visionaries to do two things; get the facts and think in a forward manner. First, let's find out what the numbers really are. The closing of a neighborhood bookstore does not a collapsing field make. The shifting of a market from Horror to SF to movie tie-ins to gaming novels is not a reflection of a people so much as it is a reflection of a culture. The approach of the millennium does not signal the end of the world, well, maybe it does, but we have a couple of years to deal with that one, right now we need to figure out this genre book stuff. The second part of the challenge (after we get real numbers to work with) is to think of new ways to attract readers to the field. Believe it or not, people still read. Believe it or not, children still are taught to read in school and at home. What we need to figure out is how to get the product to them. We may even need to accept that the product may be in a different form than we are used to or happy with. This definitely will involve more than throwing a couple of copies of ERB's Tarzan books into the local school library. For sure it will involve more than suggesting that local fan representatives visit their neighborhood elementary schools. Or perhaps the "Killer Bees" have neglected to take a good look around them at a recent convention to see just who these local fan representatives might be.

IS THAT A NEW DANCE OR ARE YOU TRULY INJURED?

So, picture this. You are at a large, Northeastern Science Fiction Convention. Oh, for the sake of argument, let's say it's Arisia. Let's imagine that, for some reason, Vampirism is all the rage. (Well, Rage is a werewolf game so perhaps we should consider it to be just the 'in' thing.) Let's imagine that not only are we surrounded by strange and socially divergent individuals, but that they are very pale, either by nature or by make up. Let's further imagine that there is an elaborate set of protocols involved in 'being' a vampire. (Please, let's also remember that this is all pretend and that vampires really do not exist, regardless of how much blood you think you really need or how dark you think your personality really is.) Let's imagine that if a black garbed, pasty faced individual approaches you with arms crossed that he (all the best vampires seem to be male) is invisible. By all means feel encouraged to bump into said individual at which time you may look stunned and innocently state "Shoot, I didn't see you!" But back to imagining. Let's imagine that there is a large ball put on during this science fiction convention and that it is a vampire ball. Let's

further imagine that during the melee which is considered vampire dancing that an individual is put to the floor in a violent enough manner to cause serious injury. Let's further imagine that during this time no other action is taken other than to gather (vampire-like, I guess) about the victim who is screaming and, well, thrashing is probably a poor set of words since I believe that bones were broken. At least no blood was spilt.

NEXT TIME WE NEED A STRONGER HOTEL

Imagine now a second convention, once again mostly SF but who can really be sure of anything today what with Ru Paul and Dennis Rodman and Marv Albert. Imagine a convention of storied past, oh, let's call it something like Disclave. Imagine a party at night. A convention party authors, publishers, fans, publicists, the odd dominatrix or two along with the occasional lover of fetish and rubber. Imagine not bringing the right stuff to the con, you know, not enough books, your autograph list, your short story, your bondage rack. Imagine having to be imaginative (it is at this point that SF writers would probably all gather and choose to relive the past, bemoaning the decline of good hotel dungeons) and come up with an alternative place from which to hang your sweetie. Say, the sprinkler system looks like a mighty fine improvisation. Imagine the dismay as pipes rip from the ceiling and an entire floor floods. I just hope they managed to get the handcuffs off before security arrived.

KLA-PAH, LET ME SEE SOME ID

Imagine being at home and surfing the cable and running across what appears to be a science fiction convention being televised on your local cable access channel. Watch as the camera, without narration, pans the crowds, the costumed individuals standing out almost as much as those in too tight clothing. Imagine finally an interviewer approaching an individual dressed as a Klingon who begins to talk of how he has been hired by the Federation to provide security to the convention and that he has been doing this, with the understanding of the Klingon Empire, for years. Imagine this individual in full makeup and costume including weapons. Imagine the crowd, including a couple of individuals in propeller beanies, thronging around. Somewhere in the midst of the interview they talk about how great and influential SF and Fantasy are. What do the neighbors think? What does your mother think? What do you think?

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CLOSED FOR RECONSTRUCTION

What is the message going out here? What's the image put forth? Are these truly the folks that the "Killer Bees" want to send out to elementary schools so that innocent little children get introduced to genre? Perhaps this shrinking of the field is not a bad thing after all. Perhaps we should encourage more of this shrinkage. Perhaps this is our chance to reclaim the good old days of SF. Perhaps it's time for a Pogrom...or two. We'll need a catchy phrase, of course something like, oh, "Reclaiming the future!" Yeah, that's it, our future is being stolen by hanger's on. Our dreams are being corrupted by the lunatic fringe. The promise spoken of by Clarke, Asimov, Bradbury (who was never really a SF writer you know) and Robert A. "It's a Heinlein between Science Fiction and Fantasy" is being tarnished by those who would paint a chicken egg and say it came from a Bunny. (Well, no, actually, those are the Christians and I'm pretty sure they are one of the few groups not involved here.) In any case, let's to war gather and unfurl our banner of Galactic Supremacy. Let us call forth the Lensmen. Let us unlock the Weapon Shops of Isher. Let us learn as one from the Martian Chronicles and set a firm Foundation or face our Childhood's End. Let us gather under the singularity and rejoice in throwing out the S&M gang. Let's spank the B&D folks until they leave, red-faced. Let's send the Babylonians back to Babylon 5. Let's have the nine deep spacers voyage off on a long trek that will last until the next generation. Let's get rid of the vampires and the elves and the shape changers and the fringe fans and the faire folk and the filkers and the freaks and return to the golden age of SF when the pimply-faced cretin was revered and when science, and not plot or characterization or story, was king. Let us return to the gloried days when the twelve people who attended last year's Worldcon were pretty sure they were going to the next one. Let us trip back to a day when you could read every single genre book published, regardless of how insipid it was. And while we're at it, let's get all of the damn women out of SF too. Well, at least let's get them out of hard SF where they don't belong to begin with and where they only serve to upset historical significance with their emphasis on humanity. I mean, Biology really isn't a hard science anyway, is it?

Comments may be sent directly to the editor or emailed to me at:=
damnaliens@earthling.net.

Steve's new column will appear in every other issue of PW hence forth—and oh, what he says isn't always what we here at the magazine think, duh! ▲

W Surreal World: Who Are The Men In Black?

by Kevin M. Carr

When Tim Burton's *Batman* hit the screens in 1989, comic book sales soared. Oscar-winning *Braveheart* helped boost Scottish tourism. Last year's mega-hit *Independence Day* made Area 51 a household name. It is no big surprise that Columbia Pictures' summer sci-fi action comedy, *Men in Black*, has piqued the public's interest in its namesake. However, the real Men in Black don't look like Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith. They do not drive around New York City in a souped-up late-model Ford LTD. And they are most definitely not "protecting the Earth from the scum of the universe."

The Men in Black apparently appear to UFO witnesses and investigators. Their purpose is to interrogate, intimidate, and obfuscate. One of the most famous encounters happened to Doctor Herbert Hopkins in Orchard Beach, Maine, on September 11, 1976. Hopkins, a local UFO researcher, had been investigating an abduction case at the time that he received a visit from a ghostly-white, bald man who wore a black suit and black derby hat. As well as being bald, the Man in Black (MIB) had no facial hair and his lips were painted bright red with lipstick. Hopkins described his speech as if he were a machine talking. The MIB claimed to be from another UFO interest group and wished to discuss the current abduction case.

Hopkins' visitor asked him if he knew about Barney Hill, a famous UFO abductee who had recently died. The MIB then told Hopkins to remove a coin from his pocket. When Hopkins did so, it changed color, then disappeared. From across the room, the MIB said, "The reason [Barney Hill] died was because he knew too much! Barney didn't have a heart, just like you no longer have a coin."

He told Hopkins to destroy all his records of the UFO abduction case.

Then the MIB's voice started to slow down, and he said, "My energy is running low-mustgonowgoodbye." Hopkins watched his visitor stagger from his house, walk around the corner, and disappear in a flash of light.

The threat worked.

Like UFO reports, MIB visits vary greatly. This muddies the waters and makes it difficult to pin down exactly who "they" are. Generally, MIBs travel in groups of two's or three's. They are described as looking Oriental; mainly because of their slanted eyes and "olive" complexions. Their wardrobe consists of black suits and sometimes hats or sunglasses even when the weather does not warrant them. During a recent UFO flap in Australia, people reported visits from strange men wearing full black suits definitely not the standard dress for the roaring heat of the Outback.

Some MIB witnesses describe them speaking in foreign languages or having thick, unidentifiable accents. They arrive in large black cars and seem to have a preference for Cadillacs. The car models are usually several years old, but witnesses describe them as looking and smelling "brand new."

Some MIB cases involve actual violence, and not just idle threats, as was the case for a Florida woman named Pat Hyde. In July 1972, she saw a UFO and began an investigation. Several days later, Hyde was assaulted in her apartment parking lot by men in dark clothing. They claimed to be police officers and "arrested" her. She was taken away and drugged for several days. During that time, the MIBs threatened her life and tried to convince her that she was in a mental institution for a suicide attempt. They also interrogated her as to whether she had psychic powers. After several days, they eventually released her. Hyde reported the incident to the police, but they found no record of her attempted "suicide" or any trace of her kidnappers.

Soon afterwards, she stopped her investigations.

Another example of MIB violence involved Jen Stevens, a UFO researcher in the Albany-Schenectady area of New York. In February 1968, she started receiving harassing telephone calls. Her husband, Peter, was then accosted by a "saturnine-looking" man who warned him that "People who look for UFOs should be very, very careful." Two months later, Peter died under mysterious circumstances. Jen, convinced that his death was related to the MIBs, abandoned her research.

Jim Keith, in his book *Casebook on the Men in Black*, meticulously documents MIB sightings dating back hundreds of years. History is replete with visions of mysterious men dressed in black robes connected with witchery and black magic. These accounts, of course, don't involve UFOs. MIB reports are also sometimes linked to other preternatural events, such as bigfoot sightings or cattle mutilations. The historical sightings sometimes coincide with major events or world changes. For example, Keith points out that "armies of Men in Black" often preceded the arrival of plagues in medieval Europe. While the people of the time interpreted these as visits from the Devil himself, the reports are none-the-less consistent with modern MIB visits.

Noted UFO researcher John Keel cites MIB incidents as far back as Biblical times. Perhaps the three angels that visited Lot and his family shortly before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah were MIBs. The same has also been suggested for the Magi. After all, they traveled in a group, were described as Oriental, and they preceded what is arguably the greatest world event—the birth of Christ.

The reverse of the Great Seal of the United States (the pyramid with the eye on top, seen on the back of the dollar bill) was supposedly given to Thomas Jefferson by a man in a dark cloak. Even Adolf Hitler had MIB-like experiences during the Holocaust. He talked of a "new man...living amongst us now." Hitler was afraid of this man and thought him to be an *Urbemensch*, the superior human. Hitler often had nightmares about this man and once was even found sleepwalking, muttering, "It's he, it's he. He's come for me." Could this be a spiritual link? A guilty conscience manifesting in Hitler? Perhaps the MIB vision is a common image in the human psyche, like a dream about falling.



While in prison, Malcolm X was visited by an MIB-like apparition. "As I lay on my bed, I suddenly became aware of a man sitting beside me in my chair," he said. "He had on a dark suit, I remember. I could see him as plainly as I see anyone I look at. He wasn't black, and he wasn't white. He was light-brown-skinned, an Asiatic cast of countenance, and he had oily black hair." Malcolm X interpreted this as a religious experience, which brought him deeper into the Islamic faith. However, taken at face value, it follows the MIB archetype. It is curious to note that the African-American leader, preoccupied with the issue of race, was visited by an Asiatic apparition, and not one of a black man.

Modern MIB cases began with the flying saucer phenomenon. The first "official" MIB report came from the Maury Island incident, a famous 1947 hoax in Washington state. Fred Crisman and Harold Dahl claimed to have found debris from a crashed disk. When they went public with their story, Dahl reported being visited by a mysterious man in a black suit who threatened him if he pursued the incident. The two hoaxers had a connection to Ray Palmer, a publisher from Chicago. Palmer was known for publishing the "Shaver Mystery" stories, tales of Oriental-looking men with glowing red eyes who lived in the center of the Earth. Dahl's description of the MIB was suspiciously close to the Shaver characters.

With this and other such crackpot reports, the public interest in MIBs fizzled before it ever got off the ground. Although many more credible stories followed, the reports were not taken seriously for decades. Is it possible that some MIB episodes were staged to make UFO witnesses look crazy?

Disinformation is a common espionage technique. In World War II, the British rearranged road signs for routes on which they transported German prisoners. False evidence was leaked to the



shortly before Germans Normandy, placing the point of attack far from the French shore. In the UFO field, some have suggested that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was a P.R. technique to condition people towards friendly aliens. Is the recent popularity of *The X-Files* and *Independence Day* a different P.R. approach? Has the evidence of possible Martian life (see "Surreal World," PW#14) been released to prepare the public for an extraterrestrial revelation?

Some MIB cases may be misinformation to aid in a government cover-up. Maury Island's Fred Crisman was a member of the O.S.S. (from which spawned the CIA) during World War II. He also testified on behalf of the government during District Attorney Jim Garrison's JFK assassination investigation. Was Crisman used to help make future MIB accounts look like fruitcake stories?

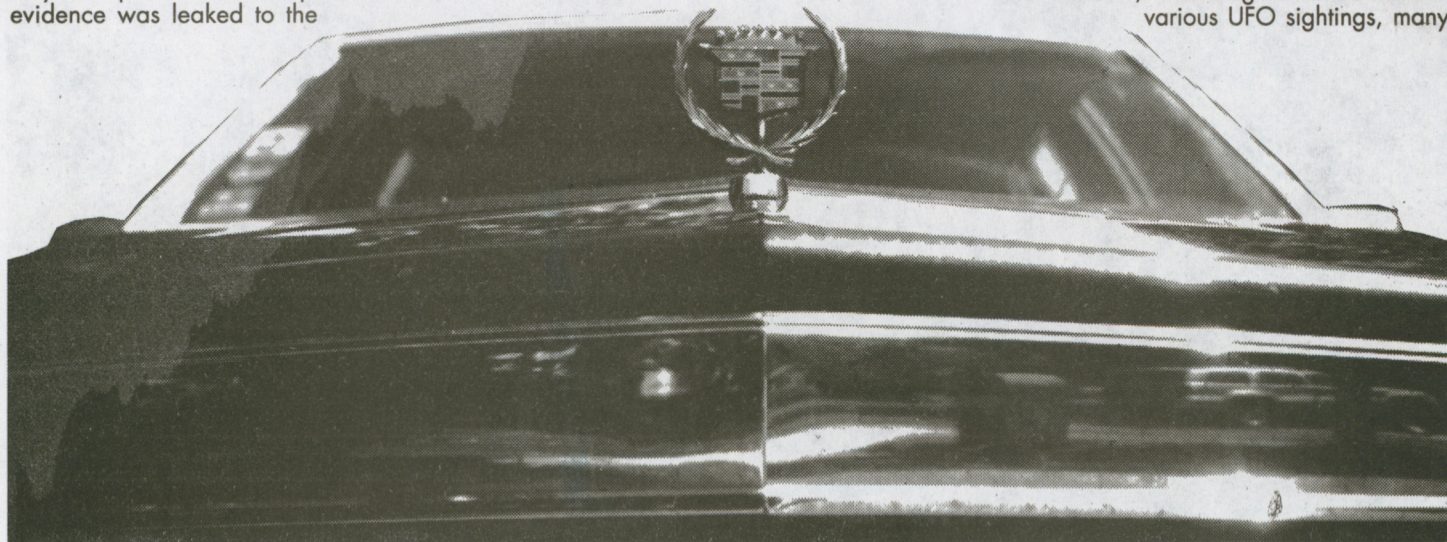
A similar plan might have been underway at the time to snuff UFO reports as a whole. In 1953, the CIA organized the Robertson Panel to evaluate the UFO situation. This "objective" group quickly declared that UFOs were not real. Soon afterwards, Project Blue Book, the Air Force's UFO investigative arm, was ordered to debunk UFO sightings.

