

POSTSCRIPTS

SUMMER 2005

NUMBER 4

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ZIMA BLUE
Alastair Reynolds

Plus others



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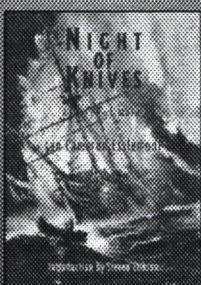
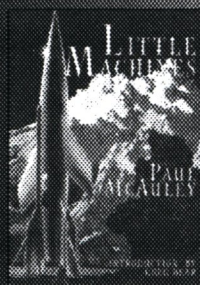
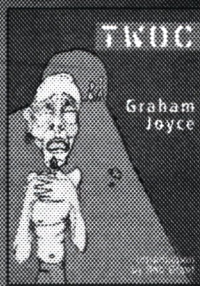
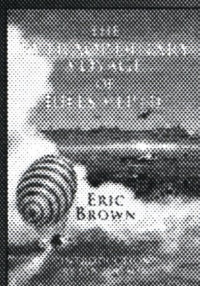
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Editorial

Nick Gevers

Imagine, O Reader, a busy street in the (for you) far-off city of Cape Town, a street extending all the way from the approaches to the Foreshore (grimy, the location of government buildings of peculiar dowdy ugliness) to a point where the slopes of Signal Hill begin to rise (and where, contiguous to upmarket suburbs, the stores decrease in feculence). The street is long; it is, in fact, called Long Street; and it is home not only to fast-food outlets, dubious pie shops, unsuccessful antique dealers, and best-ignored outposts of the red light district, but also to second-hand book dealers of every stripe, ranging from Clarke's (devoted to Africana, a trifle snooty) to Cranford's, a vast shambling structure claiming to be the largest bookshop in the southern hemisphere and operated by a small man with spectacles, an over-ingratiating manner, and a taste for bruising verbal exchanges with his rather unctuous staff. Long Street can be a rough, unpleasant place, but for me, as a teenager in search of science fiction, fantasy, and old histories (as exotic as possible), it was paradise. In Tommy's Modern Book Exchange, I found my SF, ancient dog-eared paperbacks, musty Ace Doubles even; in Cranford's, I found my histories of the Mamelukes and the English Civil War; and up and down the street (and elsewhere, in Rondebosch and Claremont and Mowbray) I found my genre magazines, ancient pulp titles long extinct and more recent publications. Like *Analog*.

Some collector had disposed of a complete run of late Campbell and early Bova *Analogs*, willy-nilly, here and there; and I acquired as many of them as my limited means allowed. And so it was that, at the same time as I read the books of Edward Gibbon, Lord Macaulay, Jack Vance, and Arthur C. Clarke, I read also great swathes of Poul Anderson, Anne McCaffrey, Harry Harrison, James H. Schmitz, Jerry Pournelle. Not precisely eclectic reading, but varied enough, and the influence on my imagination (and, unfortunately perhaps, on my writing style) was profound. Mix Hickling Prescott's account of Cortez retreating from Tenochtitlan with nuts-and-bolts space opera from Larry Niven and Christopher Anvil and the resultant fancies can be bizarre; but whatever the aesthetic calamities my English

composition teacher had to confront, I was at least hooked on fiction magazines for life. This much I owe John W. Campbell.

And now, quite a few years later, I find myself as deputy editor of *Postscripts*, a magazine very unlike Campbell's *Analog*—we're casting a much wider net, searching out the best new fantasy, horror, crime, and interstitial fiction as well as SF, and our allegiance isn't to manifest destiny among the stars—but, I hope, at least as readable and thought-provoking. Thanks to the very indulgent Peter Crowther, I solicit some of the stories for *Postscripts*, and do much of the basic and copy editing; this is a great pleasure and honour indeed (of course, Pete, canny Yorkshireman that he is, may simply be retaining me to take the blame for any less than perfect stories we ill-advisedly print. . . but no, I insult Pete and all Yorkshiremen, and *Postscripts* will never do any such thing.) *Postscripts* is, I think, fast developing its own identity, its own personality and place among the professional fiction venues of the Noughts; so what do we have on offer this issue, marking the close of our first year of publication?

Well, we have variety indeed: penetrating, bravura far-future SF from Alastair Reynolds, author of the superb *Inhibitor* novels; a deft, moving tribute by Eric Brown to that master of pastoral SF, Clifford D. Simak; slyly humorous sword-and-sorcery from Lawrence Person in the tradition of Ernest Bramah and Barry Hughart, located in a China that never was; a wholly contrasting, but masterfully surreal and atmospheric, take on the Chinese space programme from Paul Di Filippo and Barry Malzberg; Adam Roberts's mordant, satirical addition to the Arthurian canon; Jack Dann's extraordinary glimpse sideways, into the life of a James Dean spared from death in his 1955 car crash, friend to Beats and lover of Marilyn Monroe; and the first in Zoran Zivkovic's quartet of elegantly zany meditations on Death and Art. Had my teenage self been able to look forward to now, he would, I think, have been very pleased, and distinctly envious.



We expected the inspiration behind this wonderful tale to be as remarkable as the tale itself. . . so imagine our surprise when we discovered that 'Zima Blue' was inspired by a dip in the local swimming pool. Must be quite a pool! Alastair's most recent novel is the standalone SF thriller Century Rain. "I'm now working on a hard SF space opera that should appear before the end of 2005," he tells us, "provisionally entitled Chasing Janus, which is another standalone novel." While we're waiting, here's a tale about an artist with a difference.

Zima Blue

Alastair Reynolds

After the first week people started drifting away from the island. The viewing stands around the pool became emptier by the day. The big tourist ships hauled back toward interstellar space. Art fiends, commentators and critics packed their bags in Venice. Their disappointment hung over the lagoon like a miasma.

I was one of the few who stayed on Murjek, returning to the stands each day. I'd watch for hours, squinting against the trembling blue light reflected from the surface of the water. Face down, Zima's pale shape moved so languidly from one end of the pool to the other that it could have been mistaken for a floating corpse. As he swam I wondered how I was going to tell his story, and who was going to buy it. I tried to remember the name of my first newspaper, back on Mars. They wouldn't pay as much as some of the bigger titles, but some part of me liked the idea of going back to the old place. It had been a long time. . . I queried the AM, wanting it to jog my memory

about the name of the paper. There'd been so many since. . . hundreds, by my reckoning. But nothing came. It took me another yawning moment to remember that I'd dismissed the AM the day before.

"Carrie, you're on your own," I said. "Start getting used to it."

In the pool, the swimming figure ended a length and began to swim back toward me.

Two weeks earlier I'd been sitting in the Piazza san Marco at noon, watching white figurines glide against the white marble of the clocktower. The sky over Venice was jammed with ships, parked hull-to-hull. Their bellies were quilted in vast glowing panels, tuned to match the real sky. The view reminded me of the work of a pre-Expansion artist who had specialised in eye-wrenching tricks of perspective and composition: endless waterfalls, interlocking lizards. I formed a mental image and queried the fluttering presence of the AM, but it couldn't retrieve the name.

I finished my coffee and steeled myself for the bill.

I'd come to this white marble version of Venice to witness the unveiling of Zima's final work of art. I'd had an interest in the artist for years, and I'd hoped I might be able to arrange an interview. Unfortunately several thousand other members of the in-crowd had come up with exactly the same idea. Not that it mattered what kind of competition I had anyway: Zima wasn't talking.

The waiter placed a folded piece of card on my table.

All we'd been told was to make our way to Murjek, a waterlogged world most of us had never heard of before. Murjek's only claim to fame was that it hosted the one hundred and seventy first known duplicate of Venice, and one of only three Venices rendered entirely in white marble. Zima had chosen Murjek to host his final work of art, and to be the place where he would make his retirement from public life.

With a heavy heart I lifted the bill to inspect the damage. Instead of the expected bill there was a small blue card, printed in fine gold italic lettering. The shade of blue was that precise, powdery, aquamarine that Zima had made his own. The card was addressed to me, Carrie Clay, and it said that Zima wanted to talk to me about the unveiling. If I was interested, I should report to the Rialto Bridge in exactly two hours.

If I was interested.

The note stipulated that no record-

ing materials were to be brought, not even a pen and paper. As an afterthought, the card mentioned that the bill had been taken care of. I almost had the nerve to order another coffee and put it on the same tab. Almost, but not quite.

Zima's servant was there when I arrived early at the bridge. Intricate neon mechanisms pulsed behind the flexing glass of the robot's mannequin body. It bowed at the waist and spoke very softly. "Miss Clay? Since you're here, we might as well depart."

The robot escorted me to a flight of stairs that led to the waterside. My AM followed us, fluttering at my shoulder. A conveyor hovered in waiting, floating a metre above the water. The robot helped me into the rear compartment. The AM was about to follow me inside when the robot raised a warning hand.

"You'll have to leave that behind, I'm afraid: no recording materials, remember?"

I looked at the metallic green hummingbird, trying to remember the last time I had been out of its ever-watchful presence.

"Leave it behind?"

"It'll be quite safe here, and you can collect it again when you return after nightfall."

"If I say no?"

"Then I'm afraid there'll be no meeting with Zima."

I sensed that the robot wasn't going to hang around all afternoon waiting

for my answer. The thought of being away from the AM made my blood run cold. But I wanted that interview so badly I was prepared to consider anything.

I told the AM to stay here until I returned.

The obedient machine reversed away from me in a flash of metallic green. It was like watching a part of myself drift away. The glass hull wrapped itself around me and I felt a surge of un-nulled acceleration.

Venice tilted below us, then streaked away to the horizon.

I formed a test query, asking the AM to name the planet where I'd celebrated my seven hundredth birthday. Nothing came: I was out of query range, with only my own age-saturated memory to rely on.

I leaned forward. "Are you authorised to tell me what this is about?"

"I'm afraid he didn't tell me," the robot said, making a face appear in the back of his head. "But if at any moment you feel uncomfortable, we can return to Venice."

"I'm fine for now. Who else got the blue card treatment?"

"Only you, to the best of my knowledge."

"And if I'd declined? Were you supposed to ask someone else?"

"No," the robot said. "But let's face it, Miss Clay. You weren't very likely to turn him down."

As we flew on, the conveyor's shock wave gouged a foaming channel in the sea behind it. I thought of a brush

drawn through wet paint on marble, exposing the white surface beneath. I took out Zima's invitation and held it against the horizon ahead of us, trying to decide whether the blue was a closer match to the sky or the sea. Against these two possibilities the card seemed to flicker indeterminately.

Zima Blue. It was an exact thing, specified scientifically in terms of angstroms and intensities. If you were an artist, you could have a batch of it mixed up according to that specification. But no one ever used Zima Blue unless they were making a calculated statement about Zima himself.

Zima was already unique by the time he emerged into the public eye. He had undergone radical procedures to enable him to tolerate extreme environments without the burden of a protective suit. Zima had the appearance of a well-built man wearing a tight body stocking, until you were close and you realised that this was actually his skin. Covering his entire form, it was a synthetic material that could be tuned to different colours and textures depending on his mood and surroundings. It could approximate clothing if the social circumstances demanded it. The skin could contain pressure when he wished to experience vacuum, and stiffen to protect him against the crush of a gas giant planet. Despite these refinements the skin conveyed a full range of sensory impressions to his mind. He had no need to breathe, since his entire cardio-vascular system had been replaced by closed-cycle life-

support mechanisms. He had no need to eat or drink; no need to dispose of bodily waste. Tiny repair machines swarmed through his body, allowing him to tolerate radiation doses that would have killed an ordinary man in minutes.

With his body thus armoured against environmental extremes, Zima was free to seek inspiration where he wanted. He could drift free in space, staring into the face of a star, or wander the searing canyons of a planet where metals ran like lava. His eyes had been replaced by cameras sensitive to a huge swathe of the electromagnetic spectrum, wired into his brain via complex processing modules. A synaesthetic bridge allowed him to hear visual data as a kind of music; to see sounds as a symphony of startling colours. His skin functioned as a kind of antenna, giving him sensitivity to electrical field changes. When that wasn't sufficient, he could tap into the data feeds of any number of accompanying machines.

Given all this, Zima's art couldn't help but be original and attention-grabbing. His landscapes and starfields had a heightened, ecstatic quality about them, awash in luminous, jarring colours and eye-wrenching tricks of perspective. Painted in traditional materials but on a huge scale, they quickly attracted a core of serious buyers. Some found their way into private collections, but Zima murals also started popping up in public spaces all over the Galaxy. Tens of metres across, the murals were nonetheless detailed

down to the limits of vision. Most had been painted in one session. Zima had no need for sleep, so he worked uninterrupted until a piece was complete.

The murals were undeniably impressive. From a standpoint of composition and technique they were unquestionably brilliant. But there was also something bleak and chilling about them. They were landscapes without a human presence, save for the implied viewpoint of the artist himself.

Put it this way: they were nice to look at, but I wouldn't have hung one in my home.

Not everyone agreed, obviously, or else Zima wouldn't have sold as many works as he had. But I couldn't help wondering how many people were buying the pictures because of what they knew about the artist, rather than because of any intrinsic merit in the works themselves.

That was how things stood when I first paid attention to Zima. I filed him away as interesting but kitschy: maybe worth a story if something else happened to either him or his art.

Something did, but it took a while for anyone—including me—to notice.

One day—after a longer than usual gestation period—Zima unveiled a mural that had something different about it. It was a picture of a swirling, star-pocked nebula, from the vantage point of an airless rock. Perched on the rim of a crater in the middle distance, blocking off part of the nebula, was a tiny blue square. At first glance it looked as if the canvas had been washed

blue and Zima had simply left a small area unpainted. There was no solidity to the square; no detail or suggestion of how it related to the landscape or the backdrop. It cast no shadow and had no tonal influence on the surrounding colours. But the square was deliberate: close examination showed that it had indeed been overpainted over the rocky lip of the crater. It meant something.

The square was just the beginning. Thereafter, every mural that Zima released to the outside world contained a similar geometric shape: a square, triangle, oblong or some similar form embedded somewhere in the composition. It was a long time before anyone noticed that the shade of blue was the same from picture to picture.

It was Zima Blue: the same shade of blue as on the gold-lettered card.

Over the next decade or so, the abstract shapes became more dominant, squeezing out the other elements of each composition. The cosmic vistas ended up as narrow borders, framing blank circles, triangles, rectangles. Where his earlier work had been characterised by exuberant brushwork and thick layers of paint, the blue forms were rendered with mirror-smoothness.

Intimidated by the intrusion of the abstract blue forms, casual buyers turned away from Zima. Before very long Zima unveiled the first of his entirely blue murals. Large enough to cover the side of a thousand storey building, the mural was considered by

many to be as far as Zima could take things.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

I felt the conveyor slowing as we neared a small island, the only feature in any direction.