Shortly after this blanket dismissal by government sources, a man named George

Adamski appeared with wild accounts of meetings with the "Space Brothers" from Venus. According to Adamski, these blond-haired, pumped-up, Fabio types were here to show us the way to enlightenment with free love and cosmic brotherhood. Scores of other so-called "contactees" followed Adamski with similar utopian stories. Such wild stories made all UFO encounters sound like bad *Star Trek* episodes.

All the government needed was a few crackpots to seed the UFO field. Hopeful dreamers would then latch on and make a mockery of themselves and squelch serious UFO research. But John Keel is leery of dismissing the reports as a whole. Contactee reports are not limited strictly to media-hounds trying to sell their latest self-published book. In fact, Keel points out that he had documented numerous contactee reports in which the witness does not want to be identified. According to Keel, "there may be 50,000 or more silent contactees in the United States alone. And new ones are being added to the list every month." He believes they're here to deceive. "*The ufonauts are the liars, not the contactees.*" Keel states. "And they are lying deliberately as part of the bewildering smoke-screen which they have established to cover their real origin, purpose, and motivation."

In 1967 and 1968, we may have seen the largest MIB and UFO flap in the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. In addition to various UFO sightings, many



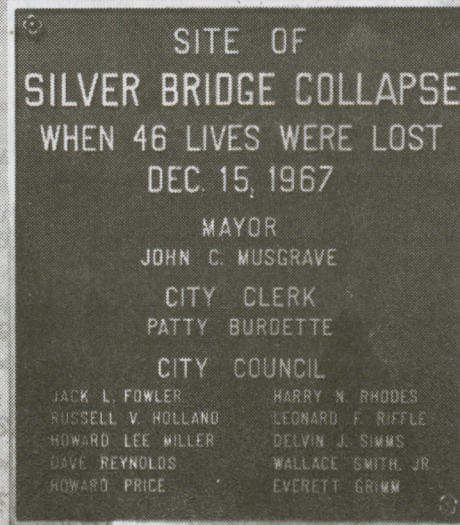
witnesses saw a great winged beast lurking in the McClintic Wildlife Station, a nature preserve seven miles outside of town. The beast stood as tall as a man, was covered in heavy gray fur, and had bright red eyes. Dubbed the "Mothman" by a newspaper editor, this creature—or creatures—was seen repeatedly in the area over the course of these two years.

At this time, several resident witnesses were visited by MIBs. In 1967, a strange man visited Edward Christiansen and his family after they had witnessed a UFO. The MIB was enormous, but went by the name of "Tiny" (which, incidentally, was the name of a popular restaurant in town). He wore dark clothes and thick, rubber-soled shoes. Christiansen's daughter noticed a thick green wire that poked out of his sock and appeared to enter into his flesh under his pant leg. He spoke in a "tinny" voice without inflection—"like a computer," the Christiansens said. Tiny claimed to be from *Missing Heirs Bureau* and interviewed Edward about his life, supposedly trying to determine if he were to inherit money from a long, lost relative.

After an extensive interview involving odd information, which included his appendix scar and what types of cars he had driven in his life, Tiny's face grew red. He asked for a glass of water, and then swallowed a small pill, which cleared up his face. After the interview, Tiny left the house and was picked up by a black 1963 Cadillac driving without headlights.

There was also a bizarre link to Point Pleasant with an MIB encounter in Mount Mercy, New York. This MIB went by the

name Apol (which is suspiciously similar to a mysterious note the witness received signed "A pal"). A bizarre mixture between a classic MIB and a contactee report, Apol made several predictions, which were relayed to John Keel. Some of these predictions, including several plane crashes and an assassination attempt on the Pope, came true. Apol's most spectacular prediction told of a "disaster along the Ohio River." Keel contacted a colleague in Point Pleasant and warned her of these predictions, indicating



that the Ohio River disaster may involve a factory explosion.

On December 15, 1967, it happened. The Silver Bridge, connecting Point Pleasant to Gallipolis, Ohio, collapsed. Forty-six people died in the carnage. It is curious to note that two strange men in dark suits were seen climbing around the Silver Bridge two days before it collapsed. Point Pleasant is a place of blue jeans and pick-up trucks—typical small-town Americana. Dark-suited men stick out like cowboys on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Could these men have "arranged" the accident?

Jim Keith notes that the Point Pleasant sightings were concentrated in both time and space. He suggests that they might have been a test

case for the government, possibly trying to gauge the public's reaction to MIB and UFO encounters. But if so, what would the government have to gain by collapsing a bridge and killing 46 people?

There is some indication that some MIBs may not be from our government simply because this is what they claim to be. MIBs commonly precede official government inquiries. In many instances, their identities are fake. Take for example an incident involving Rex Helfin, a California highway inspector who had photographed a UFO. Three of his four photos were confiscated by a man claiming to be from NORAD. However, NORAD denied any involvement. Later, he was visited by a man who said his name was Captain C.H. Edmonds of the Air Force. When Helfin contacted the Air Force, they had no record of a C.H. Edmonds.

Impersonating a government official is a federal crime. In the 1960s, Project Blue Book began looking into such MIB fraud cases. However, a Pentagon spokesman claimed the "trail is always too cold." Officers and civilians alike were encouraged to report impersonators, but the culprits were never found.

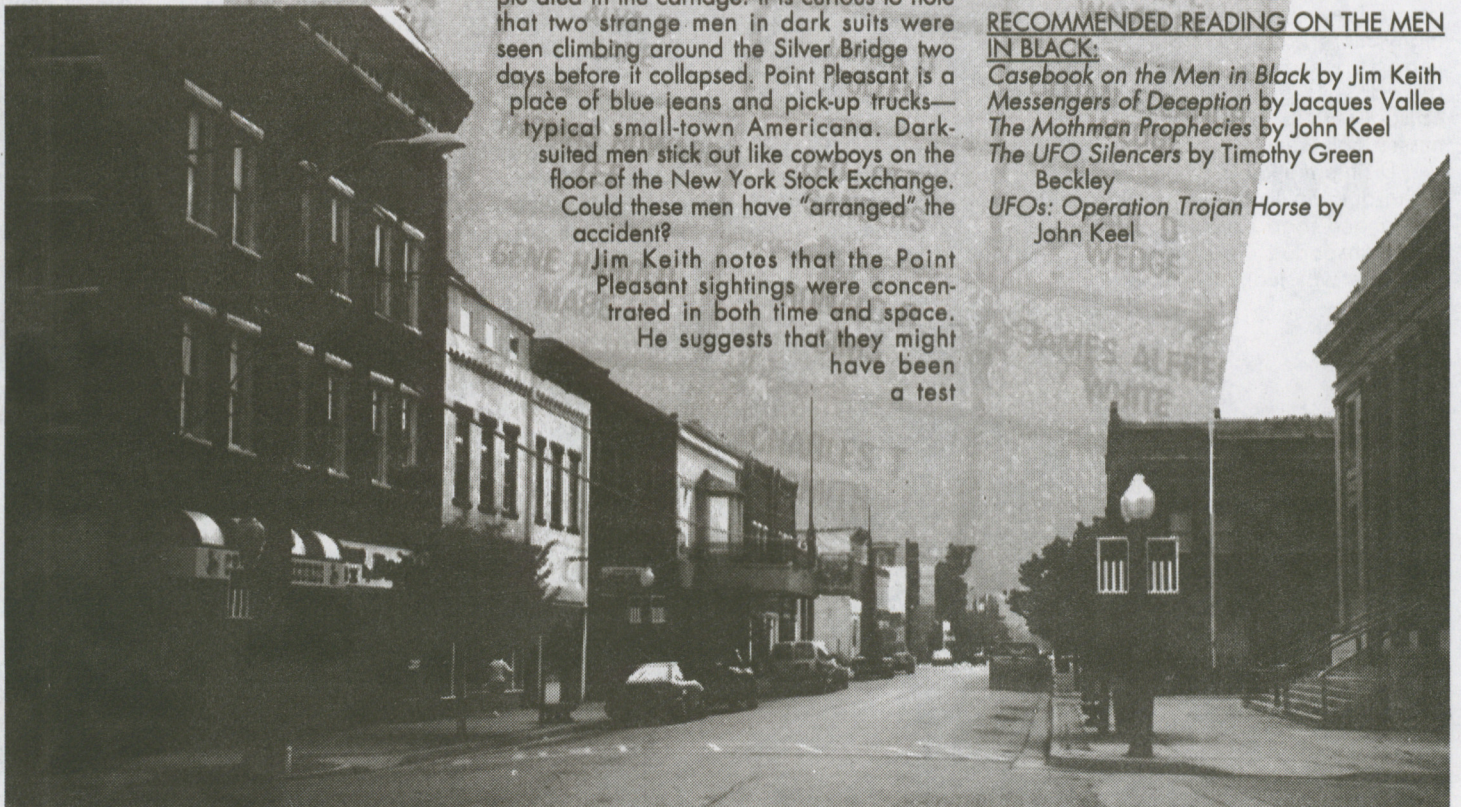
Are the MIBs from our own government, employing un-sanctioned scare tactics to silence UFO witnesses? Or are the entities behind the UFOs, covering their own tracks and we have no control over them whatsoever?

Which is scarier?...

Questions or comments? E-mail "Surreal World" at SurWorld@aol.com.

RECOMMENDED READING ON THE MEN IN BLACK:

Casebook on the Men in Black by Jim Keith
Messengers of Deception by Jacques Vallee
The Mothman Prophecies by John Keel
The UFO Silencers by Timothy Green Beckley
UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse by John Keel





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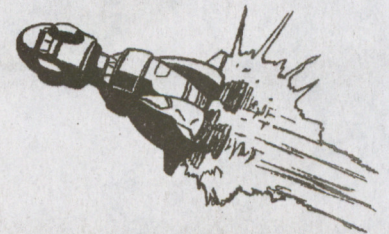
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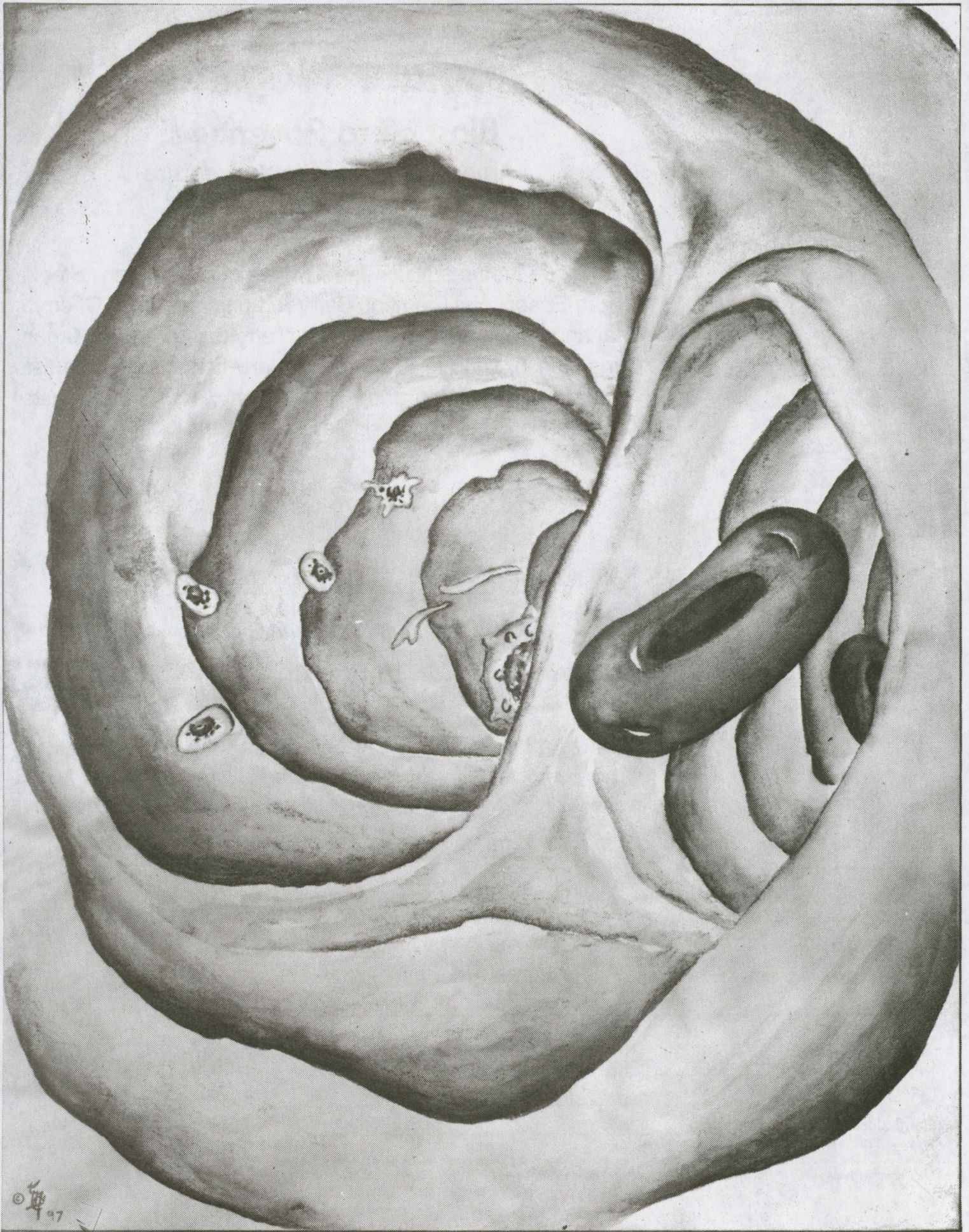
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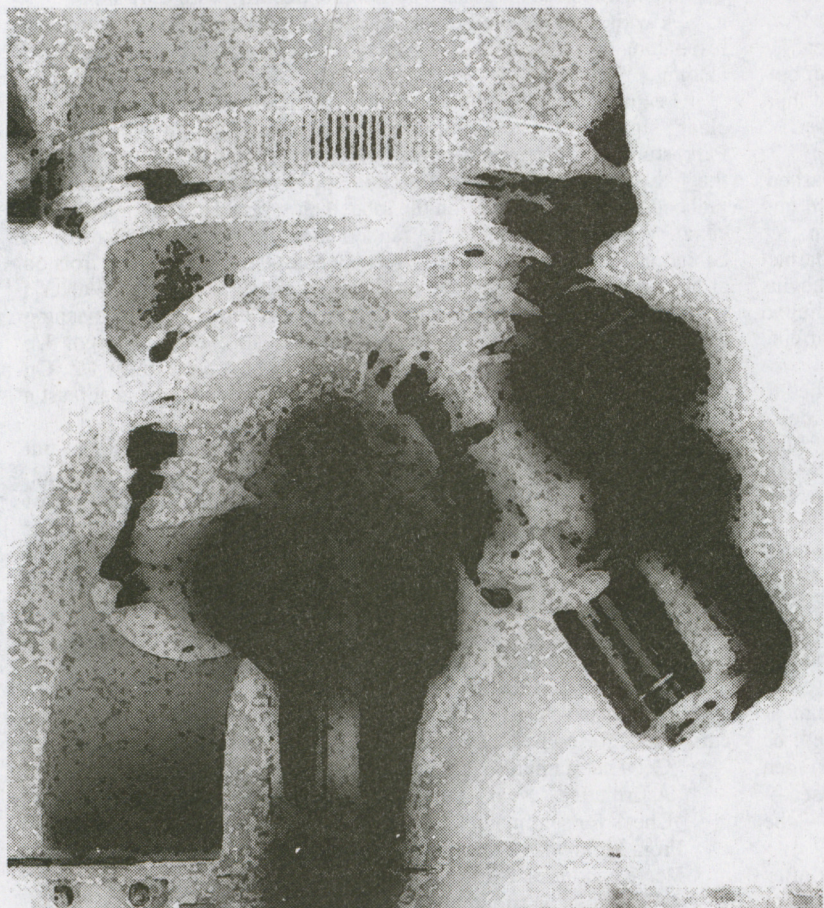
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White Blood Cell Roommates: A Day in the Life is the product of Timothy's ongoing interest in depicting reality in fantasy, in seeing the microworld as a gently absurd prism through which to re-imagine our workaday existence. Timothy holds his Doctorate in English from Columbia University and he currently teaches writing at Virginia Tech.

White Blood Cell Roommates: A Day in the Life



by Timothy S. Sedore

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

I am White Blood Cell #13095-136366-845-668699. I write from my bunk on Deck Four in the sinusoids of the left lobe in Mr. John Longevetti's liver. We are among the select—staff white blood cells charged with keeping Longevetti healthy. My two mates and I each have a futon (two of them stacked as bunks), a desk with chair, a locker and a small safe for personal effects. Comfortable enough, in itself. Unfortunately, our room has no ventilation, cramped space and thin walls. The heat from the surrounding organs and the lack of a fan makes my sleep intervals into all night reveries on the what-might-have-beens of being a white blood cell. They are many. At this writing, for example, a chewed up, saliva-soaked Egg McMuffin is taking a noisy plunge down the esophagus to the stomach. I can hear it two principal organs away. Of-duty cells from the spleen are whooping down with the oozy mass (their latest hobby), screaming like amoebas in heat.

It is throbbingly noisy, this Longevetti. Most of us are overworked; save for room and board, we are all unpaid. I say most of us because Kowalski, my roommate lying across the way, is an exception. I am sure he has been overlooked by the Assignments Desk. Nothing else occupies him. He has nothing to do each day outside of punching his time clock each morning and tangling with Armistead, my other roommate. For weeks he has churned for a female red blood cell, Tara Torres, Longevetti's live-in. He sleeps blissfully well—frustrating me the more—believing that the waves and letters they exchange each day bring closer the day they will meet.

I can't suppress my envy, particularly when I consider the pressure on the workaholic Armistead, my other roommate. Seven days a week, as Editor's Mate First Class in the cerebellum, Armistead commutes to the hippocampus in the temporal lobe. he and his two day-shift assistants, Louis "Lefko" Lefkowitz and Ward "Sly Boy" Hernandez, edit the brain's short and long term visual memory—the "mem". Visual bits float up to the Mem by the hundred. Armistead sorts them out: images of blank walls from those of favorite shoes, the Grand Canyon from yesterday's empty milk carton—16 to 18 hours a day with mandatory overtime six days a week. Are they memorable? What is memorable? Armistead and his staff decide.

Freud is right: nothing is lost in the unconscious. But it's a judgment call about where to put everything, and it's left to Armistead to decide this as well. Armistead puts Longevetti's hallway view of the front door into the shallow file, for example, to be accessible when he wants to go home and needs to remember how to get in. But the size of the Shallow File is limited, and Longevetti's glance at a blank wall beside his car in the parking lot of the North America Lint building goes into the Deep File. Why? It doesn't seem important. But who knows? It can't all be important, but the fact that something might be important makes everything *seem* important. Memories pile up in the hippocampus. Hundreds of images pass through the eyes per day. No one works as hard as Armistead at scanning the images and filing them; and no one works as hard—or fails as readily—at hiding his frenzy jags about it. He keeps up a cheerful surface, but, as his roommate, I know he has the brittle cheerfulness of an obsessed man.

Sleepless, I have spent the night listening to the left thumb's off-duty 911th Maintenance Team taking a ride on a late night pizza, screaming maniacally as they pitch down the esophagus. "Chowing down," they call it. I rise and step over to the liver's left lobe ward room diner on Deck Six for an early breakfast.

The smell of fresh-frying calories greets me as I walk in. Parasitic bacteria, who commute from outside the body to work in the cell kitchens and digestive system, are bustling back and forth between the tables and the kitchen balancing trays. The waiters are in white jackets, the busboys in white linen shirts. Zivco, the parasitic maitre' de and my Friday racquetball partner, shows me to a table where Kowalski is sitting. We are short of tables—some lymphocytes who have just come off the night shift have crowded in—so I have to sit with him. Predictably, he plunges into a reverie about Tara.

"She's full of life, Buckley. I've never met anyone quite so...so..."

Kowalski is in mid-swoon when Armistead walks in.

He has had another tough night in the mem'. He is unshaven. He walks through the wardroom and mumbles "short term" to a cup of coffee and "long term" to a rack of jelly doughnuts. Then he shouts "short term" to the cafeteria line and "long term" to the bean soup dispenser.

"Long, short, long, short," he screams.

The parasites back off. The lymphocytes fall silent. Unabashed, Armistead begins sorting the silverware into quixotic long term and short term piles, heaping them at opposite ends of the jammed room.

"Spoon—long. Fork—short," he shouts. "It's all so very darned upright and holy and pure and important!" Smiling weirdly, he begins hurling the forks and spoons. I've never seen him happier. Coming upon the knives, he buries a blade deep in the paneled wall near the caffeine dispenser.

I rise, but before I can rush across the room to him he is wrestled to the floor by a pair of burly w.b.'s from Internal Security. They don't like shackling Armistead. They know him; everyone has heard of him. Armistead, however, is gracefully nonplused.

"Everything's fine," he announces as he is carried out. "What can happen?"

He knows what can happen, because what can happen is happening to him. He knows because he has proven himself a hero over and over. Not just to me, but to all the white blooders in Longevetti. A week after his graduation from B.M.C.A., Armistead single-handedly defied a mosquito 1,200,000 times his size. He was part of a routine white blood cell patrol on the surface of the left forearm. I was with him, so to speak, cowering with the rest of the team behind a hair follicle when the mosquito approached. Armistead, standing bolt upright, never flinched. He fired twelve rounds from his single shot protein rifle at the beast, then charged, screaming, when it tried to land. Frustrated and confused—what manner of microbe would challenge an insect, after all?—the behemoth drew off.

Two weeks later, Armistead stirred cells all over the body after Longevetti broke his right leg playing tag with his dog, Woof. L, fool to no end, gimped around on it for days, not knowing that it was broken. Ravenous gangrene war parties, seeing their chance, broke into the big right toe and set up a base camp. They could not be dislodged, not with the femur partially blocked and blood reserves cut off. Panicky white blooders in the lower limb, short of oxygen, out of contact with the abdomen, were ready to flee their posts. The rumor had gotten around

that an amputation was pending, and nobody wanted to be at the wrong end of a leg amputation.

Hard core lower limb officers staved them off for a while, but even they gave way when waves of gangrene were spotted slipping into the big toe. No one, they realized, was in the two to oppose them.

Suddenly Armistead appeared.

"White blooders," he called, from the top of the bread in the femur. "Born of the bone marrow of Longevetti. Who'll make a stand with me? Who'll make a stand for the man?"

They stayed. They fought the gangrene infection—Armistead waving the colors, leading charge after charge upon them. Many were sacrificed, but the leg was saved.

Armistead was wounded, decorated, named cell of the month, and promoted to first officer in the oral cavity. A dirty job, but a high profile one—the money was close to the command chain in the brain. He was happy up there at first. He was quick to conceive and organize the first kit flying fair in L's newly hatched bald spot. His re' preceded him; he was popular. But the mouth job was his last stop up in the organization. A few days after his start, a cell under his charge fell into the oral cavity and was chewed to death. It was an accident, with no investigation warranted, but Armistead unraveled because of it. He took the blame even though no one offered it to him. His frenzy jags started. After a week, the big wigs in the brain wanted to send him to a low profile post like the outer ear to calm him down, but some bureaucratic mishap in the Cell Assignment Desk got him transferred to the high pressure mem' instead. He was offered a transfer—no one could bring themselves to force him out. He refused.

I can't eat any breakfast after they draft Armistead away. Not that it matters. A Man Overboard situation arises, and we are called to General Quarters. Armistead is released by Internal Security with a warning.

A white blooder cell team, it seemed, was on the right ear lobe, responding to what turns out to be a false alarm of an athlete's foot fungi landing.

Leapin' "Hard Scrabble" Molloy, the team leader, waved an "all clear" signal to the team. Suddenly, Longevetti, jogging in Overton Park, stumbled, and young Walker and Labine, class of '88, pitched into the maw. Two heat quivered chutes appeared. The rest of the team grabbed onto a hair follicle on the lobe, then scrambled back into the ear canal. Walker's drifting chute landed in a field of grass fifteen feet behind us, Labine's about twelve feet. Heedless, Longevetti now trots on at his customary jogging pace of six miles per hour. We see Walker's smoke canister go off at the edge of a patch of dirt. It's read, meaning his LZ is hot with hostile bacteria or insects. No one is surprised. We drop additional phosphorous flares to mark the pat back to his LZ. On one is able to spot Labine's smoke canister, but we judge he is at least a human half stride further along in the grass.

Can we pick them up? There are no guarantees, of course, but Longevetti always uses the same route back that he uses on his way out. We can do a search for Labine and Walker, but the catch is that we must get Big L to pause over the LZ. Longevetti rarely stops in mid jog. Our textbook option—the only one that's ever worked—is to remind L of something that will cajole him into a reverie over the LZ. Longevetti takes a bigger liking to sentimentality than he'll admit—even to the unconscious—and that sentimentality has saved a lost cell before. It will be up to Armistead to find that something.

On the bridge Captain Veere ("Old Pete," as he is called affectionately) two year veteran at the helm of white blooder External Security, cuts orders. Responses crackle up and down the spinal cord.

"Get a habit impulse up to the motor cortex," he says.

"Affirmative," Kenny Pender in the cingulate gyrus replies.

"Check for sentimental memories."

From Lefkowitz, Armistead's assistant: "Checking."

Veere continues. "Scan for items to trip over."

A "Negative on trip items," shoots in from the left eye.

"Positive on the sentimental memories track," Armistead suddenly breaks in. "Met Nora Carlos five meters from the LZ last August 10."

"We've got an angle, gentlemen," Captain Veere says.

White Blood squads from the Emergency Rescue Team (EMRET) are already dropping down the left and right common femoral arteries to the feet. If Longevetti pauses, they'll send out teams to make a search

on a bruised knee surface.

We get an express ride down the femoral artery, then squeeze onto the elevator deck on level two of the big toe, one level below the big right toe nail. Kowalski spouts more poems he has penned or made up on the spur en route. He nauseates me with cheap sentiments poorly woven into rhyme. I try to ignore them. He keeps spouting. Then the elevator deck lurches and drops. K stops spouting. Twelve veteran Mark VI's and the bone marrow factory new Mark VII's are ranged before us on voluminous Three Deck. The whole crew of the 555th Squadron, jaunty and festive, laughing and goofing, has swarmed about them.

An instant's glance tells me that the Mark VII is a splendid beast. K and I examine the artfully swept wings that we have heard and read about, the sloped titanium armor around the two cell cockpit, the four 3.7 micro automatic weapons neatly slung underneath the wings, the 8.8 howitzer in the fuselage and the menacing quad 50's, the latter a newly designed weapon mounted turret-ball fashion atop. The Mark VI's have a blunt and ugly look to them that endears a white blooder. They're also easy to handle in flight, but the Mark VII's are downright elegant—nearly half a millimeter long and sleek and strong as a hamstring, despite having two engines and a heavy weapons rack slung underwing. part of the credit goes to Armistead, who, along with everything else he's done in his thirteen months as a white, helped out in their design in his spare time.

It's not surprising, then, that he comes down from the hippocampus in time for the ceremonial painting of the first lightning bolt logo on each fuselage. The 555th crews pause when they see him, then they break into a cheer. I know it pleases Armistead: he waves his campaign hat in reply. Then all watch as Clarence "Slick" Strum, chief of the 555th's maintenance team, paints on the first 555.

"Get 'em, Tri Five's," Armistead calls out as Strum finishes painting the last "5".

The 555th cheers. "Mosquito, mosquito, mosquito," they rhythmically chant, recalling his greatest exploit. Then Armistead steps into the long saphenous vein for the express ride back to the hippocampus.