"You're the first to see this," the robot said. "There's a distortion screen blocking the view from space."

The island was about a kilometre across: low and turtle-shaped, ringed by a narrow collar of pale sand. Near the middle it rose to a shallow plateau, on which vegetation had been cleared in a roughly rectangular area. I made out a small panel of reflective blue set flat against the ground, surrounded by what appeared to be a set of tiered viewing stands.

The conveyor shed altitude and speed, bobbing down until it stopped just outside the area enclosed by the viewing stands. It came to rest next to a low white pebble-dash chalet I hadn't noticed during our approach.

The robot stepped out and helped me from the conveyor.

"Zima will be here in a moment," it said, before returning to the conveyor and vanishing back into the sky.

Suddenly I felt very alone and very vulnerable. A breeze came in from the sea, blowing sand into my eyes. The sun was creeping down toward the horizon and soon it would be getting chilly. Just when I was beginning to feel the itch of panic, a man emerged from

the chalet, rubbing his hands briskly. He walked toward me, following a path of paved stones.

“Glad you could make it, Carrie.”

It was Zima, of course, and in a flash I felt foolish for doubting that he would show his face.

“Hi,” I said lamely.

Zima offered his hand. I shook it, feeling the slightly plastic texture of his artificial skin. Today it was a dull pewter-grey.

“Let’s go and sit on the balcony. It’s nice to watch the sunset, isn’t it?”

“Nice,” I agreed.

He turned his back to me and set off in the direction of the chalet. As he walked, his muscles flexed and bulged beneath the pewter flesh. There were scale-like glints in the skin on his back, as if it had been set with a mosaic of reflective chips. He was beautiful like a statue, muscular like a panther. He was a handsome man, even after all his transformations, but I had never heard of him taking a lover, or having any kind of a private life at all. His art was everything.

I followed him, feeling awkward and tongue-tied. Zima led me into the chalet, through an old-fashioned kitchen and an old-fashioned lounge, full of thousand-year-old furniture and ornaments.

“How was the flight?”

“Fine.”

He stopped suddenly and turned to face me. “I forgot to check . . . did the robot insist that you leave behind your *Aide Memoire*?”

“Yes.”

“Good. It was you I wanted to talk to, Carrie, not some surrogate recording device.”

“Me?”

The pewter mask of his face formed a quizzical expression. “Do you do multi-syllables, or are you still working up to that?”

“Er . . .”

“Relax,” he said. “I’m not here to test you, or humiliate you, or anything like that. This isn’t a trap, and you’re not in any danger. You’ll be back in Venice by midnight.”

“I’m OK,” I managed. “Just a bit starstruck.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be. I’m hardly the first celebrity you’ve met, am I?”

“Well, no, but . . .”

“People find me intimidating,” he said. “They get over it eventually, and then wonder what all the fuss was about.”

“Why me?”

“Because you kept asking nicely,” Zima said.

“Be serious.”

“All right. There’s a bit more to it than that, although you *did* ask nicely. I’ve enjoyed much of your work over the years. People have often trusted you to set the record straight: especially near the ends of their lives.”

“You talked about retiring, not dying.”

“Either way, it would still be a withdrawal from public life. Your work has always seemed truthful to me, Carrie. I’m not aware of anyone claim-

ing misrepresentation through your writing.”

“It happens now and then,” I said. “That’s why I always make sure there’s an AM on hand so no one can dispute what was said.”

“That won’t matter with my story,” Zima said.

I looked at him shrewdly. “There’s something else, isn’t there? Some other reason you pulled my name out of the hat.”

“I’d like to help you,” he said.

When most people speak about his Blue Period they mean the era of the truly huge murals. By huge I do mean *huge*. Soon they had become large enough to dwarf buildings and civic spaces; large enough to be visible from orbit. Across the Galaxy twenty-kilometre-high sheets of blue towered over private islands or rose from storm-wracked seas. Expense was never a problem, since Zima had many rival sponsors who competed to host his latest and biggest creation. The panels kept on growing, until they required complex, Sloth-tech machinery to hold them aloft against gravity and weather. They pierced the tops of planetary atmospheres, jutting into space. They glowed with their own soft light. They curved around in arcs and fans, so that the viewer’s entire visual field was saturated with blue.

By now Zima was hugely famous, even to people who had no particular interest in art. He was the weird cyborg

celebrity who made huge blue structures; the man who never gave interviews or hinted at the private significance of his art.

But that was a hundred years ago. Zima wasn’t even remotely done.

Eventually the structures became too unwieldy to be hosted on planets. Blithely Zima moved into interplanetary space, forging vast free-floating sheets of blue ten thousand kilometres across. Now he worked not with brushes and paint, but with fleets of mining robots, tearing apart asteroids to make the raw material for his creations. Now it was entire stellar economies that competed with each other to host Zima’s work.

That was about the time that I renewed my interest in Zima. I attended one of his “moonwrappings”: the enclosure of an entire celestial body in a lidded blue container, like a hat going into a box. Two months later he stained the entire equatorial belt of a gas giant blue, and I had a ringside seat for that as well. Six months later he altered the surface chemistry of a sun-grazing comet so that it daubed a Zima Blue tail across an entire solar system. But I was no closer to a story. I kept asking for an interview and kept being turned down. All I knew was that there had to be more to Zima’s obsession with blue than a mere artistic whim. Without an understanding of that obsession, there was no story: just anecdote.

I didn’t do anecdote.

So I waited, and waited. And then—like millions of others—I heard about

Zima's final work of art, and made my way to the fake Venice on Murjek. I wasn't expecting an interview, or any new insights. I just had to be there.

We stepped through sliding glass doors out onto the balcony. Two simple white chairs sat either side of a white table. The table was set with drinks and a bowl of fruit. Beyond the unfenced balcony, arid land sloped steeply away, offering an uninterrupted view of the sea. The water was calm and inviting, with the lowering sun reflected like a silver coin.

Zima indicated that I should take one of the seats. His hand dithered over two bottles of wine.

"Red or white, Carrie?"

I opened my mouth as if to answer him, but nothing came. Normally, in that instant between the question and the response, the AM would have silently directed my choice to one of the two options. Not having the AM's prompt felt like a mental stall in my thoughts.

"Red, I think," Zima said. "Unless you have strong objections."

"It's not that I can't decide these things for myself," I said.

Zima poured me a glass of red, then held it up to the sky to inspect its clarity. "Of course not," he said.

"It's just that this is a little strange for me."

"It shouldn't be strange," he said. "This is the way you lived your life for hundreds of years."

"The natural way, you mean?"

Zima poured himself a glass of the red wine, but instead of drinking it he merely sniffed the bouquet. "Yes."

"But there isn't anything natural about being alive a thousand years after I was born," I said. "My organic memory reached saturation point about seven hundred years ago. My head's like a house with too much furniture. Move something in, you have to move something out."

"Let's go back to the wine for a moment," Zima said. "Normally, you'd have relied on the advice of the AM, wouldn't you?"

I shrugged. "Yes."

"Would the AM always suggest one of the two possibilities? Always red wine, or always white wine, for instance?"

"It's not that simplistic," I said. "If I had a strong preference for one over the other, then, yes, the AM would always recommend one wine over the other. But I don't. I like red wine sometimes and white wine other times. Sometimes I don't want any kind of wine." I hoped my frustration wasn't obvious. But after the elaborate charade with the blue card, the robot and the conveyor, the last thing I wanted to be discussing with Zima was my own imperfect recall.

"Then it's random?" he asked. "The AM would have been just as likely to say red as white?"

"No, it's not like that either. The AM's been following me around for hundreds of years. It's seen me drink

wine a few hundred thousand times, under a few hundred thousand different circumstances. It knows, with a high degree of reliability, what my best choice of wine would be given any set of parameters.”

“And you follow that advice unquestioningly?”

I sipped at the red. “Of course. Wouldn’t it be a little childish to go against it just to make a point about free will? After all, I’m more likely to be satisfied with the choice it suggests.”

“But unless you ignore that suggestion now and then, won’t your whole life become a set of predictable responses?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But is that so very bad? If I’m happy, what do I care?”

“I’m not criticising you,” Zima said. He smiled and leaned back in his seat, defusing some of the tension caused by his line of questioning. “Not many people have an AM these days, do they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said.

“Less than one percent of the entire Galactic population.” Zima sniffed his wine and looked through the glass at the sky. “Almost everyone else out there has accepted the inevitable.”

“It takes machines to manage a thousand years of memory. So what?”

“But a different order of machine,” Zima said. “Neural implants; fully integrated into the participant’s sense of self. Indistinguishable from biological memory. You wouldn’t need to query the AM about your choice of wine; you wouldn’t need to wait for

that confirmatory whisper. You’d just know it.”

“Where’s the difference? I allow my experiences to be recorded by a machine that accompanies me everywhere I go. The machine misses nothing, and it’s so efficient at anticipating my queries that I barely have to ask it anything.”

“The machine is vulnerable.”

“It’s backed up at regular intervals. And it’s no more vulnerable than a cluster of implants inside my head. Sorry, but that just isn’t a reasonable objection.”

“You’re right, of course. But there’s a deeper argument against the AM. It’s too perfect. It doesn’t know how to distort or forget.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“Not exactly. When you recall something—this conversation, perhaps, a hundred years from now—there will be things about it that you misremember. Yet those misremembered details will themselves become part of your memory, gaining solidity and texture with each instance of recall. A thousand years from now, your memory of this conversation might bear little resemblance to reality. Yet you’d swear your recollection was accurate.”

“But if the AM had accompanied me, I’d have a flawless record of how things really were.”

“You would,” Zima said. “But that isn’t living memory. It’s photography; a mechanical recording process. It freezes out the imagination; leaves no

scope for details to be selectively misremembered.” He paused long enough to top up my glass. “Imagine that on nearly every occasion when you had cause to sit outside on an afternoon like this you had chosen red wine over white, and generally had no reason to regret that choice. But on one occasion, for one reason or another, you were persuaded to choose white—against the judgement of the AM—and it was wonderful. Everything came together magically: the company, the conversation, the late afternoon ambience, the splendid view, the euphoric rush of being slightly drunk. A perfect afternoon turned into a perfect evening.”

“It might not have had anything to do with my choice of wine,” I said.

“No,” Zima agreed. “And the AM certainly wouldn’t attach any significance to that one happy combination of circumstances. A single deviation wouldn’t affect its predictive model to any significant degree. It would still say ‘red wine’ the next time you asked.”

I felt an uncomfortable tingle of understanding. “But human memory wouldn’t work that way.”

“No. It would latch onto that one exception and attach undue significance to it. It would amplify the attractive parts of the memory of that afternoon and suppress the less pleasant parts: the fly that kept buzzing in your face, your anxiety about catching the boat home, and the birthday present you knew you had to buy in the morning. All you’d remember was that

golden glow of well-being. The next time, you might well choose white, and the time after. An entire pattern of behaviour would have been altered by one instance of deviation. The AM would never tolerate that. You’d have to go against its advice many, many times before it grudgingly updated its model and started suggesting white rather than red.”

“All right,” I said, still wishing we could talk about Zima rather than me. “But what practical difference does it make whether the artificial memory is inside my head or outside?”

“All the difference in the world,” Zima said. “The memories stored in the AM are fixed for eternity. You can query it as often as you like, but it will never enhance or omit a single detail. But the implants work differently. They’re designed to integrate seamlessly with biological memory, to the point where the recipient can’t tell the difference. For that very reason they’re necessarily plastic, malleable, subject to error and distortion.”

“Fallible,” I said.

“But without fallibility there is no art. And without art there is no truth.”

“Fallibility leads to truth? That’s a good one.”

“I mean truth in the higher, metaphoric sense. That golden afternoon? That was the truth. Remembering the fly wouldn’t have added to it in any material sense. It would have detracted from it.”

“There was no afternoon, there was no fly,” I said. Finally, my patience

had reached breaking point. “Look, I’m grateful to have been invited here. But I thought there might be a little more to this than a lecture about the way I choose to manage my own memories.”

“Actually,” Zima said, “there was a point to this after all. And it is about me, but it’s also about you.” He put down the glass. “Shall we take a little walk? I’d like to show you the swimming pool.”

“The sun hasn’t gone down yet,” I said.

Zima smiled. “There’ll always be another one.”

He took me on a different route through the house, leaving by a different door than the one we’d come in by. A meandering path climbed gradually between white stone walls, bathed now in gold from the lowering sun. Presently we reached the flat plateau I’d seen on my approach in the conveyor. The things I’d thought were viewing stands were exactly that: terraced structures about thirty metres high, with staircases at the back leading to the different levels. Zima led me into the darkening shadow under the nearest stand, then through a private door that led into the enclosed area. The blue panel I’d seen during the approach turned out to be a modest rectangular swimming pool, drained of water.

Zima led me to the edge.

“A swimming pool,” I said. “You weren’t kidding. Is this what the stands are all about?”

“This is where it will happen,” Zima said. “The unveiling of my final work of art, and my retirement from public life.”

The pool wasn’t quite finished. In the far corner, a small yellow robot glued ceramic tiles into place. The part near us was fully tiled, but I couldn’t help noticing that the tiles were chipped and cracked in places. The afternoon light made it hard to be sure—we were in deep shadow now—but their colour looked to be very close to Zima Blue.

“After painting entire planets, isn’t this a bit of a let down?” I asked.

“Not for me,” Zima said. “For me this is where the quest ends. This is what it was all leading up to.”

“A shabby looking swimming pool?”

“It’s not just any old swimming pool,” he said.

He walked me around the island, as the sun slipped under the sea and the colours turned ashen.

“The old murals came from the heart,” Zima said. “I painted on a huge scale because that was what the subject matter seemed to demand.”

“It was good work,” I said.

“It was hack work. Huge, loud, demanding, popular, but ultimately soulless. Just because it came from the heart didn’t make it good.”

I said nothing. That was the way I’d always felt about his work as well: that it was as vast and inhuman as its inspiration, and only Zima’s cyborg modi-

fications lent his art any kind of uniqueness. It was like praising a painting because it had been done by someone holding a brush between their teeth.

“My work said nothing about the cosmos that the cosmos wasn’t already capable of saying for itself. More importantly, it said nothing about me. So what if I walked in vacuum, or swam in seas of liquid nitrogen? So what if I could see ultraviolet photons, or taste electrical fields? The modifications I inflicted upon myself were gruesome and extreme. But they gave me nothing that a good telepresence drone couldn’t offer any artist.”

“I think you’re being a little harsh on yourself,” I said.

“Not at all. I can say this now because I know that I did eventually create something worthwhile. But when it happened it was completely unplanned.”

“You mean the blue stuff?”

“The blue stuff,” he said, nodding. “It began by accident: a misapplication of colour on a nearly-finished canvas. A smudge of pale, aquamarine blue against near-black. The effect was electric. It was as if I had achieved a short-circuit to some intense, primal memory, a realm of experience where that colour was the most important thing in my world.”