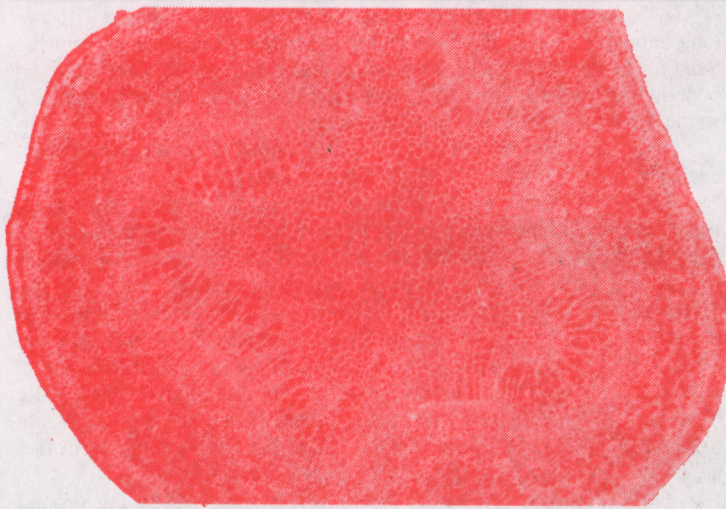
Outside, Longevetti and his colleagues wax lazy as the afternoon lengthens. He sprawls in a hammock strung between two trees. Engineering staffers from the bone marrow survey the string and do not trust it to hold him up. Here, as with anything that Longevetti's conscious decides, there is nothing we can do. The staffers and spotters are vigilant, however. An ominous call to General Quarters goes out at 1554:20. I rise from a barstool in the liver and get to my station on the bridge in the cerebellum by 1554:40.

"What's up?" I shout to Rosecrans, Cerebellum's first officer.

"Salmonella swarm off the starboard bow," he replies.

"What of it? They must be ten or twelve meters off."

"There's an open bowl of egg salad on the picnic table," Rosecrans tells me. "Five meters away."



and pick up Walker and Labine.

I remember Nora Carlos well. Their time together didn't last long ("Eccentric," she called him; "Too rigid," he said of her), but I have written in Bits and Pieces, the journal of the body, that Longevetti still carries a torch for Nora. Foolishly, perhaps, though I'm sure Kowalski approves of the wayward sentiment behind it. It is just that sort of pause for memory that we need. I remember the visual of her wearing khaki shorts, red tee shirt and sandals at Lake Paprika.

"Do we have that visual, Odd-six?" Captain Veere asks, using his nickname for Armistead.

"Need 30 seconds to find it, Captain," Armistead replies.

"Need it sooner, Odd-six. Dig it out and plug it into the conscious on a stat."

I know what 30 seconds means—it's in long term. I jump below deck to the hippocampus. Armistead is scrambling through the long term files with Hernandez, tossing visuals of joggers, picnics, Longevetti's family and grass stains aside, looking for Nora Carlos. Lefkowitz stays at the Current Thoughts Input Desk.

—CTID—, where everything is piling up.

"It's in too deep," Hernandez shorts.

"Keep looking," Armistead replies.

"Fifteen meters to LZ," I hear over the p.a. system.

"Waiting on that stat, memory," Veere calls. "Standby, EMRET."

I wait. Longevetti strides. EMRET tenses for a jump.

Finally, Armistead finds a visual of Nora's brown eyes. (Memorable indeed—why did she and L break up?) He whirls, runs for the hatch, and deftly vaults over a file cabinet. But he trips on a swivel chair. he staggers on by sheer effort, then falls, and the image slithers across the deck out of reach.

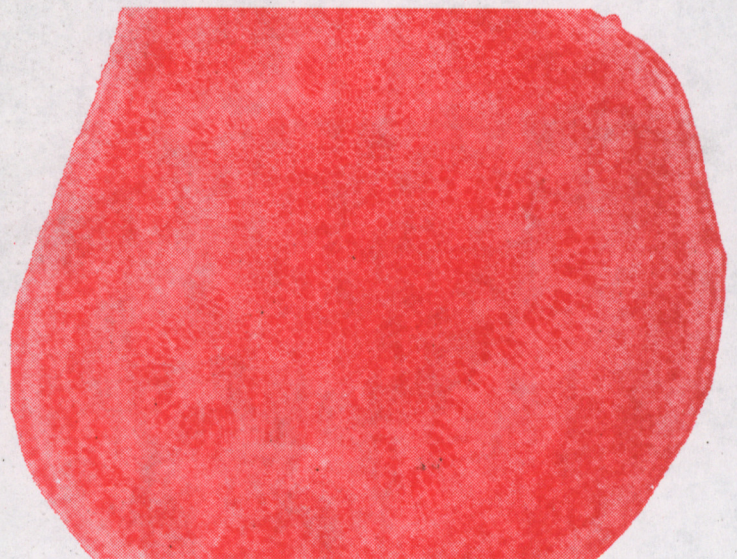
With the body in mid-career toward the LZ, Veere makes his move. "Cancel the pause option," he announces. "And keep the EMRET teams inside."

I look down at Armistead. he is still on the floor. Then, seeing me, he looks up and brightens, feigning optimism. I know he is reeling inside.

We churn past Labine and Walker's LZ at speed, too fast to spot them. We see a flickering red flare, hear the sound of gunfire. Then nothing.

A half day's work for Longevetti. We are in Michigan Park for the annual outing of North American Lint employees. The body hums and sways as Longevetti ambles about the food crammed picnic table, talking and eating. The day is clear, beautiful as such, but the blue sky is a difficult background to spot microbes against. The white blooder spotters grimly squint against it, wearing smoked glasses.

Longevetti has eaten once; he will certainly eat more. I am hungry myself, but three of the new two engine Mark VII's have arrived in the Achilles heel hangar. On my lunch hour, Kowalski and L meet in the ward room of the left patella in siesta repose. We edge past a tableaux of bloated fat cells and platelets in siesta repose. Beyond them a team of white blood repair "hard hats" is taking a break from a maintenance job



They'll make for it, sure as daylight, and every cell in the digestive system knows that Longevetti loves egg salad. I look at the faxed visual: there is not question of their identity. I remember their appearance from when Longevetti last ordered egg salad. They are distinctive, but not just because their sense of hygiene has led Spotters to pick them up by their scent alone. They also have the only known bacteria alphabet and an enormous literature. Through three generations a week their wise men write and conjure, their royalty snipe and plot against each other, and their court historians dutifully record the outcome.

Once in the salad they will burrow deep into the mayo, the egg whites and the muck. Longevetti will eat the egg salad, and then they will multiply and swarm through the corridors of the digestive system. And while our ultimate victory is almost certain, we will have to fight them up and down the limbs and organs. Like most bacteria they rarely surrender and will fight until annihilated.

Veer strides onto the bridge from his adjacent state room. He looks at the faxed visual of the swarm fetched from a spotter atop the head. Then he turns to Hep Newfield, the 555th's acting adjutant.

"Help me get at these people," he says. "I want your whole squadron to make a daylight raid against the salmonella.

"This is daylight," Newfield replies. "We never leave the body by day."

"It's a risk, I know, but they must not be permitted to get to the egg salad. I want no nausea in Longevetti tonight."

Newfield agrees. They shake hands. Orders tumble down the spinal cord: the 555th is put on alert for a daylight raid. Veere's choice of the 555th is logical enough; they are, after all, the on duty squadron. There is a problem, however: there are not enough pilots and crew available. Since "on duty status—day" requires that only 75 percent of staff be at the ready, several pilots and crew, not expecting to be called during daylight hours, are up in the esophagus "chowing down" with Longevetti's lunch. Rounding them up will take too much time. Hep Newfield must find quick substitutes for them.

"We need a weapons officer on a Mark VI," Hep says to me.

I can see a new heading in the next Bits and Pieces edition,

—"Salmonella Slammed; Stomach Saved"—but I doubt I'll live long enough to see it. Daylight flying is bloody work even without the Salmonella threat. If L. awakens, rises and walks away, we'll have no hope of getting back into Big L. We cannot fly as fast as he walks, and we do not have enough fuel to give him chase.

"Put me down," I reply, just as Armistead pops up from below deck. He, too, will volunteer. He will not be deterred.

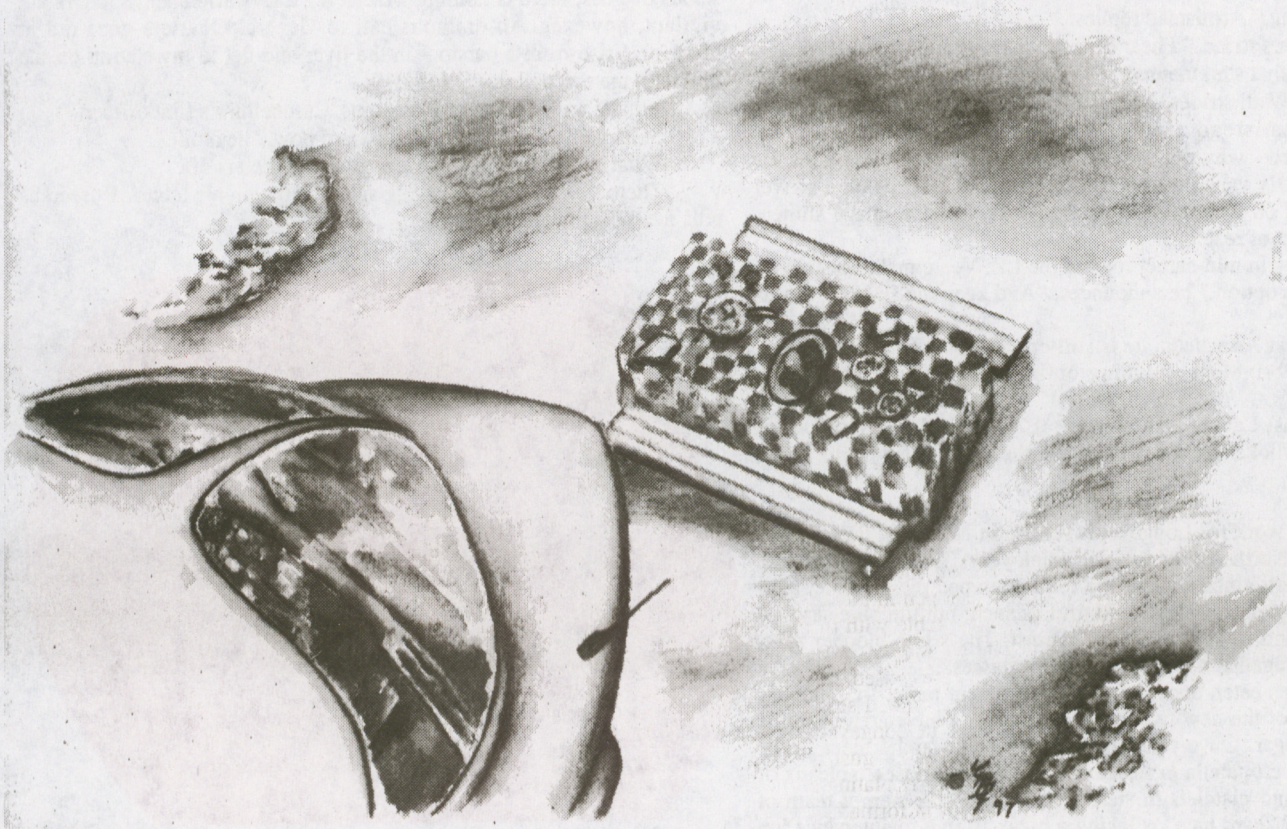
There's a frenzy on deck three in the Achilles heel when Hep, Armistead, the other volunteers and I arrive, all wearing flight suits each carrying our helmets. Maintenance is loading the 3.7's with incendiary rounds, the 8.8 howitzers with grape shot salt shells and the new quad 50's with short range canister hydrochloric acid shot. Longevetti is bare-footed, so the big toenail flight decks are unsheathed, but just now the toes are pointing straight up—way too steep for us to take off. Stern, efficient Captain Veere takes up the matter. By the time the Mark VII's have been dispatched to the other flight deck on the left big toe, Veere has issued orders, and Longevetti has raised his knees so that both feet are now pointing horizontally into the six know wind.

Engines kick over. We are unblocked and pushed by the ground crew handlers into one of the steam catapults. Our hoistman scrutinizes our poised craft, gets the high sign for us to take off from the tower, then passes it to us.

The body slips away. We are airborne at 1608:43.

Lupo, my pilot, checks our systems over, then confirms to Hep that our Fatboy Eight is air worthy. We circle the toe, bank over the lower limbs up the abdomen, then join the v formation of Mark VI's hovering over the small intestines. We wait for the others to join up, then at eight meters per hour we make for the stormy swarm. At last report the Salmonella were passing through the chain link fence of the infield. Our ETA to the egg salad is twenty-five minutes. We expect to intercept them at a point one and a half meters beyond the picnic table.

We are nine minutes out from Longevetti, still ascending to our cruise altitude of five meters, floating in the drone of the engines. One Mark VI has returned to L with engine trouble at two minutes out, and another one falls out with a fuel leak at seven minutes. The rest of us test



our weaponry. Virgil, our rear gunner, tests the rear 3.7. I fire bursts of the forward 8.8 cannon and the two wing 3.7 automatics. The others test theirs until the quad 50's of the Mark VII's, with their staccato ripping sound, open up. Then the peaceful steady engine drone overwhelms again.

We are fifty-one cells in seventeen ships. Radio silence prevails when we crest five meters. I feel as if we are alone on a training mission or excursion. The view is superb: There's no bulky Longevetti blocking our lines of sight. Down below we can see L.'s pals and colleagues bunched together for a volley ball game. Others are ineptly tossing a Frisbee, chasing it down, picking it up and tossing it again. Beyond us is sky and footfalls of air, a vision of peace and idleness and open space that I do not know in the jam-cramped quarters of Longevetti.

There is no time to bask in it. We are five meters above the picnic table and twenty one minutes out from Longevetti when we spot them, a yellow surge above the dirt and grass, invisible to the human eye, but menacing and silent, moving with the following wind at four knots and an altitude of half a meter across the backstop of the infield. Longevetti was hitless in four at bats during the softball game there earlier this afternoon. We see their warrior class cantering around the center, guarding the royalty, bureaucracy and breeders. Usually there is much frolicking and wheeling about among them, but they seem more businesslike now that they are closing up on the sea foam Tupperware temple they believe will provide their day's rations.

We break formation and divide our ten Mark VI's into three ranks of three abreast. Newfield will go solo in front. The Mark VI's scream into the wind. I see a hundred thousand salmonella faces look up at us. Newfield in Fatboy One opens fire and kicks his engine into gear. He swoops down through the midst of the horde, then pulls up at blade top level to surge in behind them.