“What was that memory?”

“I didn’t know. All I knew was the way that colour spoke to me, as if I’d been waiting my whole life to find it, to set it free.” He thought for a moment.

“There’s always been something about blue. A thousand years ago Yves Klein said it was the essence of colour itself: the colour that stood for all other colours. A man once spent his entire life searching for a particular shade of blue that he remembered encountering in childhood. He began to despair of ever finding it, thinking he must have imagined that precise shade, that it could not possibly exist in nature. Then one day he chanced upon it. It was the colour of a beetle in a museum of natural history. He wept for joy.”

“What is Zima Blue?” I asked. “Is it the colour of a beetle?”

“No,” he said. “It’s not a beetle. But I had to know the answer, no matter where it took me. I had to know why that colour meant so much to me, and why it was taking over my art.”

“You allowed it to take over,” I said.

“I had no choice. As the blue became more intense, more dominant, I felt I was closer to an answer. I felt that if only I could immerse myself in that colour, then I would know everything I desired to know. I would understand myself as an artist.”

“And? Did you?”

“I understood myself,” Zima said. “But it wasn’t what I expected.”

“What did you learn?”

Zima was a long time answering me. We walked on slowly, me lagging slightly behind his prowling muscular form. It was getting cooler now and I began to wish I’d had the foresight to bring a coat. I thought of asking Zima if he could lend me one, but I was con-

cerned not to derail his thoughts from wherever they were headed. Keeping my mouth shut had always been the toughest part of the job.

“We talked about the fallibility of memory,” he said.

“Yes.”

“My own memory was incomplete. Since the implants were installed I remembered everything, but that only accounted for the last three hundred years of my life. I knew myself to be much older, but of my life before the implants I recalled only fragments; shattered pieces that I did not quite know how to reassemble.” He slowed and turned back to me, the dulling orange light on the horizon catching the side of his face. “I knew I had to dig back into that past, if I was to ever understand the significance of Zima Blue.”

“How far back did you get?”

“It was like archaeology,” he said. “I followed the trail of my memories back to the earliest reliable event, which occurred shortly after the installation of the implants. This took me to Kharkov 8, a world in the Garlin Bight, about nineteen thousand light years from here. All I remembered was the name of a man I had known there, called Cobargo.”

Cobargo meant nothing to me, but even without the AM I knew something of the Garlin Bight. It was a region of the Galaxy encompassing six hundred habitable systems, squeezed between three major economic powers. In the Garlin Bight nor-

mal interstellar law did not apply. It was fugitive territory.

“Kharkov 8 specialised in a certain kind of product,” Zima said. “The entire planet was geared up to provide medical services of a kind unavailable elsewhere. Illicit cybernetic modifications, that kind of thing.”

“Is that where . . .” I left the sentence unfinished.

“That is where I became what I am,” Zima said. “Of course, I made further changes to myself after my time on Kharkov 8—improving my tolerance to extreme environments, improving my sensory capabilities—but the essence of what I am was laid down under the knife, in Cobargo’s clinic.”

“So before you arrived on Kharkov 8 you were a normal man?” I asked.

“This is where it gets difficult,” Zima said, picking his way carefully along the trail. “Upon my return I naturally tried to locate Cobargo. With his help, I assumed I would be able to make sense of the memory fragments I carried in my head. But Cobargo was gone; vanished elsewhere into the Bight. The clinic remained, but now his grandson was running it.”

“I bet he wasn’t keen on talking.”

“No: he took some persuading. Thankfully, I had means. A little bribery, a little coercion.” He smiled slightly at that. “Eventually he agreed to open the clinic records and examine his grandfather’s log of my visit.”

We turned a corner. The sea and the sky were now the same inseparable grey, with no trace of blue remaining.

“What happened?”

“The records say that I was never a man,” Zima said. He paused a while before continuing, leaving no doubt as to what he had said. “Zima never existed before my arrival in the clinic.”

What I wouldn’t have done for a recording drone, or—failing that—a plain old notebook and pen. I frowned, as if that might make my memory work just that little bit harder.

“Then who were you?”

“A machine,” he said. “A complex robot; an autonomous artificial intelligence. I was already centuries old when I arrived on Kharkov 8, with full legal independence.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re a man with machine parts, not a machine.”

“The clinic records were very clear. I had arrived as a robot. An androform robot, certainly—but an obvious machine nonetheless. I was dismantled and my core cognitive functions were integrated into a vat-grown biological host body.” With one finger he tapped the pewter side of his skull. “There’s a lot of organic material in here, and a lot of cybernetic machinery. It’s difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends. Even harder to tell which is the master, and which is the slave.”

I looked at the figure standing next to me, trying to make the mental leap needed to view him as a machine—albeit a machine with soft, cellular components—rather than a man. I couldn’t; not yet.

I stalled. “The clinic could have lied to you.”

“I don’t think so. They would have been far happier had I not known.”

“All right,” I said. “Just for the sake of argument . . .”

“Those were the facts. They were easily verified. I examined the customs records for Kharkov 8 and found that an *autonomous robot entity* had entered the planet’s airspace a few months before the medical procedure.”

“Not necessarily you.”

“No other robot entity had come near the world for decades. It had to be me. More than that, the records also showed the robot’s port of origin.”

“Which was?”

“A world beyond the Bight. Lintan 3, in the Muara Archipelago.”

The AM’s absence was like a missing tooth. “I don’t know if I know it.”

“You probably don’t. It’s no kind of world you’d ever visit by choice. The scheduled lightbreakers don’t go there. My only purpose in visiting the place seemed to me . . .”

“You went there?”

“Twice. Once before the procedure on Kharkov 8, and again recently, to establish where I’d been before Lintan 3. The evidence trail was beginning to get muddy, to say the least . . . but I asked the right kinds of questions, poked at the right kinds of database, and finally found out where I’d come from. But that still wasn’t the final answer. There were many worlds, and the chain was fainter with each that I visited. But I had persistence on my side.”

“And money.”

“And money,” Zima said, acknowledging my remark with a polite little nod. “That helped incalculably.”

“So what did you find, in the end?”

“I followed the trail back to the beginning. On Kharkov 8 I was a quick-thinking machine with human-level intelligence. But I hadn’t always been that clever, that complex. I’d been augmented in steps, as time and circumstances allowed.”

“By yourself?”

“Eventually, yes. That was when I had autonomy; legal independence. But I had to reach a certain level of intelligence before I was allowed that freedom. Before that, I was a simpler machine . . . like an heirloom or a pet. I was passed from one owner to the next, between generations. They added things to me. They made me cleverer.”

“How did you begin?”

“As a project,” he said.

Zima led me back to the swimming pool. Equatorial night had arrived quickly, and the pool was bathed now in artificial light from the many floods arrayed above the viewing stands. Since we had last seen the pool the robot had finished gluing the last of the tiles in place.

“It’s ready now,” Zima said. “Tomorrow it will be sealed, and the day after it will be flooded with water. I’ll cycle the water until it attains the necessary clarity.”

“And then?”

“I prepare myself for my performance.”

On the way to the swimming pool he had told me as much as he knew about his origin. Zima had begun his existence on Earth, before I was even born. He had been assembled by a hobbyist, a talented young man with an interest in practical robotics. In those days, the man had been one of many groups and individuals groping toward the hard problem of artificial intelligence.

Perception, navigation and autonomous problem-solving were the three things that most interested the young man. He had created many robots, tinkering them together from kits, broken toys and spare parts. Their minds—if they could be dignified with such a term—were cobbled from the innards of junked computers, with their simple programmes bulging at the limits of memory and processor speed.

The young man filled his house with these simple machines, designing each for a particular task. One robot was a sticky-limbed spider that climbed around the walls of his house, dusting the frames of pictures. Another lay in wait for flies and cockroaches. It caught and digested them, using the energy from the chemical breakdown of their biomass to drive itself to another place in the house. Another robot busied itself by repainting the walls of the house over and over, so that the colours matched the changing of the seasons.

Another robot lived in his swimming pool.

It toiled endlessly up and down and along the ceramic sides of the pool, scrubbing them clean. The young man could have bought a cheap swimming pool cleaner from a mail-order company, but it amused him to design the robot from scratch, according to his own eccentric design principles. He gave the robot a full-colour vision system and a brain large enough to process the visual data into a model of its surroundings. He allowed the robot to make its own decisions about the best strategy for cleaning the pool. He allowed it to choose when it cleaned and when it surfaced to recharge its batteries via the solar panels grouped on its back. He imbued it with a primitive notion of reward.

The little pool cleaner taught the young man a great deal about the fundamentals of robotics design. Those lessons were incorporated into the other household robots, until one of them—a simple household cleaner—became sufficiently robust and autonomous that the young man began to offer it as a kit, via mail-order. The kit sold well, and a year later the young man offered it as a pre-assembled domestic robot. The robot was a runaway success, and the young man's firm soon became the market leader in domestic robots.

Within ten years, the world swarmed with his bright, eager machines.

He never forgot the little pool cleaner. Time and again he used it as a test-bed for new hardware, new software. By stages it became the cleverest

of all his creations, and the only one that he refused to strip down and cannibalise.

When he died, the cleaner passed to his daughter. She continued the family tradition, adding cleverness to the little machine. When she died, she passed it to the young man's grandson, who happened to live on Mars.

"This is the original pool," Zima said. "If you hadn't already guessed."

"After all this time?" I asked.

"It's very old. But ceramics endure. The hardest part was finding it in the first place. I had to dig through two metres of topsoil. It was in a place they used to call Silicon Valley."

"These tiles are coloured Zima Blue," I said.

"Zima Blue is the colour of the tiles," he correctly gently. "It just happened to be the shade that the young man used for his swimming pool tiles."

"Then some part of you remembered."

"This was where I began. A crude little machine with barely enough intelligence to steer itself around a swimming pool. But it was my world. It was all I knew; all I needed to know."

"And now?" I asked, already fearing the answer.

"Now I'm going home."

■ was there when he did it. By then the stands were full of people who had arrived to watch the performance, and the sky over the island was a mosaic of tight-packed hovering ships. The

distortion screen had been turned off, and the viewing platforms on the ships thronged with hundreds of thousands of distant witnesses. They could see the swimming pool by then, its water mirror-flat and gin-clear. They could see Zima standing at the edge, with the solar patches on his back glinting like snake scales. None of the viewers had any idea of what was about to happen, or its significance. They were expecting something—the public unveiling of a work that would presumably trump everything Zima had created before then—but they could only stare in puzzled concern at the pool, wondering how it could possibly measure up to those atmosphere-piercing canvases, or those entire worlds wrapped in shrouds of blue. They kept thinking that the pool had to be a diversion. The real work of art—the piece that would herald his retirement—must be somewhere else, as yet unseen, waiting to be revealed in all its immensity.

That was what they thought.

But I knew the truth. I knew it as I watched Zima stand at the edge of the pool and surrender himself to the blue. He'd told me exactly how it would happen: the slow, methodical shutting-down of higher-brain functions. It hardly mattered that it was all irreversible: there wouldn't be enough of him left to regret what he had lost.

But something would remain: a little kernel of being; enough of a mind to recognise its own existence. Enough of a mind to appreciate its surroundings, and to extract some trickle of pleasure

and contentment from the execution of a task, no matter how purposeless. He wouldn't ever need to leave the pool. The solar patches would provide him with all the energy he needed. He would never age, never grow ill. Other machines would take care of his island, protecting the pool and its silent slow swimmer from the ravages of weather and time.

Centuries would pass.

Thousands of years, and then millions.

Beyond that, it was anyone's guess. But the one thing I knew was that Zima would never tire of his task. There was no capacity left in his mind for boredom. He had become pure experience. If he experienced any kind of joy in the swimming of the pool, it was the near-mindless euphoria of a pollinating insect. That was enough for him. It had been enough for him in that pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool but on another world, around another sun, in a distant part of the same Galaxy.

As for me . . .

It turned out that I remembered more of our meeting on the island than I had any right to. Make of that what you will, but it seemed I didn't need the mental crutch of my AM quite as much as I'd always imagined. Zima was right: I'd allowed my life to become scripted, laid out like a blueprint. It was always red wine with sunsets, never the white. Aboard the outbound lightbreaker a clinic installed a set of neural memory

extensions that should serve me well for the next four or five hundred years. One day I'll need another solution, but I'll cross that particular mnemonic bridge when I get there. My last act, before dismissing the AM, was to transfer its observations into the echoey new spaces of my enlarged memory. The events still don't feel quite like they ever happened to me, but they settle in a little bit better with each act of recall. They change and soften, and the highlights glow a little brighter. I guess they become a little less accurate with each instance of recall, but like Zima said: perhaps that's the point.

I know now why he spoke to me. It wasn't just my way with a biographical story. It was his desire to help someone move on, before he did the same.

I did eventually find a way to write his story, and I sold it back to my old newspaper, the *Martian Chronicle*. It was good to visit the old planet again,

especially now that they've moved it into a warmer orbit.

That was a long time ago. But I'm still not done with Zima, odd as it seems.

Every couple of decades, I still hop a lightbreaker to Murjek, descend to the streets of that gleaming white avatar of Venice, take a conveyor to the island and join the handful of other dogged witnesses scattered across the stands. Those that come, like me, must still feel that the artist has something else in store . . . one last surprise. They've read my article now, most of them, so they know what that slowly swimming figure means . . . but they still don't come in droves. The stands are always a little echoey and sad, even on a good day. But I've never seen them completely empty, which I suppose is some kind of testament. Some people get it. Most people never will.

But that's art.



"I love the work of Clifford D. Simak," Eric Brown announces enthusiastically. "His SF is counter to all the—to me!—unreadable hard SF popular in the fifties, sixties and seventies. Most of his stuff is small-scale, rural, homely—about ordinary people in often extraordinary circumstances. He comes over in his stories as a good person. He was born a hundred years ago last year, so I wrote this tale as an affectionate homage." Eric's recent work includes the novellas *Approaching Omega* and *The Extraordinary Voyage of Jules Verne* (now available from PS), the collection *The Fall of Tartarus*—plus another upcoming collection, *Threshold Shift*—and two children's book, *British Front* and *Space Ace!* In collaboration with Mike Ashley, he has recently edited *The Mammoth Book of New Jules Verne Adventures*.

Life Beyond . . .

Eric Brown

The sun was setting on another hot summer's day and the sky was cloudless. You could see everything there was to see in that sky, distant birds and the contrails of the domestic jet-liners from O'Hare, and whatever else that might drop from the heavens.

I was in my house on the edge of the bluff, with a fine sweeping view across the pine-covered valley, sitting in my study-cum-lounge on my old beat-up sofa—which Ellie my grand-daughter calls *Feral*, on account of its looking wild. I was alternating my attention between the big window, where I could see the distant Mississippi winding through the lush meadowland of Wisconsin, and my book. I was reading Thoreau and looking up from his wise words from time to time, smiling that complicit smile that acknowledges the privilege of being addressed by the

dead, personally, through the depths of space and time.