We follow in the second rank. We hammer away with the 3.7's and 8.8's, spitting salt into the columns of warriors and a steady arcing stream of incendiary protein rounds at the panicked bureaucrats, breeders and royalty bunching together in the center of the swarm. The noise deafens. The shank of the 3.7 vibrating in my grip turns hot. The warriors below return fire with their protein rifles, pockmarking the Mark VI's. Globbs of them close behind us. They do no damage until a lucky shot sluices into the engine of Saul Windowitz Fatboy Ten, behind us. His craft explodes, leaving only a cloud of dust behind. We fall endlessly, firing the whole time, then suddenly dive through the swarm.

Salmonella bodies fall in clumps around us. One falls among us and smashes the windshield of Fermin in Fatboy Two, blinding him and sending his craft flip-flopping out of formation. I do not see what becomes of him. We are too busy. But I hear an explosion and find out later that he hit dead into a leg of aluminum lawn furniture. We come up behind the swarm, loop the loop, and join Newfield in giving chase.

Moving at speed, the swarm approaches the picnic table then dodges under it to melee with us. Wind currents make the air under the table tricky to navigate the Mark VI's. We are forced to slow to three meters an hour and back off from them. Meanwhile the Salmonella seem to collectively smell the egg salad. Spurred by our hesitation, they gun for it, rising above the bench and the table top. We close up now, twisting and turning behind them to throw off their fire, still spitting shell cases and gunfire. We drop hundreds of Salmonella, but the rest are undaunted. They know we cannot kill them all. Newfield calls in the Mark VII's.

We do not see them at first. Suddenly they surprise the Salmonella and us, veering out from behind a napkin dispenser. They are magnificent. They fly in wing echelon, perfectly aligned, their ranks dressed before they advance, lead by Armistead in Fat Boy XV. They hold their fire until they surge across a paper plate stack and salt and pepper shakers. Then they fire their devastating quad 50's. Gaps open in their ranks; the warrior class wavers, then falters back below the table with the royalty, breeders, wise men and us. They catch the crossfire of our 3.7's. The whole horde commences to panic, and my hopes are roused, but suddenly the quad 50's jam, one after the other. A design flaw, I suspect—fixable once we are back in the machine body shops in Longevetti, but fatal out here. The Salmonella rally. A providential wind gust drives them up into the egg mass. They pound the calcium armor plating of the mute Mark VII's in frustration as they pass through the formation, and whoop like red corpuscles on 24 hour r & r as they gain the salad.

"Form up," Hep calls, believing that our cause is hopeless, mindful that we are far from Longevetti. "Let's get out of here."

Then a Mark VII flashes past us, down bound.

I do not call out to him as the others do. I know Armistead won't hear us. His weapons man and rear gunner bail out, but Armistead stays with his machine to the last, spattering rounds from his protein rifle ahead of him until he buries Fatboy Twelve in egg salad. For a few seconds nothing seems to happen, and I wonder if the soggy mass will simply muffle the crash and snuff out the impact. Then, as we circle the salad, a yellow froth seems to rise out of the salad bowl. Suddenly the salad explodes, throwing up an orange cloud before the whole messy works combusts into a ball of flame mushrooming thirty feet into the air. We are close enough to be buffeted by the explosion and hear the screams of the Salmonella. Close enough, too, for sprays of egg to spatter our windshield. Humans come running, wondering, no doubt, what has happened. How can they ever know? Yes, humanity, the egg salad has blown up. I look over at Longevetti—still sleeping.

We regain control and bank out of collision range with the humans.

Our work is done. Hep and Kowalski land and pick up Armistead's crew from their LZ atop a jar of mustard. We in turn reform a v formation and wait for Hep and K to join up. When they do we light out at eight meters per, ducking out in time to avoid a human dumping ice water on the inferno, which forms a hissing cloud of steam that scatters the surrounding people.

Ours is not a clean escape. We lose Pettigrew and crew in Fatboy Twelve when an errant Frisbee slices into our fast running flight. The Frisbee tips Pettigrew's wing, then continues through our formation harmlessly, but the force of the Frisbee sweeps him in a tailspin into the lawn. No one bails out.

We are back in the Achilles heel by 16:54, 61 minutes after going to General Quarters. The still torpor driven Longevetti is as unfeeling and as heedless of our venture as the hammock he is sprawled upon. His feet are splayed at angles that are awkward for landing. We are too low on fuel to wait; we have to risk landing. Three of the blooders are injured, and two Mark VII's are totaled in the landings.

Kowalski, his hair slicked, is tying a tie when I come in. His radio blares a broadcast: Intestinal Phillies leading, 3-2 over the Twins after seven innings. I mention Armistead. He musters obligatory regrets, but he has a hopeful young fem' waiting for him out by a leg of the kitchen table. It's no time for mourning.

"We're meeting tonight in the kitchen, Buck," he tells me. I've got a Mark V requisitioned from the 352nd Squadron to make the trip." He pitches into "You know, Buck? I've never known anyone quite so...so..." before I escape to the corridor.

The body bears and eliminates millions of cells a day, and there are trillions in the bod' as a whole. Lefkowitz and Hyder will have met Armistead's replacement by now and introduced him to the deep and shallow files of the hippocampus. And somewhere in the conscious Longevetti is thinking of Nora Carlos, wondering what brought her to mind this morning, however briefly and intangibly. But we are white blooders, and we have lost ten cells outright and two died of wounds in our venture today. Who will remember Armistead and the other blooders who have died within and beyond Longevetti? Some of us will; some of us have to—we have to believe that they would have done so for us. And so several hundred of us—off duty—gather on the white of the small right toe that evening for services.

Padre Damos reads the Burial of Cells rite, followed by Rabbi Follicle, who adds a few words in proportion to Longevetti's religious make-up. I look at the bodies wrapped in the Longevetti flag (large L on blue field surrounded by stars, one for each major organ) lined up on the edge of the abyss of air. "Taps" is played by the 555th's bugler. Captain Veere reads each name aloud, adding his own 'Odd-Six' to that of "Warner Armistead, NCO, Mem." Captain Veere calls for silence. For a moment Longevetti and the body collective hesitates—this slumbering pale amalgam of billions of cells destined to live a short, dangerous, too easily forgotten life.

Each cell slips overboard with a protein rifle salute.

A whistle pipe blows.

"Carry on?" the loudspeaker announces. ▲

Jeffrey hails from Westland, Michigan and Heart's Desire marks his first fiction sale. About Heart's Desire he writes, "This story is a classic 'what if' scenario, in this instance being, what if a woman who had a fatal illness proved to be profitable to those around her?"



Heart's Desire

by Jeffrey Valka

Illustrated by Robert M. Copley

A woman named Helena contracts a fatal virus and falls into a burning fever. She alternates between fits of helpless delirium and thrashing, violent outbursts. One moment she will tear at her sweat-drenched bed sheets and scream as if in the throes of a particularly long and painful childbirth, but then suddenly she stops and grows very still, murmuring incoherently. Day and night her family watches over her and cares for her, but they can do little more than try to alleviate her suffering and make her comfortable. It's only a matter of time before she can fight no longer and succumbs to the illness, they say to each other.

A single white dove sits perched on the windowsill of the sick room and watches in silence. The family mostly ignores the bird except for a few attempts to shoo it away, but their attention remains focused on Helena and her immediate care.

Days wear on and the sickness worsens, becoming more difficult for Helena to fight. She grits her teeth against the pain raging through her body as the sweat running down her face and neck begins to take on a milky coloration and thicker consistency, a symptom no one has seen until now. Many of the family members fall to their knees and wring their hands in prayer, certain that the end has finally come. The milky white sweat runs more and more slowly down Helena's anguished face until it comes to a stop at her bare collarbone and appears to solidify, ripening like an apple into a small, round bead. She screams as if being touched with sizzling hot brands along her skin, as if this tiny bead were tearing the very life from out of her.

The bead falls from her body and clatters onto the floor where it rolls around like a marble. Helena faints with exhaustion, and her breathing becomes shallow and ragged. Her family stands there for a moment, stunned by this new development. Helena's brother John drops to the floor and crawls around until he recovers the white bead. He holds it up to the light and examines it with a cold, scientific look. He rolls it between his thumb and forefinger, studies the bead up close and from far away. "It looks like a pearl," he says and passes it around to the other relatives for their own inspection: Eyes light up as the bead passes from hand to hand, each person rolling it in their palm and glancing over at Helena who is now deeply asleep, and then back to the white bead. Nervous glances fly between them as they pass it

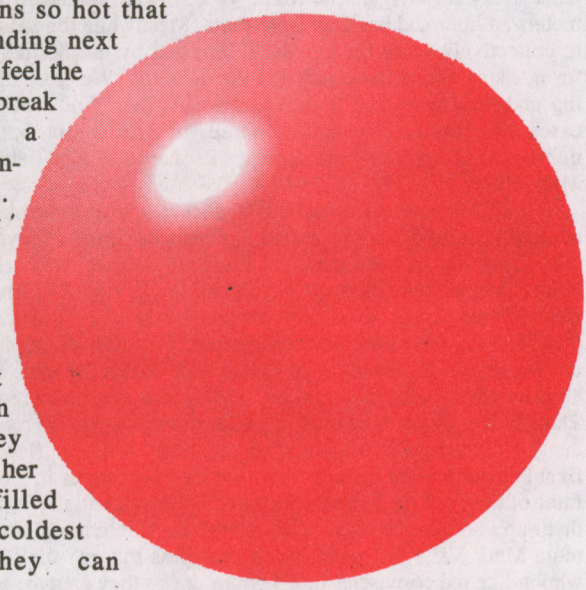
along, fingers hesitant to let go of the potential treasure. Nobody speaks a word to anyone else as they pass it around.

Later that day John takes the bead to a jeweler for an appraisal, who confirms their suspicions: the milky white bead is in fact a genuine pearl, and quite valuable. Upon this realization, the family members all take a renewed interest in Helena's care. Before they used to take turns at her side reading poetry and favorite stories to her and wiping her brow with a damp cloth; now they steadfastly refuse to leave any one person alone with her for fear that Helena will produce another pearl and the one watching her will quietly pocket it and turn a small profit. Deep within each relative's own thoughts, however, they guiltily imagine what could be had if they themselves were able to sell one of the pearls. Unspoken distrust crackles between them like an electric charge. They stare edgily at one another and walk around the room like jungle cars on the prowl, one eye on Helena and the other looking over their shoulder.

Two days later another violent fit racks Helena, only this one is much worse than the first. She shrieks and flails about mindlessly like a frantic, overturned turtle, desperately crying out for someone to bring an end to this. Her

fever burns so hot that those standing next to her can feel the heat and break out into a sweat themselves.

They move her from the bedroom to the adjacent bathroom where they submerge her in a tub filled with the coldest water they can





muster. They ladle water over Helena's head and dump buckets of fresh ice into the water to bring the fever down. With sobs of pain and tears streaming down her cheeks, Helena produces another pearl which plunks into the water and rolls around on the bottom of the tub. Someone thrusts an arm into the water and quickly retrieves the pearl, and takes it back into the bedroom for inspection. This one is slightly larger and a purer white than the first pearl, obviously more precious and more valuable. Two of her aunts who remained behind lift Helena from the tub and towel her off while the rest of the family marvels at the new wonder. The white dove continues to observe in silence, by now completely forgotten.

A vigorous discussion breaks out between the relatives as to what they should now do with Helena. Her condition has obviously become more serious, and several argue that she should be taken to a hospital. Others say no, that if she is to die, then she should die in her own home surrounded by her family. Finally, after a great deal of talk, John says, "I will sell the pearls so we can bring a doctor here to take care of her. She will receive the best possible care and still remain at home."

The family agrees, and they bring in a doctor to watch over her during the day. A few try to hide their disappointment at the sale of the pearls, but they grudgingly tell themselves that it is all for the best. The doctor brings with him the finest machines that money can buy, and suddenly Helena is surrounded by tubes and wires that run in and out of her nose and arms, and blinking monitors that measure all of her vital signs. Under the doctor's care her condition stabilizes, but he tells them that there is little hope of her ever recovering from this illness. "All I can do at this point is prolong her life and provide her with a small amount of relief from her pain," the doctor says.

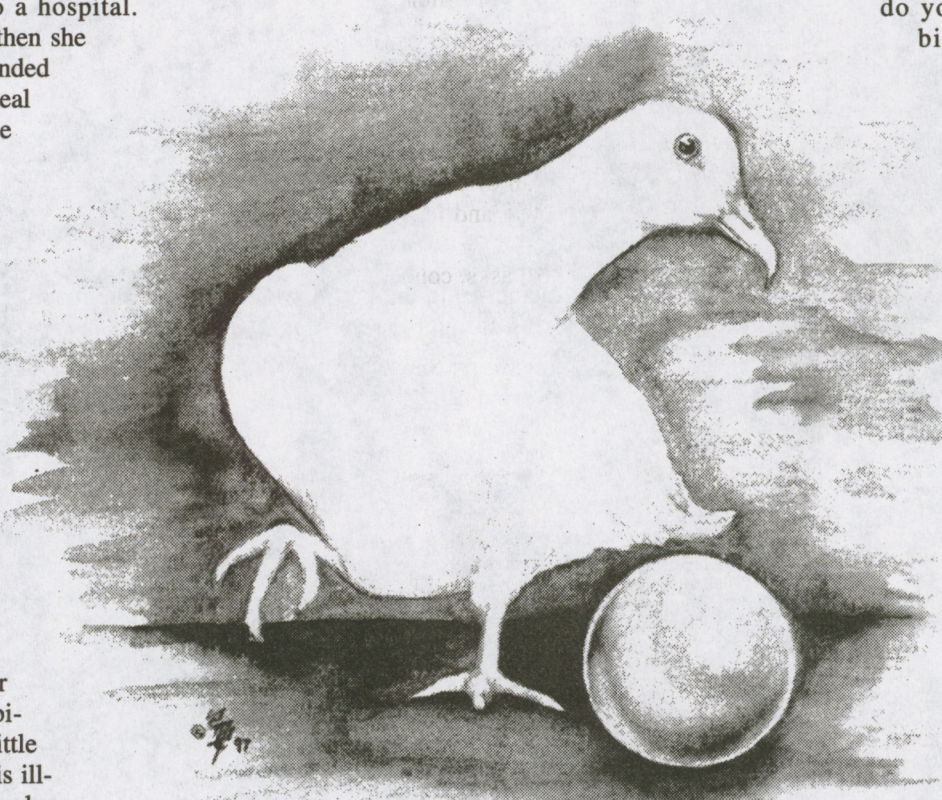
Every two to three days she produces another pearl, which is immediately sold in order to pay for the doctor's services. Eaten up by their own unrequited greed and avarice and unable to stand it any longer, a few complain about this. "Why should the doctor get rich at her expense?" they say. "She never knew him, and to him she is nobody, just another sick person. Wouldn't she want her own blood to profit from this, and not some stranger?" Many of the relatives nod their heads in agreement, relieved that someone has finally given voice to the thoughts that they themselves had been harboring like a shameful secret. A few try to argue on Helena's behalf, but they are outnumbered and quickly intimidated into silence. The family decides to cut back on the doctor's services, and have him visit just once a week instead of every day. They disconnect the machines deemed superfluous and send them along with the doctor.

Like witches around a bubbling cauldron they sit at her bed-

side, waiting for Helena to produce another pearl. She looks back at them all, knowing what they all want, but she says nothing. Eventually another violent, agonized seizure takes hold of her just as before, and someone scoops up the latest treasure. All but one of her family members goes off to sell the pearl and to celebrate their newly found fortune. One of her aunts, Aunt Nora, who helped Helena from the tub, remains behind to watch over her. Nora takes a seat by the bedside and reads a book while Helena sleeps, but eventually she too nods off into sleep.

The white dove flies from its perch on the window sill and alights upon Helena's chest which rises and falls in ragged, fitful breaths. Her eyelids flutter open and she sees the bird for the first time, uncertain of whether she is awake or dreaming. In a voice

like sandpaper she whispers, "What do you want, bird? Are you hoping to get rich like my



worthless family? I'm afraid I have no pearl to give you right now."

The bird cocks its head to one side and stares back at her, as if sizing her up. After a moment the bird says, "I'm not here to profit from your misery, but rather to grant you a favor."

Convinced now that she is either dreaming or in the midst of a fever-induced hallucination, Helena says, "What kind of favor can you do for me? You're not even real."

"I can bring an end to your suffering and carry your soul into paradise. But to do that, you must first give me the pearl of your soul, the very essence of your being. Until then, you will remain trapped here in this body."

Helena is silent for a moment, then says, "I'm not going to give that to you...you can't have it. You're just like the others. Even my dreams are hoping to make an easy fortune off of me!" Weakly she raises her arm and tries to wave the dove away. "Go away and never bother me again."

Without a word the dove flies from Helena's chest and back to its window sill perch. It sits behind her just out of sight, and waits.

The next morning Helena's family returns after having spent the night on the town with the money made from the sale of the pearl. Nora frowns as they enter and gives each one a lacerating stare, but says nothing. They are loud and boisterous despite having been out for the entire night. Already they begin making plans for how the money from the next pearl should be spent.

From the next room Helena hears everything that they say, feigning sleep but feeling disgusted beyond measure with her family's behavior. How could they have sunk so low, so quickly? She thinks. I will die before I give them anything more.

Late that night when everyone is asleep, the dove visits Helena once more. She awakens feeling lucid and clear for the first time in several days. "Have you changed your mind?" the bird asks without a trace of irony.

"Yes...yes I have. Take me away from this place," she says, bitterly at first, but then simply tired, resigned. "How do I give up the pearl of my soul?"

"You must go deep within yourself and bring together everything that you are. Your loves, your fears and all of your desires. Focus it all on a single point, then push it away and let it go. I will do the rest."

Helena closes her eyes and does as the bird asks, concentrating intently upon her life from her earliest memories to the present moment. She imagines herself wandering through a vast mansion with each room holding a different memory. She opens the doors, walks into each room and carefully examines what she finds there. Gradually her mind begins to bustle with the

thoughts of all the places she's been and all the people she's known. Helena smiles as she remembers childhood friends and old loves who all parade before her. She works at this mental inventory methodically, considering every memory and feeling one at a time, examining every facet. This will take months, she thinks, despairing.

Suddenly the memories rush out like a tidal wave, as if a cork has been pulled out by the act of unearthing these forgotten things and triggered an overwhelming avalanche. I'm drowning! I'm drowning! she thinks, unable to process the thoughts quickly enough or to stem the tide. She thrashes weakly in her bed and knocks the IV out of her arm.

"Push it away," then disembodied voice of the bird tells her. "Push it away and let it go."

"I can't..." Helena says, sobbing. "I can't do it..."

In a blinding flash the lights come on in the room, and John stumbles in. "What's wrong?" he asks, confused and still half asleep. the flash of light and sudden intrusion of her brother shocks Helena back into the present. All of the feelings and memories dredged up suddenly vaporize, blown away like a cloud in a strong wind and she sinks back into her bed with a deep, heavy sign. A stunningly gorgeous pearl, the largest and most beautiful one yet, rolls from her chest into Helena's lap where it lays nestled in the sheets like a newborn baby.

John's eyes grow large and hungry as he spies the pearl which glints in the moonlight spilling into the room. Sleepily he reaches for it, unaware that Helena has stopped breathing. the dove swoops down from above and takes the pearl into its talons before he can reach it, however, and soars through the open window into the enfolding arms of the night. ▲

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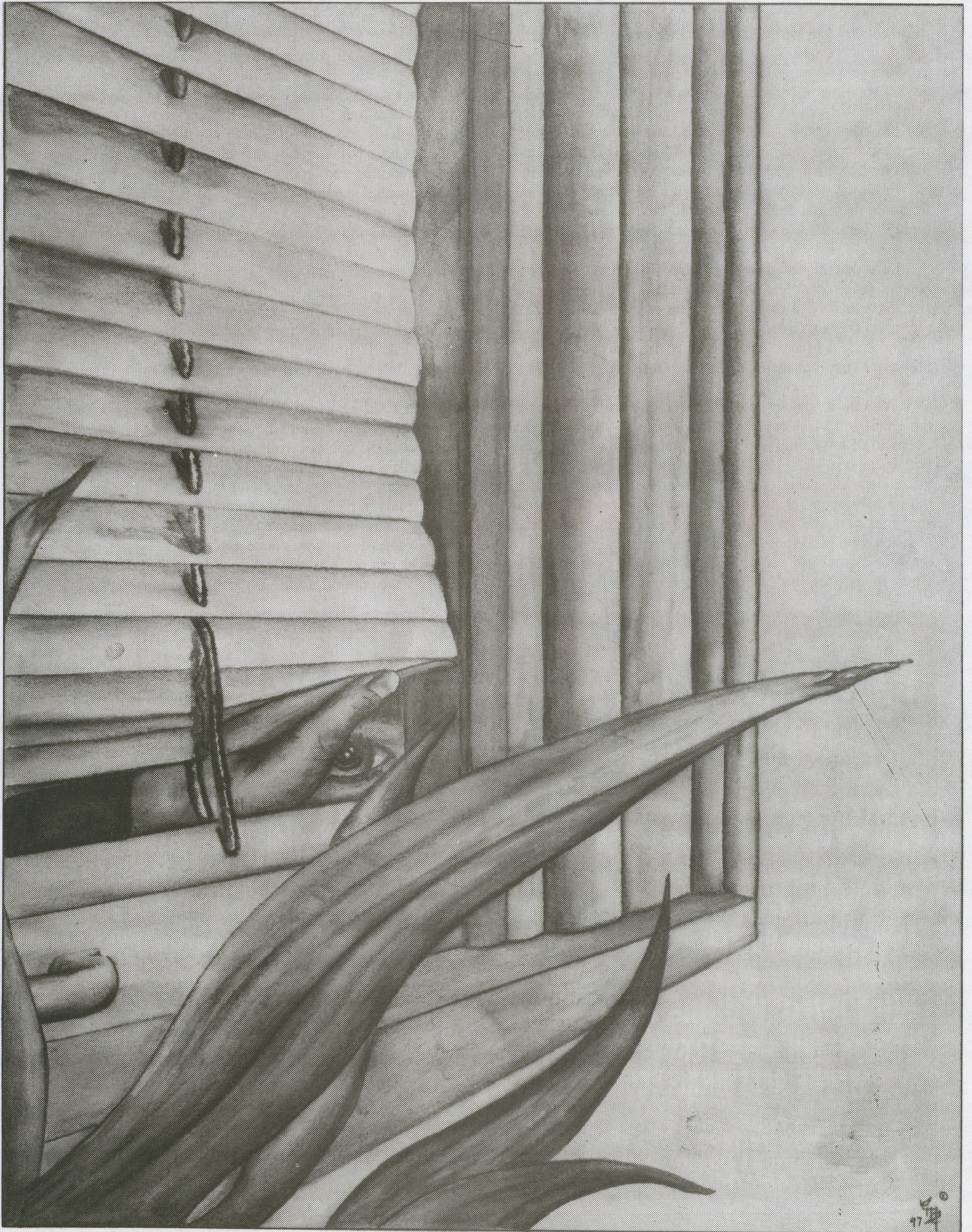
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Geoffrey has one of the most interesting biographies of any writer published within the pages of PW. Geoffrey is a physicist for NASA and is a principal investigator on an experiment on the PATHFINDER mission, which recently captivated the world with its landing on Mars. He is a Hugo and Nebula award winner with over 50 published short stories in Asimov's, Science Fiction Age, Realms of Fantasy, Absolute Magnitude, Tomorrow and many others. Ironically, "Invasion of Privacy" is a mystery story...PW is becoming the place to change colors...

Invasion of Privacy

Coop raised the corner of the blinds a crack and watched the car pull into the drive. Hammerman was alone in the car; good. That would make it easier. He took his position behind the door and waited.

When Hammerman turned to lock the door, Coop crept up behind him, silent like a cat stalking, and swung the bat. All his strength, no warning. The old white man had fast reflexes; Coop hadn't made a sound, but as the bat swung around Hammerman turned and threw up his arm.

Coop put his body behind the blow. The bone in the old man's arm shattered like a stick, and the bat made a satisfying, solid crunch on the side of the cop's head. The force of the blow knocked him to the tiled floor. He got to his knees, but Coop was behind him now and gave him a hard kick with steel-toed boots, catching him precisely between the legs. The blow lifted him slightly off the floor, and when he landed he made no move to get up. Coop kicked him face-down on the tile floor, put a foot on his neck, and raised the bat. "Move and you dead, pig."

by Geoffrey
A. Landis

Illustrated by
Robert M. Copley

The old cop made only inarticulate whimpering sounds. Blood was coming out of his nose and one ear.

Coop tossed away the bat and pulled Hammerman's arms behind him. The cop sucked in his breath sharply when Coop pulled his shattered arm. Coop ignored it; handcuffed his hands roughly behind him. He put his foot on the man's back and shoved him back down onto the floor, face first, then reached around to unfasten the man's belt. There was a gun in a holster strapped to one ankle, a .22 Beretta. Coop pulled it and tossed it in his sack; Hammerman wasn't gonna to get a chance to reach for it. He jerked Hammerman's pants down around his ankles. Faster than tying his legs. There was a latrine stink as Coop jerked the pants down; Hammerman had lost control. No surprise. Coop ignored that too.

The cop seemed to come around a little as Coop took the rope out of his sack and put it around his neck. His voice was slurred and irregular. "Whowho are you?"

"Name Cooper Wade, pig-man. That ring any bells?"

"Wade? No." He tried to shake his head, but the effort seemed too hard for him. "Wade? No, never heard of you."

Coop laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "Well, imagine my surprise. Guess this is all a big mistake then." Coop tightened the rope. He'd done a poor job on the noose; spent an hour in the library and then practiced for hours at home, learning to tie the noose, but it still didn't seem quite right. But it would do.

"Did I...did I arrest you?"

"Bright guess, big guy. Right the first time. Yeah, you arrested me. Jaywalking. Fifteen dollar fine and a one-minute lecture by the judge."

"I don't get it."

"Oh, you're gonna get it, all right." Coop kicked him in the ribs and then jerked up on the rope. "On your feet."

The cop staggered up. "My wife. What did you do to Susan?"

"Nothing, cop man. I got nothing against her. She's upstairs." Wrapped in about a mile of duct tape, she looked like something from an old horror movie featuring the mummy, but she was basically okay. Coop didn't hurt people, not unless they got in his way. She'd been easy.

"If you touched her, I'll..."

Coop jerked the rope to pull the old man off balance, grabbed him by the shattered arm with one hand and with the other twisted the man's head around by the hair. "You'll do what, old man? Tell me just what you think you can do."

"Why?" Hammerman gasped. "Just tell me, why?"

The atrium had a high ceiling with exposed oak beams. Expensive old house; guess cops got paid off pretty. Coop tossed the end of the rope over one of the beams and then pulled it taut. "Why." His voice was flat. "Now, that's the real question, isn't it. Yes, indeed. So you never heard of me before, now. My, my." He pulled over a chair and put one hand under the cop's crotch, then lifted with that hand and simultaneously pulled the rope with the other.

The cop whimpered in pain, balancing on tip-toe on the chair. Coop left him there for a few seconds as he wiped his hand on the cop's shirt, then slacked the rope a bit and adjusted the knot behind the cop's left ear.

The cop's voice was barely audible. "Why?"

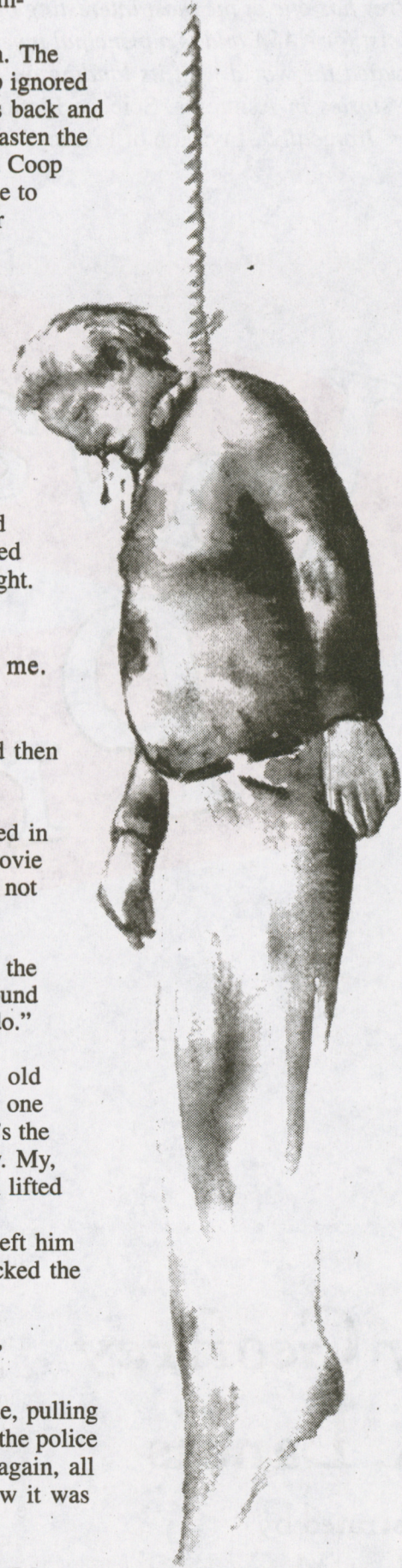
"Well, let's see. You ever hear of something called ACE, Mr. Cop man?"