On the sofa beside me was the small booklet that Ellie had written on the computer in her room. She had presented it to me after dinner, a little shyly, eyes downcast, before slipping off to bed. She'd always said she wanted to be a writer—"just like you," she said—and I had assumed that it was another of her short stories, though I did wonder at her skittishness. So, I laid aside Thoreau and began reading Ellie's booklet, and soon *Excursions* was forgotten, and the impending visit of the interfering social worker too.

Oh, Ellie, Ellie . . . if words were the currency of our humanity, then my grand-daughter was rich beyond compare.

I wept.

The piece was entitled *My Life*, and began: *One month ago my Mom was*

killed in an automobile smash, and since then I've lived with Grampa in his big, old book-filled place on the hill, and I love Grampa more than anything in the world but I miss my Mom so much it's like a pain inside me...

It went on, for over ten thousand words, describing her life before the accident, her life since, and the incomprehensible tragedy of her loss.

I finished reading the booklet, and then climbed the stairs and stood in the doorway of Ellie's room. She was asleep face down on the bed, still dressed: too-small tee-shirt and too-small jeans stretched tight on her spurting adolescent frame.

I was glad she was asleep: I could have offered only hugs and kisses and tears in consolation, in lieu of any explanation.

I went back downstairs and considered the imminent meeting. I wanted to be sharp when the social worker came to try to take Ellie away from me.

She had telephoned earlier, a young woman with a highfalutin' Boston accent, calling me from a gas station off of Highway 94 to apologize. She was running late, she'd said; my place was hard to find, she'd added; and so she'd miscalculated how much gasoline she would need, she'd concluded.

I found myself reassuring her, friendly-like, telling her not to worry . . . this stranger out to wreck my life.

She'd said she would find a motel for the night, and see me in the morning, but I assured her that tonight would be

fine. I wanted to get the meeting over and done with.

Now I heard movement above my head. Heard Ellie open the window of her room and then the distinct creak of her window-seat. No doubt she was hugging her knees, staring out at the night and the stars, as she had made it her habit to do over the weeks.

I smiled and went back to my book.

Minutes later there was all-hell of a din as Ellie jumped from her window-seat and thumped across the bare boards and raced down the stairs and arrived, breathless, in the doorway to the lounge, gasping at me.

"What's spooking you, girl?" I said, amused.

"Gramps! Look! Look in the sky over Wilson's forest! I saw it coming down from way up! There, see it?"

She ran into the room and vaulted over the back of the sofa, landing beside me and hugging me to her, pointing through the window.

It took some while for my eyes to adjust, then I saw what had excited her so.

It was a silver thing, all twinkling and scintillating in the light of the setting sun. It was hard to tell how big it was—maybe the size of a light aircraft—but it was stubby, torpedo-shaped and wingless, and was angling down steeply over the treetops. I caught a five second glimpse of Ellie's mysterious object before it dropped into the forest and vanished.

We looked at each other. My granddaughter's eyes were wide.

“What was it, Gramps?”

Common-sense took hold of me. “Either a bit of some old satellite, El, or a weather balloon, most like.”

“Bor-ing! Not a UFO or a time-machine?”

“You’ve got a lively imagination!”

She glanced at her booklet, then at my book. “What you reading, Gramps?”

“Thoreau.”

“Did you read . . . ?”

I pulled her to me and kissed her mussed-up blonde curls. She was eleven years old and gawky, with nascent beauty in the lineaments of her face, just waiting to explode. I could see a lot of Sam, my daughter, in her.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” I said. “Now off to bed, and sleep, okay?”

She gave me another tight squeeze, then slipped from the sofa and hurried back upstairs.

I might have let her stay up a while, and talked to her some, but I had seen, way away on the winding track that led to my house and nowhere else, the beetling shape of a Buick.

I poured myself a stiff bourbon; I wanted to be sharp in order to face Miss-whatever-her-name-was, but also I wanted something to take the edge off my anger.

Two or three minutes later the Buick rounded the last bend and drew to a halt. The driver climbed from the car and walked the rest of the way up the pot-holed track, pausing to peer at the house with a hand fitted to her brow.

She was tall and smartly dressed, with long dark hair and a strong, intelligent, city-wise face.

She was carrying something, as well as her valise. I hoped it wasn’t what I thought it was.

I left the lounge and hauled open the front door before she had time to ring the chime.

“Mr Robertshaw, I’m so sorry.”

“Call me Ed. Don’t worry, I keep elastic hours.” It wasn’t what I had meant to say, but I always find it hard to cold-shoulder folk, even social workers.

“I’m Elizabeth Kovac. We spoke at length last week.”

And she *was* clutching, in her beautifully-manicured right hand, what I’d feared. I winced as I led her through the house to the lounge.

She sat in an armchair and I collapsed into the sofa.

“Mr Robertshaw—Ed—it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I only wish the circumstances were a little more conducive to bonhomie,” I said, and smiled to myself.

I could see her glancing around the room, at the disorderly piles of books, at my somewhat dishevelled appearance.

I was not what she was expecting a grand old man of letters to be.

She placed my latest novel on the arm of the chair and patted it, somewhat primly.

“Ed, I’ve been reading your books for years. I can’t tell you how much I enjoy them.”

I shrugged. I always find praise embarrassing.

Her glance alighted on the ream of quarto on my desk. Her eyes widened. "Your latest?"

I refrained from saying, "And probably my last." I'd finished the third draft of what I considered my finest novel shortly before my daughter's death, and the accident had knocked me sideways and pushed from my mind all thoughts of ever writing again.

"I take it you and your team read my letter and the adoption papers," I said.

She sighed. "Mr Robertshaw—I'm sorry . . . Ed. As I said on the phone, Ed, this is an exceptional case, and in any other circumstance we might have considered your application."

"Ellie's happy here," I said, despising myself for the note of desperation in my voice. "She wants to stay with me."

"To be perfectly frank, Ed, the child's desire in cases like this is not of paramount concern."

"Then what is?"

"The long-term welfare of the child . . . your grand-daughter."

"I too have that in mind."

She looked at me. She said, pointedly, "The *long-term* welfare, Ed?"

Touché.

"I'm as fit and healthy now as I was at the age of forty," I blustered.

She smiled. "How old are you, Ed."

I stared at her. She was, I guessed, around thirty, a mere child.

"Eighty-five last fall," I said.

She was smiling at me, patronizing. She no longer saw me as the patri-

archal novelist; now I was some crusty backwoods hermit bordering on senility.

"Ed, please try to see the situation from my point of view. Ellie needs care for the next six, seven years. With all due respect, you might not be able to provide that care."

"I don't want El in a home," I said.

"Let me assure you that Ellie will be fostered by a caring family short-term, while a suitable long-term adoptive family is located."

"But my grand-daughter is happy with me!" I began.

She leafed through some papers and then looked up at me. "Ed, I discovered that last fall you suffered a minor coronary."

I stared at her, gestured helplessly. "It was minor," I echoed.

"You didn't inform us."

"I didn't think it mattered that much," I said lamely.

Kovac became business-like. "Ed, we'll do everything within our powers to keep Ellie nearby. We recognize the mutual need for continued contact," Kovac went on, but she was spouting text-book stuff at me now, and I switched off.

I thought through the best way to tell Kovac that I wasn't giving in—that I wouldn't give up Ellie without a fight.

From her valise, Kovac withdrew a sheaf of forms and laid them on the coffee table between us. "If you could complete the relevant details and get them back to me . . ."

"And if I refuse?"

“Ed, that wouldn’t be advisable. We’d have to take the matter to court, and that would only prolong the entire procedure.”

“And I’d have Ellie for a little bit longer.”

She stared at me. She clearly thought me an old fool—which I probably was. “Ed, Ellie would be taken from you and placed in a care home for the duration of the litigation. It would only prove even more upsetting for her.”

I gave her my fiercest stare. “So in effect what you’re saying is that I have no say in the matter? Even though I love my grand-daughter and want her to stay, and Ellie wants to stay too, there’s absolutely no way you’re going to listen to what *we* want?”

“Ed, as I’ve tried to explain, we have the best interests of Ellie in mind. If only you could see that.”

We bickered back and forth for a time, getting nowhere. I succeeded only in increasing my blood pressure some.

At last I stood and indicated the door. “I think we each know where the other stands on the matter,” I said in my most formal and pompous manner.

Kovac rose to leave. “I was hoping that this could be settled amicably,” she began.

I saw her to the door—almost tossing her copy of my novel after her—and watched her drive away down the track and out of sight.

I made my way up to El’s room and stood in the doorway. She was asleep,

under the sheets this time, her clothes folded neatly at the foot of the bed.

I stood there for perhaps fifteen minutes, my head full of images of Ellie as a baby, a toddler, a feisty, independent nine-year-old . . .

I was eighty-five, but I was good for another ten years. I would fight Kovac and the system with every means available to me. Okay, so maybe I was an old fool, but since Sam’s death Ellie had become more precious to me than anything else.

She was my life.

I made my way downstairs and, almost without realizing what I was doing, I picked up the bottle of bourbon, took a long swallow and stared out through the window.

Minutes later, I was on my way along the track toward Wilson’s forest . . . still clutching the bottle of bourbon.

It was that time of night when coons are abroad, moving cautiously through the undergrowth, and the first owls are tuning up. A full moon climbed high above the pines, and the last of the sunlight was reddening like a haemorrhage in the west.

I was drawn. Looking back, that’s how it seems. I was an old fool to be out when the sun was almost down, with only a bottle of bourbon and a bellyfull of regrets to keep me company, but it didn’t seem that way.

The night air was resinous, and I recall the sense of excitement, apropos

of nothing, as I left the track and took the footpath toward the forest.

I climbed through the pines, the twilight suddenly deepening, and out of the last light of the sun a sudden chill came upon me. I think I even stopped and wondered why I'd left Ellie all alone back there—not that she was in any danger, being that the nearest human habitation was nigh on twenty-five miles away.

I pressed on. I stopped once to take a chug of bourbon and then continued my climbing. I was heading toward where I judged the *thing* had come down, though quite how I might have judged that I do not know.

Then I saw a glint of silver through the trees and increased my pace.

Whatever it was, it had shaved down a good dozen sturdy pines on its entry into the forest. Now it stood on the edge of a bluff, its nose projecting out over the edge, with a fan-tail of pulverized matchwood in its wake.

I stopped dead in my tracks, and pushed my hand through my thinning hair; I might even have said *God-dang-it*.

It was a blunt torpedo, perhaps twenty feet long, and silver. At its nose was a wrap-around viewscreen kind of thing, and halfway down its length a cartoon mousehole-shaped opening.

A short ramp led down from the opening.

I don't mind admitting that I took a good few swallows of bourbon at the sight of it.

I stepped forward and approached

the thing. Courage had nothing to do with my advance; like I said, I think I was drawn.

The vessel's occupant had taken advantage of a fallen log and was admiring the view beyond the drop. Half the county was bathed in the light of the sun, all faded green and hazy gold.

The creature was humanoid and very thin, almost skeletal, with very white skin, the regulation number of eyes, a nose and a mouth; but its features were curiously flattened and expressionless. I gained the impression that it was male, though of course in that I might have been mistaken.

It wore a little gray suit consisting of knee-length trousers and a short-sleeved shirt.

"You live," it said, "in a beautiful part of the world."

I nodded. "I like to think so," I replied.

"I think it's important to take the time to appreciate natural beauty," it went on.

"There is nothing—absolutely nothing," I said, "like Wisconsin at sundown in summer."

The being gestured to the log. "Won't you join me?"

You think it strange, I guess, that I am so matter of fact in reporting the first recorded instance of human contact with an extraterrestrial. In my defence let me state that although a part of me was aware of the significance of the event, it was as if my intellect had been tranquillised. I am sure that the alien was responsible for this.



Illustration by James Hannab

Perhaps, without its feat of telepathic tranquillisation, I might have been a gibbering wreck.

I sat down next to the creature on the log.

I found myself saying, "You come a long way?"

Of all the questions to ask a traveller from the stars!

"Since my last stop," it said, "not that far. A matter of a hundred light years or so."

"Is that all?" I nodded. He was right—it didn't seem much, not when the crews of the various *Star Trek* TV re-runs seemed to do several times that amount every week. "And before that?"

"I have travelled through the inhabited system for almost fifty of your years," it said.

Now let me say that, although it communicated with me in good old English—albeit our Americanised version—its words were not synchronized to the movement of its lips, and the effect was similar to that of watching a badly dubbed foreign film.

I fidgeted. My old bones were a little uncomfortable without a back-rest. I sat down on the mossy floor of the clearing and lodged my back against the log.

My alien companion did likewise.

"A good idea," it said.

I took a swallow of bourbon and, remembering my manners, offered the bottle to my guest.

It regarded the bottle. "Go on," I said. "We call it bourbon. Has quite a kick. Try it."

With seeming caution it reached out, took the bottle, and raised it experimentally to its lips. A good shot-glassful of alcohol slid down its long gullet, and then another, both without ill-effect.

It returned the bottle. "Interesting."

I gestured to the ship beside us. "Quite a vessel you have yourself there," I said conversationally.

"You would think, wouldn't you, that after fifty years of star travel I would have perfected the landing manoeuvre?"

I shrugged, not knowing much about that line of thing.

"I feared my ship would be damaged, but after a thorough inspection I am happy to report that it needs but minor repairs."

"That's good to hear." I hesitated. "Perhaps I might be able to help."

"That's very kind of you, but it won't take me long."

I nodded. "And then you'll be on your way?"

"I will, though I had hoped to have time to do what I came to this planet to do."

I took another swig of bourbon, and passed the bottle. My friend drank too. For an alien, it certainly liked its liquor.

"And what," I asked, "did you come to Earth to do?"

I can hear you asking: the annihilation of the entire human race? The reconnaissance of all military establishments preparatory to an alien invasion?

I thought nothing of the sort. I kind of trusted the alien by then. But I was

curious. After all, he could have been here for something more upbeat . . . like to hand over the cure for all known diseases.

"I make it my duty," it said, "to collect on every planet I visit an example of its literature. In short, I collect books."

I stared at the critter beside me. I hadn't taken it for a bookworm.

"Books?" I said. "I mean, other planets possess books? I thought maybe Earth was unique in having them. I would have thought that other planets had . . . well, other means of . . . of recording things." I realised I was babbling and shut up.

Listen to me! Other planets? Until that time I hadn't given much thought to the possibility that other inhabited worlds might have existed beyond planet Earth.

"Oh, all sentient races the galaxy over have had, at some point in their history, objects known as books."

"And you collect them?" I asked.

He turned his bland, flat face to me and essayed, for the first time, a smile. It failed to work fully—the effect resembled a stretched elastic band—but I appreciated the effort.