The answer was a whisper. "Assured Crack Eviction."

"You got it," said Coop. He tied the end of the rope to the door handle, pulling once to check that it wouldn't slip off. "Lotsa nice newspaper headlines for the police department, getting tough on crack dealers, making neighborhoods safe again, all that. Remember? Sure you remember. You were part of it. Remember how it was done?"

"Show of presence."

Coop laughed. "So that's what you called it? Show of presence, now. My, my."



Let's remember now, shall we? Seems to me you picked a neighborhood, maybe six blocks on a side. Show of presence. Seems to me that that means about a hundred patrolmen, all done up in riot gear, maybe fifty squad cars, helicopters, SWAT teams_ yeah, how did you say it? Presence. Right. And everybody you find in the neighborhood, they're a suspect. Gonna scare the shit out of the dealers, you, so you search everybody, no exceptions. My, my."

"That was years ago," the man croaked. "Over and done with a long time."

"Years ago, yes. Guess you don't remember it, Mr. Cop. Guess it was nothing to you. Just one more fifteen-year-old black kid coming home from a baseball game, guess he picked the wrong street to cross. Might be a drug dealer, and that baseball glove, well, who knows how many containers of crack it might be hiding? So you handcuffed him and searched him."

Coop walked over and picked up the baseball bat, leaving the cop balanced on the chair, held up by the tension of the rope on his neck. The cop's eyes followed him. His right eye was bloody, and the pupil dilated, big as a dime. He musta gotten a concussion from the whack on the head; Coop was surprised he was still conscious.

"Didn't find anything, did you? So what did you do? Well, you pulled down his pants, right there on the street, put on a rubber glove, felt up his crotch, bend him over and checked out his, how do you put it, searched his body cavities. Who knows what he might be hiding, right? Half a dozen policemen there watching, too. Couldn't believe you didn't find anything, so you got another lieutenant to search him again. Then you put him in the paddy-wagon with about a hundred other handcuffed black kids just like him for an hour while you called in to check his records. My, my; guess he must have been the only black kid in the city didn't have a record, no outstanding warrant for his arrest, not even cutting school. Couldn't let that stand, could you? So you gave him a ticket for jaywalking, sent him on his way. Guess he didn't mean much to you, Mr. Cop. Guess you did that to about a hundred other kids just like him that day; you don't even remember his name."

It wasn't just that, of course. Not just the leering white guy and the laughs and crude remarks from the watching cops and the way he was held by the hair with his face twisted around under the other cop's armpit; not just the way he'd felt their eyes on him and realized that he was nothing at all to them, just a big vicious animal that had to be put in its place; not the dozen baths he took afterwards and the way he felt violated, hurt and sick and scared. It was the way everybody on the street seemed to know, afterwards, the way their eyes avoided his, but he could feel them looking and making whispered comments behind his back, not quite loud enough that he could quite hear what they said. That was when it had gone bad for him, or at least, when it had started.

"Well, kid's mother talk to a lawyer," he said. "Lawyer tell her something funny. State law say it's rape when you go sticking fingers up somebody's ass without their saying

okay, or having a search warrant or nothing. But the lawyer, he say forget it, kid. Nothing you can do unless the district attorney wants to prosecute, and let's be real, kid. Forget it."

Coop swung the bat back and forth a few times to loosen up, then took his batting stance in front of the chair. "Guess he didn't forget, huh?"

The swing felt good, felt like a home run, a good solid connection against the cop's knees. The snap was as sharp as a rifle shot.

Coop hit him a couple of times as he twisted and jerked, just for the practice, but after the third hit the body wasn't really even twitching any more. He wiped the bat down and put it away in its sack. It was over.

It was over, the years of waiting and cringing from police cars; and the months of stalking, hiding and watching and planning. It was over, but he didn't feel any better. He didn't feel anything at all, not the release he had hoped for, not the satisfaction he yearned for. He didn't feel good at all; just numb, and aching tired, and dirty. He felt just as empty, as soulless as ever. The body hanging there was nothing to him, just a piece of soiled meat.

But there was the other lieutenant, guy named O'Neill, and after that there would be the other ones, the ones who had stood around and watched.

It was going to be a busy summer, yes indeed. ▲

Boxes -Jonathan Harrington

We live, after all, in boxes.
A big box on the prairie
A blue box by the sea
An old box in the mountains
Or a box in the city
Overlooking the park.
Four walls, a top, a bottom—
Don't we have them fixed up cute?
A bed, a sofa, running water.

We get inside boxes every day
And drive to other boxes
Where we work or go to school.
When we die a box like a miniature hospital
Pulls pulls up and takes us away.
Someone puts us in another box
And they take that box
And put in yet another
Deep in the ground.

THE THRONE OF BONES

by Brian McNaughton
TERMINAL FRIGHT—\$35
PO Box 100
Black River, NY 13612

Review by Tom Piccirilli

Upon closing the door on his forum for exceptional classical horror fiction, *Terminal Fright Magazine*, editor Ken Abner Jr. turned his discerning eye to the publishing of books. The first, in what will hopefully be a long and bewitching line, is Brian McNaughton's *The Throne of Bones*, a premiere collection of fifteen short stories and novellas that comprise the best darkly fantastical work by an author of long-standing regard. McNaughton is a dazzling writer of the bizarre and grotesque fused to a whimsical near-fairy tale-like quality, whose prose harkens back to Clark Ashton Smith, H.P. Lovecraft, and Lord Dunsany, but always remains utterly his own enigmatic creation. Few authors manage to pack their work with such horror, beauty, and poetic narratives; and yet still have them consist of an enthralling plot that drives the reader straight on through the heart of nightmare.

He writes of an unnamed land of gothic intensity and midnight brilliance, with a history encompassing the King of Ghouls and his strange brethren, artists and lovers, morbid religions, depraved sorceries, and evil gardens that clutch at the broken-hearted, with skulls piled high and graveyards where sages seek the final answers to life and death. These stories fit together into a fascinating mythos, each a polished piece laid side by side to accentuate one another. *The Throne of Bones* itself is a section of the book comprised of six tales—including the lengthy and absorbing "Lord Glyphtard's Tale", quite possibly my favorite herein—replete with such eeriness, rich texture, and rare, sublime hideousness that one is surprised that so much raw passion, demented as it might be, can be packed into even a novella.

The book is physically attractive with striking cover/interior artwork by Jamie Oberschlake and a solid binding that proves *The Throne of Bones* will withstand being reread time and again, which I suspect most fans of horror will want to do. McNaughton's pieces interlock to form a masterwork world and scheme of infernal splendor and lovely repugnance, one that will be hopefully added upon for a long time to come.

WIRED TO DEATH

by Pamela Mitchell
Write Way Publishing—\$20.95

Review by Michael Laimo

Equal parts science fiction, mystery, and horror, *Wired To Death* is the perfect recipe for a delicious read. Author Pamela Mitchell cooks up a mysterious tale that explores the pith of human desire and its coalescence with the

REVIEWS

EDITED BY
TOM PICCIRILLI

imminent dangers that lurk inside the dream-forged environment of virtual reality.

It is the year 2018. Seattle Washington is envisioned as a city with terrorist-secure architecture, electric cars, and voice-rec security locks at every impasse. In this almost-perfect world where most diseases are acquiesced through customized medical treatments, Tanner Bishop, the supervising field agent for the Federally governed Center for Disease Control, receives word of an unexplainable out of control cancer that targets the lymphatic system and causes monstrous tumors and eventual death within days upon first contact. With the assistance of her field agent Stephen, their research immediately leads to a multitude of clues that baffle and intrigue them. They carefully probe through each and every one, disclosing more and more facts until they at last uncover a fearful horror veiled behind the technology of a virtual reality weight-loss program. The duo soon find themselves confronting doctors, media, lawyers, all of whom have their own curiosities with respect to the growing epidemic, and although they initially appear to behave as obstacles to Tanner and Stephen's analysis, they all conclusively provide the necessary keys that heighten the story's frightening resolution.

Throughout the growing investigation, as Tanner and Stephen discover more and more about the terrible disease and of VR Weight Management, the manufacturer of the weight-loss program, their relationship with one another flourishes. They share their intimacies and in turn quickly realize with much regret how their personal problems impede their mutual willingness to become more emotionally involved. Somehow, however, they utilize this hindrance to help foster their professional collaboration, and ultimately discover together the horrifying truth behind VR Weight Management.

Ms. Mitchell creates a satisfying story that carries the reader into a very possible and probable future, one filled with an all too conceivable horror that will remain in the reader's mind as the widespread use of virtual reality approaches. Her narrative is well thought out and paces quickly through complexities that begin on page one, and with much satisfaction, continue on to the very end. *Wired To Death* is a wonderfully original story that will no doubt keep the reader turning page after page all the way to the dark; staggering finale.

COLD AT HEART

by Brian A. Hopkins
paperback—\$9.95
Starlance Publications
5104 Cooperstown Lane
Paseo, WA 99301

Review by Michael Laimo

A single word can thoroughly sum up the atmosphere Brian A. Hopkins creates in his aptly titled novella, 'Cold at Heart': Cold. As I turned each page, a new series of chills seized my senses as temperatures slid below zero, snow whipped from every page of text, as icy blood rushed through the veins of the characters and flowed into my hands as I gripped the manuscript. There is so much 'cold' here it's no wonder those chills assaulted my spine as briskly as they did. But as I read on, I wondered if it could be the fright of the tale that had me shivering. Thinking back, it was a combination of the two, as 'Cold at Heart' is one well-penned, creepy novella.

A forceful adventure that explores the unfamiliar territory of the Arctic, 'Cold at Heart' delves into and uncloaks the truth of the haunting mythology surrounding the Arctic wolf. Extensively researching historical records pertaining to Canadian anthropology, Hopkins meshes the fruit of his labor with an indubitable fascination with the werewolf. The resulting formula is a quasi SF/Horror adventure loaded with dark mysteries that lurk behind every glacial ridge and drift of Arctic snow.

Hopkins' dark (and cold) prose gained my respect as he weaves serious concerns and believable morals without interrupting the tense flow of the tale. The story intertwines two connected worlds, first the past accounts of Chief Petty Officer John Torrington, who during his nineteenth century expedition into the Arctic, unearths the terrifying dark secret to the existence of the Arctic wolf. Soon following his mysterious death, a succession of daunted characters investigate the secrets he leaves behind, only to find themselves in similar dreadful situations.

Photographer Peter Burke lives in our time. He accompanies Biologist David Snow (intended pun, I assume) and his daughter Julie on an expedition to discover and record the truths that Torrington and others had aspired to determine a century prior. Burke is a smart, intelligent character that at once surmises things are not quite as they seem. He quickly discovers that Julie Snow holds a cold dark secret, one that carries the reader (and Burke) into a world of magical and supernatural perplexities. The chapters alternate between the two worlds, the past providing answers to the mysteries in the present, which in turn eventually unravel the enigma of the Arctic wolf. Ultimately the past and present worlds skillfully intersect each other with a commonality that carries the reader toward an exciting, fascinating conclusion.

Hopkins is a storyteller, no doubt, and he tells this story quite well. His descriptions of the Arctic environment never made me forget

that as the reader was expected to feel the pain and discomforts he made his characters endure in this stark gray world, discomforts that had me clawing at my gut with uneasiness throughout.

My only disappointment was that I had to read an original manuscript, and did not have the pleasure of the artwork that will accompany the trade-paperback release of fine piece of fiction.

INTERCEPTION

Graham Watkins
Carroll & Graf \$24

Reviewed by Scott H. Urban

The on-line romance seems tailor-made to serve as the *cause celebre* for the end of the millennium, combining, as it does, cutting-edge technology (which hardly anyone truly understands) with animalistic, sexual urges (which everyone does). Already, shooting e-mail messages back and forth across the Internet has led to the break-up of marriages, teens running away from home, and, in more than one instance, murder.

Snatched up as a hot topic, news anchors and talk show hosts (even Ann Landers) see themselves as the arbiters of computer-spawned passion. In his latest novel, *INTERCEPTION*, North Carolina author Graham Watkins (*KALEIDOSCOPE EYES*, *THE FIRE WITHIN*) has combined love, industrial espionage, governmental corruption, and the latest advances in computer science to fashion a suspenseful narrative that serves as a worthy successor to his last cyber-thriller, *VIRUS* (Carroll & Graf, 1995).

Andrea Lawrence, a New York psychologist, begins to 'surf the net' as a means of understanding the marital traumas some of her patients are going through. In a particularly fascinating 'chat-room,' she 'meets' Californian Grant Kingsley. At first they 'speak' through aliases, but as their conversations grow warmer and more personal, they exchange e-mail addresses and strike up a friendship that quickly grows into something more, even though they have never actually seen or spoken to each other.

At first, Grant, a horse-handler at a dude ranch, is happy to communicate over the Internet. The tragic death of his first wife and second son have made face-to-face interactions at best uncomfortable for him. With the relative anonymity of chat-room conversations, he can maintain contact with others, minus any cloying attachments. But he finds it increasingly difficult to deny his attraction to the patient, understanding psychologist.

Inevitably they make the decision to meet in person. They determine that this is the only way they can tell whether or not what they seem to feel for each other is genuine. Andi will fly to Los Angeles to spend a weekend. Simple enough: either they hit it off and become lovers, or else their personalities clash and they go their separate ways.

But this is a Graham Watkins novel, and nothing can ever be that easy.

Grant and Andi's budding on-line romance is being monitored by a consciousness neither truly human nor machine. Everything they write is scrutinized, while every intimate detail of their backgrounds is being investigated. As their correspondence increases, their messages are being subtly changed without their knowledge. They are being set up, but the reasons why are uncertain. Corporate managers argue the feasibility of bringing Andi into their plan, while someone referred to only as Sue5 manipulates Grant and Andi's reality, both actual and virtual. But is Sue5 an ally or an antagonist?

It doesn't take long for Grant to discover that the woman he meets at LAX is not Andi Lawrence. An impostor, she's part of a much larger plan to throw him off-track. Meanwhile, Andi believes she's met the man of her dreams, someone who carefully steers her toward a trap, just as the slaughter-house employee guides his charge through the chute to the killing floor.