"I pick up three items from every planet I visit."

"Only three?"

"Inhabited planets are multifarious, and my ship is only small."

"And when you return to your homeworld, will you sell these books?"

"I am not a businessman," it said. "I donate the books to the Library of Lithia. My planet stands at a junction

in the spaceway. Many races come to Lithia to study at the Library."

I stared in open-mouthed wonder at my informant.

I recalled what it had said, earlier. "But you fear that you don't have enough time to collect your quota of books?"

The alien stared out over the bluff, into the deepening night. I honestly think that it was quite taken with the landscape.

"That is so. The repair will take a little while. Then I will have to depart. I am expected back at Lithia in one month, Earth-time."

Something like vast melancholy opened up inside me. I thought of the Library of Lithia, and the fact that it would be without any examples of human books.

Impulsively I asked, "How long will your repairs take?"

"Perhaps one of your hours," it replied.

"In that case," I said, scrambling to my feet, "I'll bring you three books before you leave. For the Library. A present from the people of Earth!" I stopped and stared at the alien, who was looking up at me with large eyes. Did I see gratitude in those great milky orbs, or was that wishful thinking on my part? "But which three books?" I asked.

"Allow your heart to make that choice," said the alien. "But I will state that I require books which reflect what it is to be a human being, books written with emotion, and not text books or scientific treatises."

I nodded. "I'll return within the hour with three suitable volumes," I promised.

The alien stood also and, briefly halting my progress from the clearing, said, "And I will give you something in return, Ed."

But I was in too much of a hurry to respond. It was not until I was well down the incline, the starship hidden from view, that I wondered how the alien had known my name.

I made my way home at a shambling jog, having to stop from time to time to ease my ageing legs and lungs. Only when the house came into sight, lighted against the darkness that loomed behind the bluff, did I realise what a responsibility the alien had charged me with: my imminent choice would dictate to countless alien scholars their knowledge and understanding of planet Earth.

I rushed into the house and stood in the middle of my study, surrounded by shelves of books from floor to ceiling, books piled tottering on the floor, books spilling from chairs and boxes; thousands of books, millions, perhaps billions, of words; the concentrated thoughts of legion of thinkers from humankind's vast history.

And my alien friend wanted me to choose just three!

I paced my study. I pulled down volume after volume, made a primary pile, and a secondary pile, keeping the alien's dicta uppermost in my mind. Books written with emotion, which told what it was to be human.

When I looked up I saw that almost

an hour had elapsed, and I panicked. What if the alien had departed in his silver starship without three human books for Lithia?

Minutes later I was near to making my choice.

The complete works of Shakespeare seemed to be an obvious choice. But then what? The Bible . . . or the Koran, the Talmud, the Bardo Thodol, the Bhagavad-Gita?

I looked across the room, and saw upon the desk the manuscript of my latest novel, the novel which I thought summed up so many years of literary endeavour.

If I were to slip it into a binder, present it to the alien as the third book . . .

To think of it, my words read by creatures from far stars.

Then my gaze fell on the booklet Ellie had given me earlier that evening.

Trembling, I crossed the room and picked up her heartfelt outpouring of loss and love and hope.

In my other hand I hefted my weighty manuscript, and then, after careful consideration, laid it aside.

I carried Ellie's *My Life* back to the pile I had made on the floor, selected two further books and made my way quickly from the house.

My heart was thudding with the knowledge of the choice I had made, and the thought of these three volumes residing in the distant stellar library. What a gift to the stars—what an honour for the human race!

I hurried from the track and took the path into the pines. I climbed,

my heart banging. I searched desperately for the glimpse of silver between the trees, insane with the thought that the alien had departed already—or that I had hallucinated the entire meeting.

But there it was.

I stumbled, exhausted, into the clearing and approached the starship.

The alien emerged from the opening within the ship's flank and came down the ramp toward me.

It paused, and again that strange smile played upon its unpractised lips as I held out the books.

It took them one by one.

"This one?" it asked, and I explained that it was a revered holy book.

"And this?"

I gave a brief synopsis, hardly doing justice to the author's genius.

"And the third?" it asked.

"This," I said, my voice trembling, "this is the true account of a young girl's grief at losing the person she loved the most, but it is also a testament to the power of hope for the future that lives in the heart of every human being."

The alien tucked the three books under its arm.

"The only thing I can give you in return, Ed," said the alien being, "is advice."

"Advice?" I echoed.

"Sometimes we must relinquish that which we treasure the most, Ed. You see," it went on, before I could say a word, "I have learned this from experience. For many of your years I have garnered from around the galaxy

the most fabulous items from the most fabulous planets. I refer to books, of course. Then, on my way back to Lithia, a device I have aboard the ship translates the books into my own language, and I have time to read them, and the many wonders they contain—and by the time of my arrival I have grown fond of the books in my possession, so fond that I am loath to give them up to the library."

"But you do?" I said.

It smiled. "I do. Books need to be read in order to grow, Ed. I could not selfishly keep them for myself. They belong in the world beyond."

And, before I could move or say another word, with its free hand the alien reached out to me.

"One must accept, Ed."

It touched my face, in a gesture I might have found disconcerting had it been made by another man. But his touch, on my cheek, filled me with peace and joy—and acceptance.

I backed away, toward the edge of the clearing, as the alien turned and climbed the ramp into its ship.

The opening vanished, and seconds later the starship lifted without a sound and moved slowly out over the bluff. It accelerated into the night sky and in an instant was lost among the stars.

I stared up at the massed constellations, my head filled with the wonder of far stars, and alien cities and civilizations. Then I made my slow way home to where a young girl, at the very start of her life, was sleeping the sleep of the innocent, and maybe dreaming.

And as I went it came to me what a pig-headed, cussed, ornery old fool I'd been.

Back home, I climbed the stairs and stood by Ellie's bedroom door for a long time, wondering how to tell her that, for her own good, she would have to leave me.

That was ten years ago, and I survived. I even wrote more novels, inspired perhaps by my memory of the alien.

Ellie left and lived with kind adoptive parents over Millville way, and I do believe they were the very best thing for her. A professor and his librarian wife, they broadened her mind in a way I doubt I could have done.

I visited Ellie every month—but I never told her of my strange encounter with the bibliophile alien that night.

She is sleeping in her old bed above my head as I write this, returned from

university for the summer break. Tomorrow is her twenty-first birthday. I have never been back to the clearing in Wilson's forest, perhaps fearing that there will be no evidence to corroborate my memories.

And the gaps in my shelves, from where I took the books? And the fact that, on the morning after Ellie gave me her booklet, it was nowhere to be found in the house?

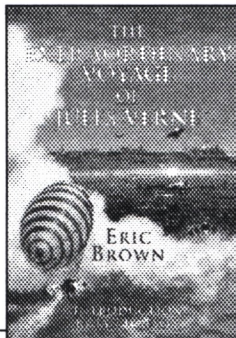
Tomorrow, after breakfast, as a birthday present, I will take my grand-daughter over to Wilson's forest. I will tell her of that miraculous night ten years ago, the night she saw the starship fall to earth; I will show her the trees scattered like jackstraws, and tell her that she is the author of a work read by all manner of alien beings across the vast expanse of the galaxy, a work of pain, and grief, and of boundless love and hope rewarded.



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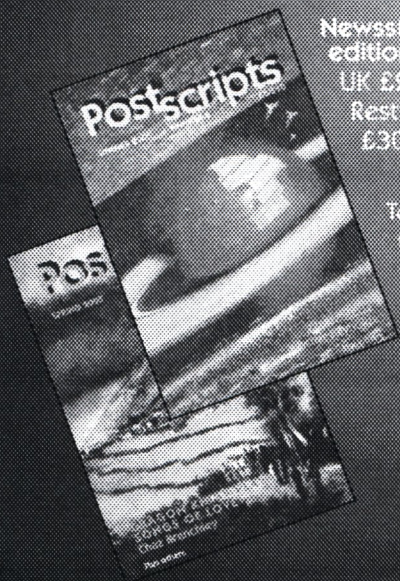


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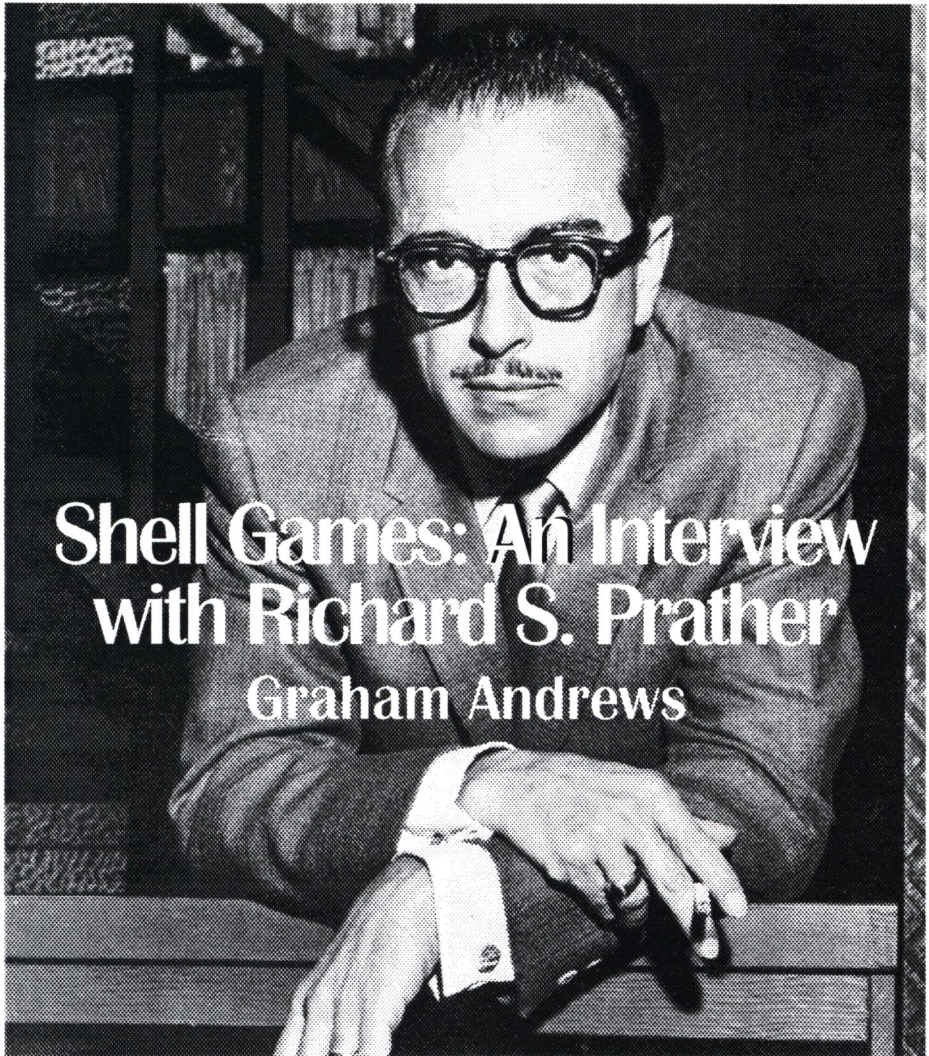
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Shell Games: An Interview with Richard S. Prather

Graham Andrews

Richard S(cott) Prather was born in Santa Ana, California on 9 September 1921. From 1942 until soon after the Second World War, he served as a fireman, oiler, and engineer in the U.S. Merchant Marine, after which came four years as a civil servant (Surplus Property and Salvage Disposal Office) at March Air Force Base, Riverside.

Prather became a full-time writer in 1949. He wrote several stand-alone novels during the next ten years: Lie Down, Killer; Dagger of Flesh; The Peddler (as by Douglas Ring); and the TV tie-in Dragnet: Case No. 561 (as by David Knight). Shell Scott, his

quintessential and “happy-go-looky” Hollywood private detective, first appeared in The Case of the Vanishing Beauty (Gold Medal, 1950).

The two-score Shell Scott books (see Bibliography) have sold over 40,000,000 copies in the U.S.A. alone. They read like a collaboration between Raymond Chandler and P.G. Wodehouse—with some Henry Miller thrown in for naughty-bits measure. Dig that Crazy Grave is a good place to start. Or The Wailing Frail. Or . . . take your pick, really.

Some few years ago, while researching Two Just Men: Richard Prather and Shell Scott, Graham Andrews visited Mr and Mrs Prather in Arizona. “I recounted the sad story of how I’d been given ‘six of the best’ with a bamboo cane (three strokes on each palm) at Everton Secondary Intermediate School in Belfast,” Graham recalls. “Why? Because I’d cited my then three favourite writers as Leslie Charteris, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Richard S. Prather. I still bear the mental scar tissue. And yet Dick laughed! I was driven to take solace in strong drink—Bushmills whiskey, since you ask.”

GA: Have you always wanted to be a writer, or did you just “fall into” the profession?

RSP: I “just knew” I was going to be a writer, some day, from the time I was a kid in grammar school. I didn’t know why, and I certainly didn’t know how, but I did know that was what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Even much later, during my first (and only) year of college—at Riverside Junior College, Riverside, California—that remained true, although I still hadn’t actually *written* anything except a few flowery poems and other scribblings. Indeed I clearly recall being caught by the acerbic male teacher of my French class, reading not the French grammar I was supposed to be studying but Max Eastman’s *Enjoyment of Laughter*. The professor was not amused.

When Dr. Mary Wendenhall [the College Dean] asked me why I, normally a reasonably good student (or grind, or “dork”) was doing so poorly in my French class, I told her politely that I had “always” wanted to be a writer—the point of this otherwise pointless anecdote—and intended to write not in French but in English. Dr. Mendenhall was not amused either. But she was kind and I survived, with a “D” (really rotten) in French, and about ten years later celebrated publication of my first mystery novel [*The Case of the Vanishing Beauty*]. So I did in time become a real writer. Or expect to eventually. When I grow up.

GA: You served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during the Second World War. How did the experience affect your life in general and your writing in particular?

RSP: In the Merchant Marine I was part of the engine-room crew, aboard ship referred to as the Black Gang, serving in the beginning as a wiper. This word isn't even capitalized, since it refers to the lowest form of life on the ocean, beneath which are only the crawling sea-bottom insects. A wiper's job—you guessed it—is to wipe. He carries oily rags about and wipes up spilled oil, grease, puke if available, everything in the engine room that is greasy, obnoxious, and/or unappetizing. My months as a wiper affected my life in general and my writing in particular by filling me with a desperate desire to succeed at doing something else.

Also, as an escape from greasiness, when off watch I wrote a lot of poetry, primarily Shakespearian sonnets about gorgeous Goddesses with big boobs. Those sonnets may not have been exceptional, but those boobs were, and my poetic preoccupation with their iambic-pentameter dimensions and rhythms may have, for good or ill, strongly influenced my later descriptions of Shell Scott's female companions.

GA: You have often expressed admiration for Raymond Chandler. What is your favourite Chandler novel, and why?

RSP: My favourite Chandler is *Farewell, My Lovely*. Partly because, contrary to some critical opinion, I think it's the best work he ever did, but also because it was my introduction to Chandler, the first of his novels that I read. Here's the story:

During 1942 and early 1943, I was part of the engine-room crew on an oil tanker (the old *Frank G. Drum*, sailing the south Pacific). Among friends about my own age was a young Fireman—one step up from being a wiper in the Black Gang—a short, thin, hyperactive kid filled with enthusiasm. Late one afternoon he rushed up to me and another black-ganger also off watch (all three of us, I believe, worked the 12-to-4 watch, in our standard 4 hours on 8 hours off twice a day routine). He was waving both arms, one clutching a small rolled-up book—one of those flimsy but wonderful Armed Forces Edition paperbacks, found everywhere overseas in those days.

"You've got to read this!" he yelled. "THIS IS THE BEST BOOK I EVER READ! You've got to read it!" and he handed me the flimsy book. And my life was changed.

The book's title of course was *Farewell, My Lovely*, by some guy named Raymond Chandler. I read it that night; I think, before giving it back, I read it again. And my enthusiasm equaled my friend's.

Farewell was the best mystery novel I had ever read, and I'd read a bunch by then. Chandler's characters in the novel impressed me more than his plot (especially later in life when I pickily "analyzed" *Farewell* and Chandler's other books, concluding that his plots were occasionally flawed, their actions/reactions/explanations not always and "inevitably" logical . . . but by then it didn't matter.) What knocked me out in *Farewell, My Lovely* was Chandler's language, his words and the *way* he used them—his *style*. Often those words, lines, descriptions of characters, were to me so unique and fresh and eye-stopping (Hey, go back and read that again!) they were like a string of verbal firecrackers going off in my head. It seemed to me then (and now, for that matter, sixty years after the first fact) that Chandler was saying things that hadn't been said before . . . or at least was saying what might often have been said but not before in such an original mind-plucking way.

This was only two or three years after I almost flunked out of French class, so I was still a gonna-be writer, but now I knew what *kind* of writer I wanted to be: a writer of mystery novels who, if I got lucky enough, might occasionally come up with words and phrases and even whole paragraphs as fresh and original and arresting as Chandler's own. Maybe I never quite succeeded, but I had a lot of fun trying. And I hope at least a few readers of my books have had as much fun with all those words as I did.

GA: Apart from Chandler, which other mystery writers have influenced your work?

RSP: A *lot* of other writers influenced me and my work, at least on a subconscious level (whatever that is . . .), and those were the authors whose own work I most admired, found most original and satisfying, those I most enjoyed reading—and *re*-reading (a true test). Among them would be: Cornell Woolrich, especially his novel titled, if memory serves me still, *The Black Path of Fear*. [It does — Doubleday, 1944.: GA.] In the first chapter of that book the lead character is in a crowded cocktail joint (in Mexico, I think), standing at the bar next to his beloved and lovely lady. Unknown to him (and—importantly—unknown to the reader) she has just been lethally stabbed, and the knife may have been (if memory, etc.) still in and projecting from her body, unseen in the smoky dimness. There is an aura of perplexity, confusion, of suspense slowly and steadily building, with—just offstage, in the heavy shadows—a hint of not-yet-seen horror. Well . . . she

slumps to the floor, our protagonist discovers either the knife itself or the fact that she's *been* knifed and is all-over blood, and the plot continues from there.

A less accomplished and brilliant writer than Woolrich might have summed this up as follows:

Tommy Hero noticed that Madeleine, whom he dearly loved, was slumping on her bar stool, appearing to fall over. He grabbed for her, and his hand struck a deadly knife's-butt. Without thinking he pulled out the ugly blade and saw blood smearing it and his fingers. "My God!" he cried aloud, "she's been *stabbed*, she's been *kilt*!" Beautiful Madeleine fell to the floor, kilt at his feet.

But Woolrich, true Master of Suspense, takes his time . . . his e-l-a-s-t-i-c time . . . pulls the reader with him moment by moment along with his at-first puzzled and then strangely alarmed hero . . . lets the reader share his protagonist's thoughts and emotions, together with the jumbled periphery of sounds and sights and smells in the crowded bar . . . and, I swear, stretches this brief action of half a dozen lines (above) into two or three absolutely riveting *pages* before the final shock and horror is revealed. And this isn't padding; it's brilliance.

Add to Cornell Woolrich: John (D. MacDonald); I enjoyed meeting him a few times, so feel O.K. just calling him John. More cerebral than Woolrich, but just as good in his own way—in fact, in my view, as fine a craftsman as any other writer alive during his time.

Also: Dick Francis—one of the few writers who has never disappointed me when I read the second or third or twentieth of his books after the first one turned me into an instant fan wanting more of the same. His characters are memorable, his prose marvellous and usually "just right" at major moments and, wonder of wonders, his carefully-constructed plots hang together from beginning to end—a rare thing, believe me, even among many best-selling pros.

I've never spoken to Francis, but I'll bet a dollar to a dime that he sweats over and carefully fits together every major movement of his yet-to-be-written novel's plot *in advance* (like me) before writing the first line of his first (*and maybe final*) draft of the manuscript. So, Dick Francis, if you're out there, let me know if I'm right! (Even if I'm wrong, I'll remain an enthusiastic fan; but I'll bet you a dollar to a dime . . .)

GA: How did you come up with the catchy name "Shell Scott"?

RSP: Just lucky, I guess. When I started plotting my first full-length novel (in

1949) my protagonist's name wasn't Shell Scott, but—are you ready for this?—Brad Crane. The name “Brad” and much of my P.I. hero's physical description was borrowed from a good friend of mine in Junior College (1940) named Bradford Ridley Voit, a very bright, very good-looking, and very well-built fellow with long blond hair and slightly angled blond eyebrows . . . and “Crane” came from some place in my head where Big Mistakes are born (at least, so I soon decided). Every time I typed my lead's name that “Crane” bugged me; it just didn't feel right. So, I rummaged through memory . . .

When I was still a kid in Riverside, California, a neighbour of mine living across the street was a boy named Meredith Sheldon. (Remember, this was years before I ever heard of my future literary agent, Scott Meredith.) It struck me that my friend's last name, Sheldon, sounded great for the first name of my fictional hero, particularly since it contracted naturally (and appropriately, I thought, for a private eye handy with a .38 Colt special revolver) to Shell. After that, my hero's last name turned out to be easy: my father's name was Sidney Scott Prather; and my own middle name is also Scott. Thus did Brad Crane become Sheldon “Shell” Scott.

Keeping the above in mind, ponder this: in due time, and several hundred pages of plotting and prose later, my agent for the next 25 years became Scott Meredith; whose close associate in the agency was his brother, named Sidney; and all these curiosities came together in my head when I was, during the '70s, living in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Other questions to ponder: Is *everything* a coincidence? Or: Is *nothing* a coincidence? Take your pick.

GA: You were the first writer to achieve fame and fortune primarily through paperback-original novels. But have you ever yearned for the respectability—if I may call it that—of hardcover publication?

RSP: Not really. I was quite satisfied with the dubious respectability of paperback publication. Besides, when half a dozen hardback editions did come along they turned out to be a respectable route to impoverishment, since their publishers reported to me net Sales approaching zero. It was soon evident that my big sales and healthy earnings came almost entirely from paperback publication, especially from Fawcett Publications/Gold Medal Books, which sensibly paid authors (and—significantly—was *able* to profitably pay authors) royalty earnings for every copy of their books *printed* . . . a royalty-statement figure easily checked and verified.

In remarkable contrast, apparently all other paperback publishers in existence not only failed even to *report* “Copies Printed” but paid authors on the basis of alleged “Copies Shipped” minus huge numbers of “Copies Returned” (this subtraction producing what authors assumed was the “Net Sale” they’d be paid for, assumed incorrectly since what in fact it produced was merely a “Net Shipment” vulnerable to further subtraction) . . . both “Shipped” and “Returned” figures being unsupported royalty-statement numbers reported by the publisher that were impossible for an author to check or verify, or believe. Is it any wonder I’ve often said that, during more than fifty years in this curious business, I think Fawcett/Gold Medal was the best publisher I ever had?

GA: *The Case of the Vanishing Beauty* (1950) was the first-published Shell Scott novel. But *The Maddern Caper* (manuscript title: a.k.a. *Pattern for Murder* and, definitively, *The Scramble Yeggs*) was the first to be written. Why did Gold Medal kick off the series with *Beauty*?

RSP: Gold Medal failed to kick off the series with my first book, *The Maddern Caper*, because they had already looked at it and rejected it. Why? Who knows? Maybe they thought it stank. Nobody ever told me why. A few years later, when the Shell Scott series had become their biggest moneymaker, Fawcett bought the rights not only to *The Maddern Caper* (which had by then become Graphic Books’ *Pattern for Murder*) and republished it as *The Scrambled Yeggs*, but also purchased rights to all of my other novels and short stories and made them a welcome—welcome to me, anyhow—part of the series.

So . . . in the end, Pollyanna lives, stumbling blocks are stepping stones, and everything works out the way it was supposed to in the first place . . . doesn’t it? Well, doesn’t it? Come on, I need some help here.

GA: Shell Scott began as a traditional P.I. with a better-than-average sense of humour. Then the “funny bits” grew more dominant—especially after *Strip for Murder* (1955). Was this a deliberate reaction against the urban-hell P.I. novels of that time?

RSP: Not really. Or perhaps, now that I think about it: Well . . . maybe. I like to think that the lighter touch (and, hopefully, “funny bits”) in some later novels was a kind of organic growth, a natural result of concentrating on what I liked, that I enjoyed writing (and reading), what made *me* feel better.

It's true, however, that much of what I read at that time was mildly (sometimes profoundly) depressing, or at least distasteful to me. Also true that if, after finishing the reading of a new-to-me novel, I felt less happy, less optimistic, less *well*, I crossed that author off my list—since there was then (and even more so now, during our current “Dubya” days) so much crap being piled up in the world that I saw no virtue in purposely poisoning my head with more of it.

In my introduction to *The Comfortable Coffin* (the 13th Mystery Writers of America Annual, which I edited; Gold Medal, 1960) I suggested that in books, plays, even a lot of puerile unrhymed prose ludicrously called “poems”, we were surrounded by so much pessimistic garbage apparently designed to make us feel miserable that we were all in danger of drowning in tired blood. The stories I selected for *Coffin*, however, were intended to leave readers feeling better at The End, a little happier, maybe even *healthier*.

And that is what I fervently hoped then, and hope now, might be said about Shell Scott's adventures in all, or at least some, of my books. Whether what I hoped for has been realized is for others to say. But when I reread one or two of them myself these days, they make *me* feel a little healthier. And maybe that's enough . . .

GA: Which Shell Scott novel is your personal favourite, and why?

RSP: Ask me that question on a dozen different days and I might respond with half a dozen different titles. But the one that would crop up most often would be *Strip for Murder*. For one thing, much of the book's action takes place in a nudist camp (my original title on the ms. was *Nudists Die Naked*), which strikes me as a lot of fun even without any crime-and-punishment plot. Not that I've ever been a practising dyed-out-of-the-wool nudist myself, you understand—I just make these things up! But . . . didn't a wise man say that, as we look back over our lives whether we're 20 or 40 or 80 or 150, we most regret not the things we did but the things we didn't?

Besides, I think that *Strip* includes two or three of the funniest, or at least most outrageously amusing, scenes I ever wrote. So the answer is definitely (today): *Strip for Murder*.

GA: Which non-Shell Scott novel is your personal favourite, and why?

RSP: There are only three non-Shells, and of them my favourite is *Lie Down, Killer* (Lion, 1952). It's set in southern California (where I was born),

specifically in Laguna Beach where my late wife (Tina, of several book dedications) and I lived for more than a dozen very happy and productive years. It was then a uniquely beautiful and creatively alive coastline of warm sandy beaches, white sea foam, gorgeous big (*very* big) ocean, a whole city-full of charming and handsome people. I've been back briefly a couple of times, and the place was still beautiful but . . . different, more crowded, more bustly, with a slightly off-key flavour as if the original native charm had mildewed.

Memory of a favorite city is, of course, memory not only of a place but of a time.

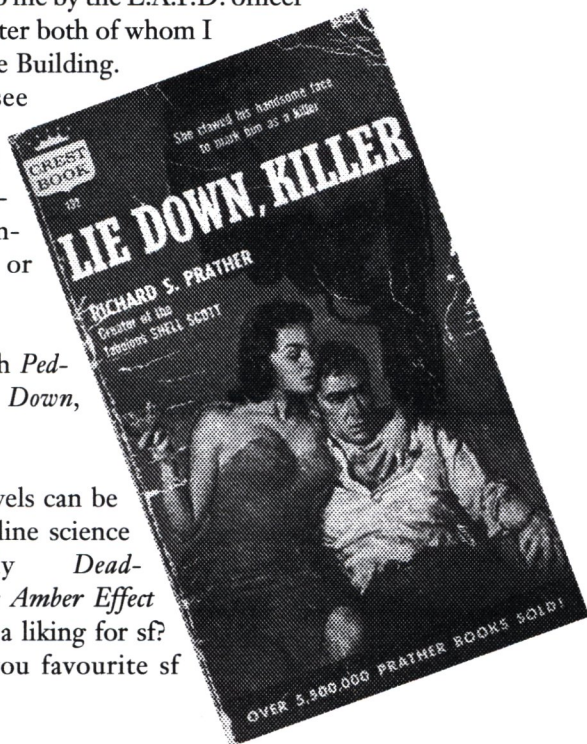
Of the two others, *The Peddler* (also Lion, 1952) came out pretty well, I think, much as I intended; but compared to my other novels it's more dark, more gloomy, in a way more sour . . . and its ending is much less that joyous. So *Peddler* is out.

The remaining title, *Dragnet: Case No. 561* is a crisp enough professional job in my view, but based on characters from the top-ten TV series (Joe Friday/Jack Webb & Company) I didn't create, and on a true-crime police file presented to me by the L.A.P.D. officer and *Dragnet* scriptwriter both of whom I met in the L.A. Police Building.

This led, in time [see below: GA] to a certain amount of disillusionment concerning anything connected to dragnets or *Dragnet*.

So *Dragnet* is out, along with *Peddler*. Leaving *Lie Down, Killer*, it's in.

GA: Many Shell Scott novels can be considered as borderline science fiction, especially *Dead-Bang* (1971) and *The Amber Effect* (1986). Do you have a liking for sf? And, if so, who is your favourite sf writer?