Tracing a shadowy organization known as IIC, Grant must somehow single-handedly penetrate a virtual desert fortress with all hands set against him. The clock is counting down to a nerve-wrenching conclusion, even though neither Grant nor Andi realize just how much is at stake if they lose. It would give too much away to tell you more, but let's just say that once you've completed this novel, I won't blame you if you want to drop that America On-Line subscription and never write another e-mail message in your life.

Watkins' plot unfolds smoothly and seamlessly. Since the author and his wife actually adopted the personas of Grant and Andi and wrote on-line messages back and forth to each other, the warmth and passion of the protagonists' burgeoning romance carry a verisimilitude missing from much suspense fiction. If there's any problem with the book, it's Grant's seemingly infallible attractiveness to women. Even though he's a recluse at the beginning of the book, by the novel's end we have either seen or heard about six or more women who have fallen head-over-heels in lust with the ranch-hand. Of course, this is coming from a reviewer who's lucky he didn't have to pay his wife money to walk down the aisle with him...

Having tackled the knotty problem of artificial intelligence in his last novel *VIRUS* (which takes on added significance following Kasparov's crushing defeat at the hands of supercomputer Deep Blue), Watkins picks up the concept of melding man and machine, perceiving dangerous implications for the future of all humanity. According to the author, it's not a matter of whether or not we'll ever achieve this technology—this level has already been attained. The question becomes, 'what price humanity?'

Watkins' *INTERCEPTION* is an adventurous, suspenseful entertainment which poses unsettling issues we will all have to grapple with—perhaps as soon as we read tomorrow's headlines.

ANIMATED OBJECTS

by Linda Addison;
Introduction by Barry Malzberg
\$7.95 + \$1.50 s&h paperback
\$14.95 + \$1.50 s&h cloth
SPACE & TIME BOOKS
138 West 70th Street, (4B)
New York, NY 10023-4468.

reviewed by Gerard Daniel Houarner

Pieces of a life in words. Observations and gut reactions to daily life picked up, examined, captured in poetry, stories, journal entries. Dreams and fantasies. Nightmares. These are the "animated objects" collected in this author's first book, and *Space and Time's* first book-length publication in many years. A surprising and startling debut for the writer, and an impressive come-back to the small press scene for the publisher.

Starting with the playfully surrealistic cover based on a childhood picture, animated *Objects* moves through a brief but characteristic Barry Malzberg introduction to four sections of thematically-tied poetry and fiction, capped off by a series of journal entries, to give the reader a journey through a personal vision of the fantastic. Some of the material is reprinted from the pages of magazines like *Tomorrow*, *Pirate Writings*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Epitaph* and others, but the majority of the work is new. The poems range in format from haiku to a solid, devastating block of stream-of-consciousness. Art contributions from five different artists, including the author's son who, along with a school-mate collaborator, transformed a picture of his mother as a child into the cover, provide visual accents to the text.

The first section of the book opens with the title poem, a declaration of identity that embraces both author and readers, and touches on both the light and the dark, the playful and painful that will be explored in the collection. The rest of the section offers a variety of material, touching on nature, writing, myth, and winding up with a pair of humorous SF short shorts.

The second section include some harder-edged selections like the poem "The

Plan," capturing the spirit of break-up, and the short story, "The Box," which explores the subject with power and surgical precision. The playfulness is not forsaken, with the poem "Bard Wellington," a summary of a writer's life, and "Little Red in the Hood," a short-short fairy tale with a decidedly urban twist. But a touch of sadness flavors the section, as in the poems dedicated a pair of deceased aunts, and the theme of letting-go of both the good and the bad is prominent.

The next group of poems center on the "Night Bird," a creature apparently tuned to passion and darkness. Additional pieces continue to take a predatory view of life, love and death, ending in another short-short examining the physical process of decay that leads to the inevitable turn of the life cycle. The final section contains one poem, ironically, "The Prelude," that seems to lift the reader out of the spiraling descent into darkness and death, promising love

and life. An epilog of selected journal entries, one a year since her graduation from high school, allows a more personal view of the author's life and provides an interesting context and emotional resonance to the material.

Animated Objects is a lively collection that ranges from the wry and amusing to raw, primal emotion. Its works sometimes tickle and at other times cut, taking the reader from joy to despair, reality to fantasy, and in the end affirming that the journey is, indeed, worthwhile.

Exile and Entrance

by Patrick Thomas

Padwolf Publishing Paperback—\$6.99

Review by Michael Laimo

A futuristic adventure of betrayal and newfound trust, *Exile and Entrance* introduces a dark science fiction environment, quickly blanketing it with fantastical elements, and adequately intermingles both genres to create a unique novel.

In the near future, the United States government grows corrupt after the forced relationship with an alien race from the planet Liberty. For reasons unknown to most of humankind, the government violently abducts hundreds of individuals for a so-called exchange program with an alien race, the 'Muridae'. When Rick Wagner discovers his baby sister has been selected as an indentured extradite, and that his parents have willingly surrendered her, he hides her and forces the government to send him instead.

Rick is warped away to the Planet Liberty, to a city called Tore. He befriends a small human girl named Susie en route to his exile, and in turn seeks out her safety upon arrival. Not an easy task, as the Muridae, human-sized rat people, have planned to auction off the six-year old as a slave. Rick fortunately makes the acquaintance of Burke and Kerr, two monstrous, multi-limbed aliens from alternate planets in the universe, who themselves were indentured as exiles from their home worlds many years past. Now well-regarded individuals, they take Rick under their wings (or furry and pebble-rocked appendages, in this case) and aid him in saving Susie from certain slavery.

From this point on Rick from Dirt (Earth) learns the ways of life in the city of Tore, and the true reason for his coming here—to train as a warrior for the multi-cultural Tore games, Wrestlemania-like events that can leave its participants crippled. Kerr and Burke lead Rick through extensive training, teaching him how to live life entirely as a warrior.

This doesn't happen, of course. Following his human desires, Rick seeks happiness in his relationship with Susie as memories of his sister quickly fade. He meets and falls in love with Sasha, a blue-haired amoropath (hooker), finds a way to defeat his foe Smed-lee, a Muridae with a penchant for inflicting pain, and finally seeks out other Earthlings.

The premise of the novel is intriguing, and

extremely well written, and Thomas leaves us with many unanswered questions, calling for a sequel. The biggest of these is: Why? Why has the government decided to shove off humans for such selfish Muridae reasons, only to presumably get nothing in return?

Approximately ten characters are introduced from their own points-of-view, some in first person: at first this can be confusing to the casual reader. No doubt Thomas had a flurry of inventive insight when creating all these personalities, but the reading would have been somewhat more fluid if limited to, say, half as many.

Patrick Thomas writes with a gripping narrative style filled with some truly imaginative ideas, as *Exile and Entrance* clearly shows. Perhaps this effort would have been more tightly focused with an extra pass at editing. There are pages dedicated to the explanation of weapons, tools, even bodily waste techniques. Lengthy descriptions complicate simple scenes, and although they detail the strengthening relationships between the various characters, they do not necessarily move the story along.

However, these are minor quibbles. Thomas' elegant prose and apparently knowledgeable insight of the Muridae world thoroughly entertain. *Exile and Entrance* is a captivating read for those willing to experience an extremely detailed sociological breakdown for a new, imaginative world. This is worthwhile reading, and not purely effortless escapism, though the reader will sure enter into a world of depth, action, and powerful adventure.

INSIDE THE WORKS

by Tom Piccirilli, Edward Lee

and Gerard Daniel Houarner

\$12.95 + \$1.50 s&h trade paperback

\$45 +\$3 s&h, hardcover

Necro Publications

PO Box 540298

Orlando FL 32854-0298

Reviewed by Linda Addison

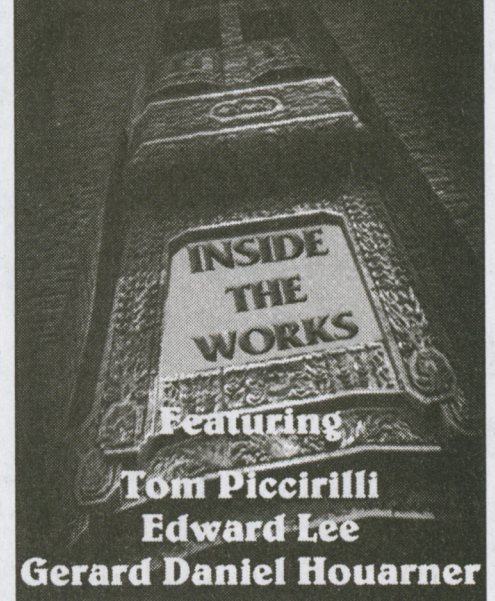
A three-fold collection, *Inside the Works* is about art, desire, consequences and the things done to satisfy these drives. The handlers' on this journey are three storytellers, each clearly strong and skillful on their own.

We begin with five tales by Tom Piccirilli; *Bedlam* has bizarre characters inside and outside a hospital that tortures for pleasure's sake rather than to heal, ending with a satisfying turn of revenge. *Mind of the Moon* takes us inside the conflict of not only a serial killer's mind, but of one who hunts only other murderers. *Passing Through* takes shape from the title, concerning townfolk tormented by the unexplained 'passing through' of object through their flesh, hold onto your lunch until the end. The title piece *Inside the Works*, and the fifth story, *Recovery*, involve The Works, a retreat in the dark heart of Manhattan containing day-care centers, poets corners, and rooms of

chain and leather, where madness and artistry entwine into one. Hunger for revenge and redemption guide us through The Works and its various artists, predators, and prey. "You can't stay here if you're not out on the edge," one character says. Go out on the edge with Piccirilli, he's a trustworthy, scintillating guide.

The second installment is Gerard Houarner's novella *Truth and Consequences in the Heart of Destruction*. It concerns the highly evocative, mystical, murderous Max (see Houarner's book *Painfreak*, Necro Publications, 1996; don't worry—you won't be lost if this is your first Max story). Max is not feeling well, and the Beast within him is not happy, either. Max's Asian-African twin lovers, Kueur and Alioune watch over him as it's discovered that indeed, Max is pregnant. He is surrounded by a variety of healers (oknirabata, Navajo shaman, etc.) and a gaggle of black-suited men, all of whom are

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uneasy about his fading power and the emergence of some new creation. In Houarner's richly textured universe many things can happen, but everything has a cost.

Edward Lee's novella, *The Pig*, opens with a pig, hookers, bestiality, and underground porno film-making in a broken down country house, financed by unsavory Mafiosa-types: Leonard is the captive producer, whose dream has taken a slow resolve into the worst nightmares, and pigs aren't the only animals involved. After a thorough tour of Leonard's particular hell the novella takes an large, unexpected turn with a visit by a neighbor from a nearby farm. Lee ends this rough and ready ride knee-deep in irony. Lee is as powerful with his humor as he is with his stomach-roiling grue.

These writers know what they're doing. Trust them. Go inside. ▲

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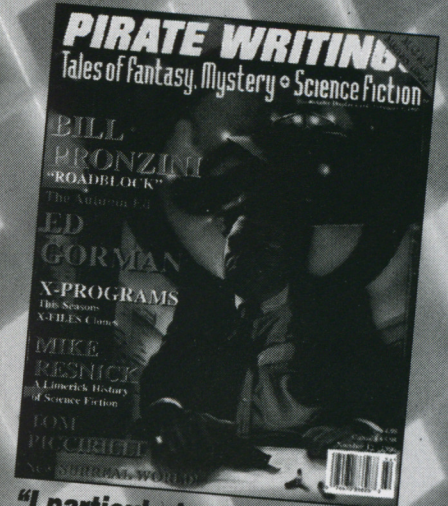
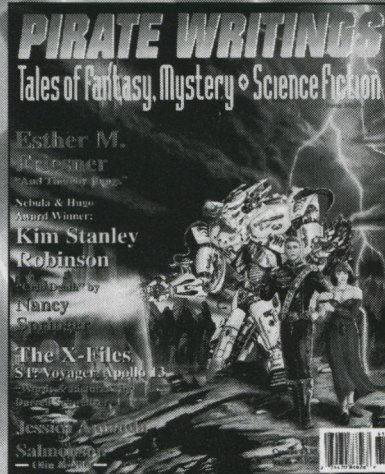
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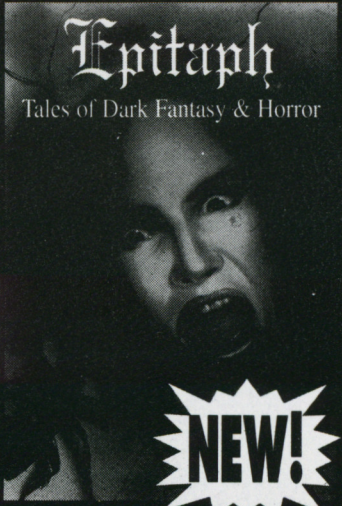
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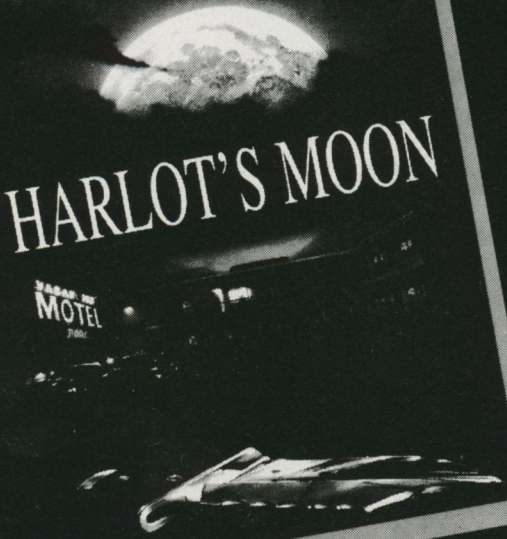


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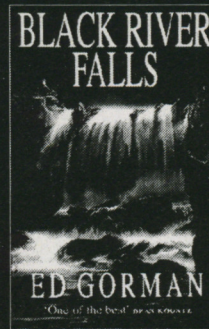
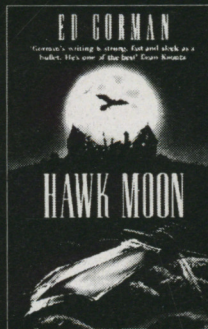
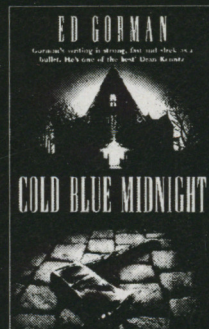
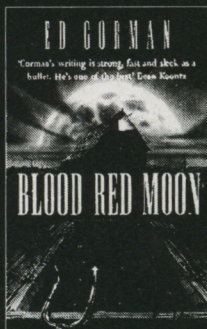


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