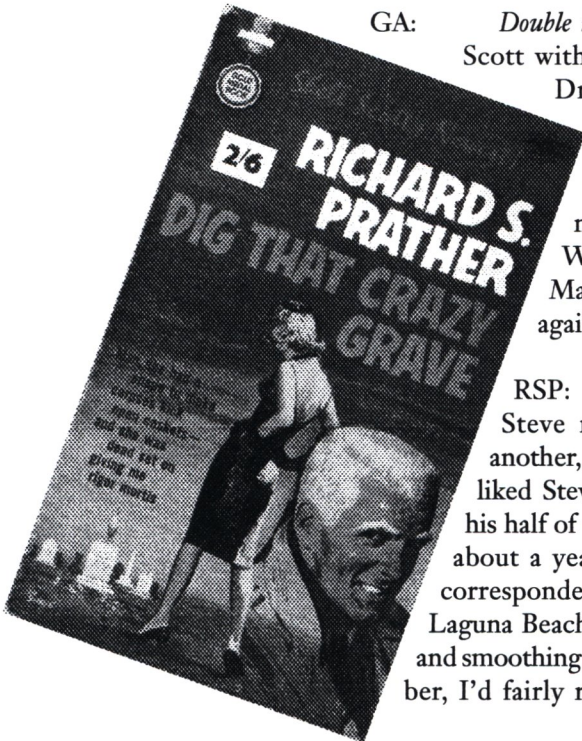
RSP: I have an almost lifelong liking for sf, which goes way back to my prepubescent fascination with Edgar Rice Burroughs's wonderful Tarzan novels when I was ten or twelve years old. The many Tarzans I devoured then led me into ERB's very different but equally wonderful John Carter/Mars-and-Martians books, which were probably my initial encounter with science fiction.

Also at that time, those fondly-remembered pulp magazines, with their raggedy-edged pages and garish, "eye-bruising" cover art—and treasure within of stories, and *more* stories—were displayed in every bookstore or magazine stand that I visited. I read a lot of those pulps, from adventure stories (*Adventure*, *Argosy*) to Westerns (*Wild West Weekly*), to mysteries (*Black Mask*, *Dime Detective*, even *Spicy Detective*)—but, most of all, science fiction (*Astounding Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*). After the pulps disappeared I read a lot of paperback novels, mostly mysteries; but I never lost my love for sf, and never will.

My choice for the best science-fiction writer of them all? Easy. Robert A. Heinlein.

GA: *Double in Trouble* (1959) teamed Shell Scott with Stephen Marlowe's Chester Drum (another popular Gold Medal P.I. hero) [Marlowe (1928–) wrote a great deal of science fiction under his birth-name of Milton Lesser: GA.] Why haven't Prather/Scott and Marlowe/Drum worked together again since?

RSP: Probably because neither Steve nor I ever suggested we do another, and nobody else did, either. I liked Steve Marlowe himself, and liked his half of the book, but I think it took us about a year; first much back-and-forth correspondence, then getting together in Laguna Beach for wrapping up the long ms. and smoothing out a few rough spots. Remember, I'd fairly recently survived the *Dragnet*



ordeal, which used up about a year of writing time also. I was, therefore, eager to do more just-by-me Shell Scott novels . . . which I did.

GA: By the mid-1950s, pulps had been replaced by the more cost-effective digest magazines. Did you enjoy writing for *Manhunt* (nicknamed the “new Black Mask”)? And for your own *Shell Scott Mystery Magazine* (nine issues, 1966)?

RSP: Not much. I was always a guy who wanted to write long, not short; big, not little; full-length novels, not short stories or novelettes. The enjoyment often came during the writing itself, when the words were flowing . . . but doing the shorter pieces was never—repeat, never—my idea. Any suggestion that I do a short story or novelette for *Manhunt*, *SSMM*, *Cavalier*, whatever, invariably came from my longtime literary agent, Scott Meredith. To overcome my reluctance, SM argued convincingly that magazine publication would increase “name recognition”, introduce Shell Scott to new readers, and earn a little (very little) money for me.

I now know that some readers did graduate to the SS novels after becoming acquainted with my P.I. in one or other magazine. And the “very little” money was gratifyingly multiplied after most of those stories were published in paperback collections by Gold Medal Books. So probably Scott Meredith was right. And, after the fact, I’m glad those stories got done, and are still available in the three GM (and one Pocket Books) collections.

GA: Have you ever felt the urge to write more Shell Scott short stories for *Ellery Queen’s*, *Hitchcock’s*, etc.?

RSP: Nope.

GA: The “Matt Helm” movies (starring Dean Martin) were supposedly based on the character created by Donald Hamilton. But they play more like *Shell Scott Joins the Secret Service*. Wasn’t a Shell Scott film series under consideration at that time (c. 1963)?

RSP: Around that time there was more than one “almost but not quite” deal. One company took an option on the entire Shell Scott package, planning to do not only films but also a TV series. However, another company bought out that smart company, which disappeared into limbo, and the immediate possibility of Shell Scott as a P.I. James Bond disappeared with it.

Also, well-known producers Marty Jurow and Dick Shepherd (they

introduced voluptuous Tina Louise as the female star of *God's Little Acre*) were interested in the series, and took an option on *Find This Woman*. Marty Jurow came to Laguna Beach to discuss the "first" film. It was an exciting time for a while. Marty had arranged for Frank Sinatra, no less, to sing the *Find This Woman* theme song. He was also considering two big-name actors as the silver screen's Shell Scott. They were—and you should find at least the second name interesting—Robert Mitchum and Dean Martin. I said I slightly preferred Mitchum, if he would force himself to smile a lot, but Martin would be a great Shell also. (What I really wanted to know was how much they'd pay me.) Alas, none of this came to pass. Why not? Beats me. I guess the simple answer is: That's Hollywood.

In consequence, nobody paid me any Big Movie money. The truth is, it cost me *more* than the option money I got for *Find This Woman* to later buy back the film rights on that book so that I could close a deal with the company that went into limbo.

Actually, the lonely real sale of even a portion of my work to "Hollywood" was the sale in 1992 of the screen rights to three chapters of my book, *The Meandering Corpse*, to Columbia Pictures for "certain incidents" in the screenplay for *The Last Action Hero* (1993, directed by John McTierman). Thus a little bit of Shell Scott, but as "Jack Slater, The Ultimate Hero"—by the Governor of California. Who was then "merely" Arnold Schwarzenegger.

GA: You wrote the *Dragnet: Case No. 561* TV tie-in novelization for Pocket Books in 1956 (as by David Knight). Did you have any problems writing about lead characters that were not of your creation?

RSP: I watched so many *Dragnet* episodes, and listened to so much self-recorded *Dragnet* dialogue, that it paralysed my brain for a *long* time. With that kind of preparation, I didn't have any problems writing about characters I hadn't invented. There were, however, a few other disturbances, tangentially touched upon in my discussion of the three non-Shell novels. I mentioned then that the *Dragnet* novelization for Pocket Books was based upon a true-crime case from L.A.P.D. files, presented to me by the L.A. cop and *Dragnet* script writer appointed to help me. What I didn't then mention is that the case was a dandy and meaty one that had *already* been sold by *Dragnet's* Mark VII Productions, or the L.A.P.D., or an elf or a gnome or somebody to a Movie Company, which proceeded to make of it a Major Motion Picture—which, in fact, had already been scripted, cast, acted in, filmed, released to the world and presumably viewed and enjoyed by millions of

moviegoers. [The film in question was *He Walked by Night* (1949), starring Richard Basehart.]

I learned of this history only years later, long after I had spent a year plotting and writing the book, and it had been accepted with praise, published with a great deal of fanfare, and, I have reason to believe, widely distributed in a mildewy graveyard somewhere.

GA: Drama comes from conflict; the hope of victory and the fear of failure. How do you make an ultimately “invincible” hero like Shell Scott into a “vulnerable” human being?

RSP: Well, first, you don’t tell the reader that Shell Scott is a “vulnerable human being” (or brave, tough, clever, horny, whatever you want the reader to believe your hero, or other character, is). Instead, you *show* (or try to show) him in situations or scenes where he *is* vulnerable (or tough, clever, etc.) Show him making mistakes, like all of us (especially me, I sometimes think), even drawing wrong conclusions from the available evidence (so long as he eventually reaches the right ones).

What the author wants, or should want, is for the reader to “see” (as he reads your words) your lead character—and all other characters, for that matter—acting in ways that let the reader draw his own conclusions about what kind of man (or woman) is on stage . . . and hope they’re the kind of conclusions you wanted your reader to reach when you wrote it. From an article I did for *Writer’s Digest* way back when (called “How to Clap One Hand”: c. 1955):

In one of Mickey Spillane’s books (or maybe all of them) Mike Hammer knocks a hood into a corner and the hood lies there blubbing. Hammer kicks him in the chops and hits him with a rock or a machine gun or an airplane, I don’t remember, and the hood stops blubbing. You might think that’s more than enough, but you’ll agree that “stopping the blubbing” presents a more vivid picture than “Hammer was tough”.

I think one of the reasons for Spillane’s huge (and, in my view, well-deserved) popularity was the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, he knew the “rules” and employed them brilliantly in his books. In the scene mentioned above, and many others, he demonstrated the primary requirement: “SHOW it, don’t tell it.”

GA: Like Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, Shell Scott knows the difference between fit-the-crime punishment and over-the-top revenge. Does

this reflect your own attitude towards “natural justice” and the rule of law?

RSP: This, too, has changed somewhat over time. I used to loudly lament the (apparent) fact that too often guilty men “get away” with it and avoid deserved punishment for their crimes. Now, I believe they—we—may often escape the man-made rule of law but never “natural justice”.

I’m not wise enough to know, but I do believe there is Higher Intelligence in and of the Universe and Us, and Cosmic Laws unvarying and eternal from which we cannot escape . . . that whether we know it or not, eventually all “evil” is punished and all “good” rewarded, though not necessarily in the way we dummies might expect it to happen. So, to enjoy more rewards and fewer punishments all we have to do is learn what those Laws are and quit ruining ourselves by trying to break the unbreakable. Many New-Agers call this Karma. I call it a painful Learning Process, although I haven’t really learned much yet because I don’t know for sure what any of those Laws are. But I hope to eventually. Maybe tomorrow.

In sum: Cosmic law is always just, while much of man-made law (particularly in these phonily patriotic “Dubya” days) is merely statutory justification for crimes that are not *called* crimes.

Be that as it may, for practical here-and-now purposes we’re stuck with the man-made law. So in my books—and in most other mysteries—criminals will continue to be suitably punished under the (Admiralty) law and the good guys will be rewarded for their virtue. After all, what I write is fiction.

GA: Shell Scott has always been an observer and critic of the society in which he works. How does Richard S. Prather and/or Shell Scott feel about the state of present-day America?

RSP: From birth to death, almost everything we’re told is truth is a lie; almost everything we’re told is genuine is false; almost everything we’re told is virtue is vice, and vice versa. The most dangerous hypocrites alive are the priests and preachers and bumbling bureaucrats and drug-pushing physicians and—most of all, No. 1—the parasitical politicians who feed us this garbage and rule us. But they deceive and rule us only because we swallow their garbage without puking and applaud the criminals for committing their crimes. The state of present-day America? Beginning long before, but especially from 1990 until now, or from Bush to Bush, in the misbegotten name of “FIGHTING *TERROR!!!*”, the U.S.A. has become the most

vicious terrorist nation on Earth, staining what used to be “Old Glory” with the blood of countless innocents. If you don’t believe me, ask the ghosts of our dead brothers or sisters in Iraq, plus Afghanistan and nearly every other place with a name on the planet.

Incredibly, some of our elected (and un-elected) political leaders, employing their long-practised Orwellian mind-control language-of-lies, call this slaughter of “foreign” men and women and children “Defending America!” I fail to comprehend how any rational citizen can believe such transparent hogwash; but apparently many can and too many do. With the result that we’re all too immersed up to our necks in an ocean of bullshit, and the tide is still rising.

Otherwise, we’re in great shape.

GA: What are your views on electronic, print-on-demand book publishing? How many Shell Scott volumes are currently available in e-book form?

RSP: I’m the wrong anachronism to ask about electronic anything, Graham, since I’m one of the few writers still breathing who—gasp!—doesn’t use a computer. Which means I don’t surf the Internet, check out fascinating websites, or even send or receive e-mail—whatever that is—and my understanding of electronic publishing is severely limited. (Aside: this condition of computer illiteracy may soon change, however, for reasons outlined below.) But I can tell you what e-publishing meant to me personally so far, and means right now:

For the first time in my half-century writing life, *all* 40 titles in my Shell Scott series (36 novels, 4 collections) are “in print” at the same time from the same publisher—all available for downloading or as real print-on-paper POD books from www.ereads.com (plus Amazon and other websites). While this happy circumstance has so far produced less-than-expected income, it has also produced in me considerable satisfaction, together with that which springs eternal: Hope. At least the possibilities—like the possibilities for e-publishing itself—seem almost limitless.

Even from my own limited perspective, electronic publishing looks like a mind-blowing revolution barely begun that has already changed publishing for ever and will very likely in the days and years ahead transform it into a colossus beyond recognition by old-timers like me and even new-timers of today. A myriad other authors of out-of-print books will find their moribund titles given new life in digital form. But also, on the other side of the coin, countless dilettante first-novelists and “hobby” writers and even a few total imbeciles will be published, adding to the flood of available titles such

wonders as personal *Reminiscences About Me and Pa* by the late Jacob Westerauffen. I guarantee it, along with many other stupefyingly boring and never-before-publishable disasters; plus a few not-to-be-missed masterpieces which might be difficult to find floating in the flood.

Other than that, I know not. However . . .

A longtime friend, Linda Pendleton [the widow of Don “Mack Bolan/the Executioner” Pendleton], has sneakily attempted to brainwash me about the ease and speed and *fun* of working/writing on a computer, bombarding me with pounds of printouts from somewhere in cyberspace. Another writer/friend, Wade Stevenson—apparently weary of my complaints about how long it was taking me to type a 1,000-word manuscript, and by his inability to send me a note by snail-mail—recently purchased a new computer and alas, packed up his replaced hard drive and UPSed it from Wheatland, Wyoming, to me in Sedona, Arizona. The obscenely-named [WANG?: GA] machinery is unpacked and lurking ominously in the next room right now.

So it looks as if, thanks to Fate or Cosmic law or Karma—and the cruel generosity of Linda and Wade—I’ll have to buy a keyboard and mouse, a monitor and modem and printer, and other mysterious tings. I might soon limp . . . growling and complaining . . . into the 21st Century.



A Reverie for Mister Ray: Reflections on Life, Death, and Speculative Fiction by

Michael Bishop contains reviews, formal nods to his major influences (including Jonathan Swift and Theodore Sturgeon), a manifesto on reviewing, profiles of colleagues (from the venerable Ray Bradbury to the young Andy Duncan), state-of-the-art position papers (see “Writing SF as If It Mattered”), humor (“Critics’ Night at the Sci-Fi Bistro”),

observations on paleontology (including his proposal for the Nebula Award-winning novel **No Enemy But Time**), detours into the works of mainstream fabulists like Kurt Vonnegut and Haruki Murakami, and revealing autobiography (from “Military Brat: A Memoir” to the gonzo “Nine Prescriptions for My Funeral”). A truly rich selection (nearly 70 essays) from four decades of Michael Bishop’s career as a dedicated practitioner and observer of the sf and fantasy fields.



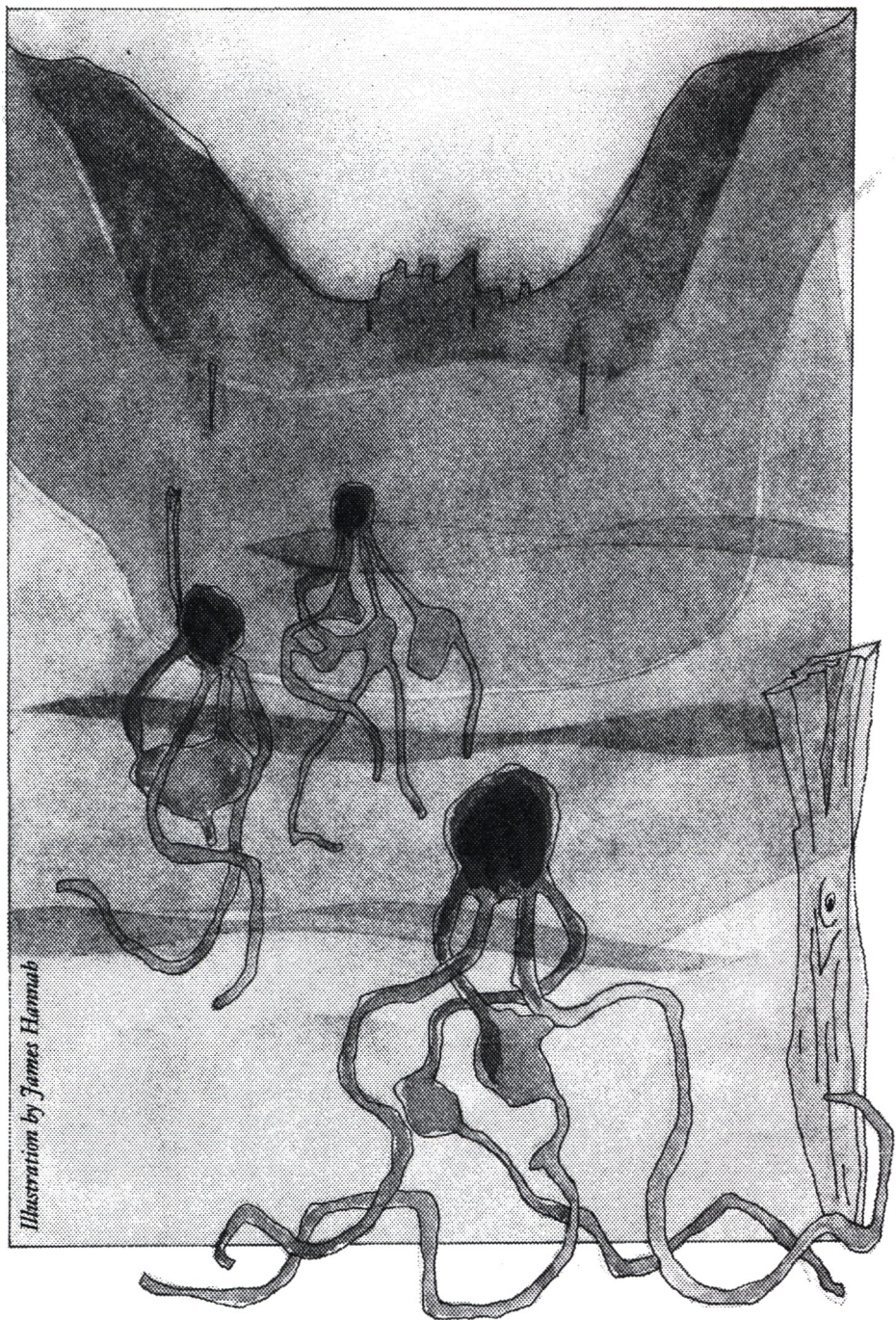


Illustration by James Hamab

Here's an unabashed homage to at least three different sources: Ernest Bramah's Kai Lung stories, Barry Hughart Master Li and Number Ten Ox novels (Bridge of Birds, The Story of the Stone, and Eight Skilled Gentlemen), and a series of Hong Kong supernatural martial arts films starring the late Ying Lam Ching as 'the One Eyebrow Priest'. "Since any lover of speculative fiction should be familiar with Hughart and Bramah—and if not, you have some great reading ahead of you," says the encyclopaedic Mr. Person, "let me talk about the One Eyebrow Priest films. They're wonderful, over-the-top, odd amalgams of kung-fu battles, broad humor, oriental variations on western supernatural creatures (in China, vampires hop, and can be paralyzed with the right prayer affixed to their forehead), and Taoist magic. For a look at what they're like, check out Mr. Vampire, one of the first and best of the series. Finally, special thanks to Walter Jon Williams for helping me nail down a few period details."

The author lives in Austin, Texas, where he just bought a house. His short fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Analog, Fear, and several anthologies. He also edits the Hugo-nominated SF critical magazine Nova Express, and is a member of the long-running Turkey City Writer's Workshop. His non-fiction has appeared in National Review, Reason, Whole Earth Review, The Freeman, The World & I, Science Fiction Eye, The New York Review of Science Fiction, and Slashdot.org. He owns a very large library. He also makes a mean batch of salsa.

Master Lao and the Flying Horror

Lawrence Person

On the day Old Man Zhang was murdered, Orange Blossom was teaching me the ritual she called Butterfly Drinking Nectar.

Her mother had nicknamed her Orange Blossom because she was born the day of her village's Orange Blossom ritual. The other apprentices at the White Crane Temple called her Shaking Melons for current performances of far more interesting rituals.

Minutes earlier, I had made good use of her namesakes in a ritual called Bear Jumping Two Mountains, which I

had found quite engrossing, though not half so much as Butterfly Drinking Nectar. Orange Blossom loved me for my strong and handsome body, my growing mastery of magic and kung fu, and my ability to pay her five coins every other week. I loved her not only for her namesakes, but also for her lovely peasant beauty, her delightful giggle, and her carefully honed talents, many of which had been learned in Shanghai.

Just then she was about to show me her most powerful and sacred ritual, Magic Sword Entering the Lotus,

when our lovely interlude was most cruelly interrupted.

"Idiot! Dolt! Moron!" I heard a dreaded voice yell behind me, each word punctuated by a bamboo staff's painfully familiar blow to my naked back. I leapt off the bed, all the magic draining from my sword as I shielded my head from the wrathful blows of Master Lao.

"Harlot! Strumpet! Whore!" he yelled, wielding his bamboo against Orange Blossom's exposed bottom. (Thanks to ample padding there, his blows inflicted no lasting harm.) "I have told you before not to tempt my apprentices with your wickedness!"

"Their money is as good as anyone else's!" yelled Orange Blossom defiantly. It saddened me to hear her reduce our transcendent ecstasy to mere commerce, but I had more pressing concerns to worry about, as Master Lao turned his wrath, and staff, back to me.

"You were supposed to be back from the market half an hour ago!" he yelled, inflicting a most painful blow to my raised forearm. "And here I find you shirking your duties and cavorting with harlots!"

"Mercy, Master!" I yelled. "My spirit is willing but my flesh is weak!"

"Not nearly so weak as it will be after I get through with you!" he said, raising the staff again.

"What in the Nine Hells are you doing in here?" asked Dancing Petals from the doorway. Dancing Petals was the establishment's proprietress, though the other apprentices called her Lumbering Whale.

"He beat me with a bamboo cane!" yelled Orange Blossom.

"That's five coins extra, and only by appointment!" said Dancing Petals.

"Corrupt panderer! I am only here to retrieve my apprentice! We have no intention of staying in your vile den of iniquity!"

"That's not what you said the last time you were here!" Dancing Petals replied, causing my master's face to turn the most amazing shade of pale.

"Come, Chou Lin, we must leave this place immediately," said Master Lao, drawing himself up and speaking in the calm, dignified voice he used on rich businessmen. "Such houses of wickedness are often a magnet for evil spirits."

In my experience such houses are more often magnets for middle-aged husbands and government officials, but in this, as in so many things, I acceded to my master's greater wisdom. With a single, mournful glance at the lovely Orange Blossom, I struggled into my clothes, grabbed my bundle, and followed Master Lao out into the street.

"Chou Lin, what are the Three Great Sins for a temple apprentice?" he asked.

"Idleness, Drunkenness, and Lustfulness," I recited dutifully.

"And you have indulged in each during the last three days!" he said, striking my back another painful blow.

"Mercy, Master, mercy!" I cried. It seemed unfair for him to bring up Drunkenness, since the bottle had been Kua Qing's. Likewise, the Idleness had been a direct result of the Drunken-

ness, since next morning the sunlight had burned my eyes like hot poker. I knew that when I became a White Crane priest, my chief duties would be battling evil and sin. While I understood evil, I still had an inadequate grasp of sin, and thus sought to study it at every opportunity.

"Stop cringing, you pathetic little insect! Your conduct is unbecoming a temple apprentice. Did you get the rice paper for the prayer offerings?"

"Yes, master."

"Did you get the joss sticks?"

"Yes, master."

"Did you get all three kinds of rice?"

"Yes, master."

"Did you get the steamed buns?"

"No, master!"

Master Lao raised his staff again.

"I was unable to! Zu Bing's shop has closed!" And indeed, the latter was true. Rumor linked Zu Bing and his debts to several notorious gambling house owners with a mound of live ants in a most unpleasant fashion.

"Come then. There is a new place we can get sticky buns."

Spring Moon's noodle house had opened in what had once been the carpentry shop of Kao Ling. Kao Ling had been one of the first victims of the plague of snakes, an incident I have already related in great detail elsewhere.

From the many smiling customers assembled there, it seemed that no one missed Zu Bing. With an attractive atrium extending to the new second story, a bamboo-propped skylight letting in a flood of sunshine, bright tile

floors and the beautiful screen paintings adorning the walls, Spring Moon's noodle house presented a most pleasing and cheerful atmosphere, and I resolved to take Orange Blossom there as soon as Master Lao's wrath (and watchfulness) had faded.

"Are you here for lunch?" asked a melodious voice. I turned and instantly all thoughts of Orange Blossom left my mind.

In our province, it is said that the Emperor of Heaven is attended by the nine most beautiful women in the world, each raised to Godhood that they might serve him on his dragon throne. However, on that day I knew he could have been attended by only eight. One must have slipped away back to earth while he was sleeping, for surely there could not be nine more beautiful women in all of Heaven and Earth than Autumn Wind.

"No, we are here to pick up some steamed buns," said Master Lao, smiling. This in and of itself was a sure sign of Autumn Wind's divinity, since I could count the number of times Master Lao had smiled in my presence on the fingers of a single hand. "Are you Spring Moon?"

"No, I am Autumn Wind, her daughter. Mother is helping out in the kitchen. Let me go get her."

I gazed longingly after her as her divine form glided as softly as her namesake back to the kitchen. Master Lao must have noticed my gaze. He held his staff across my chest and spoke to me in a grave tone.

"Chou Lin, I know what you're

thinking, and I order you to stop at once!"

"Huh?" I replied cleverly.

"You have already fallen into lustfulness once today. Do not compound your sin with a second offense!"

"What?" was my witty retort.

"Autumn Wind is not one of Dancing Petal's girls! To pursue the wicked thoughts about her that I know are racing through your head can lead only to dishonor and ruin!"

"Hmm?" I said eloquently.

Master Lao lowered his staff and leaned forward on it. "Ah, youth," he sighed wistfully.

At that moment, Autumn Wind floated back to us. "Mother says she will be out here shortly."

Once more I mustered the masterful rhetorical skills I had so recently displayed. "Hello," I said, smiling.

"Hello," she said, smiling back so brightly I feared I would melt before her radiance. "Are you two from the village? I haven't seen you in here before."

"We are from the White Crane Temple. I am Master Lao, and this is my apprentice, Chou Lin."

"Hello," I said again, the sight of Autumn Wind evidently having driven all other words from my brain.

"Why don't you—" she began to say, but just then our reverie was broken by a hideous, piercing scream.

Belying his white hair, Master Lao was instantly off and running in the direction of the terrible sound, and soon I, and half the village, followed in his wake.

The scream sounded once again, straight ahead, and Master Lao headed for Old Man Zhang's house.

In his youth, Zhang had made his fortune as a junk captain upon the Yangtze, after which he had retired back to the village for a life of gambling and idle drunkenness, sins for which he was condemned and envied in equal measure.

Spring Flower (who was now, if truth be told, more of an autumn weed) had been his cleaning woman, and it was she who stood just a few feet inside the door to Zhang's house, screaming again and again. Master Lao was through the door in an instant, then stopped, his face ashen. I was only a few steps behind.

"Chou Lin, escort her outside and bar the door," he said. I nodded dumbly and guided the still screaming Spring Flower out the door against the pressing throng, the terrible image of Old Man Zhang's body burned into my mind.

He sat facing the door, dark bloodstains down the front of his blue silk shirt and a bloody crater where his neck had been.

When we arrived back at the temple, Master Lao was in a foul mood.

Not only had he administered purification rites to Zhang's body, but he had to wait nearly an hour for Policeman Ho to show up to examine it. Ho, who owed his job entirely to his uncle's position as assistant

tax collector for the province, had done his usual cursory, bumbling job.

"This man has obviously been the victim of a crime of violence!" he said.

"Your powers of observation are unparalleled, Honorable Ho," said Master Lao.

All of these delays meant we, and the food, arrived back at the temple two hours later than Master Lao had planned on starting preparation for the feast.

"Master Lao," said Kua Qing, rushing up as we entered the temple, "we heard about the murder! What has happened?"

"Later!" bellowed Master Lao, thrusting the chicken cage into Kua Qing's hands. "We must start on the feast. Kill and pluck these chickens immediately!"

"But Master, why me?" asked Kua Qing in the honeyed voice he always used when attempting to evade honest work. "It is Chou Lin who should pluck the chickens in atonement for the sin of lustful-ness." In a small village, news travels fast.

"No, *you* will pluck the chickens," said Master Lao sternly. "Chou Lin needs to perform a more important task."

At this, I puffed up my chest and smiled at Kua Qing. It is always heartening to have my position as Master Lao's Number One Apprentice confirmed.

"Chou Lin, start cleaning the chamber pots."

My smile faded.

Master Lao asserts that all work is honorable, and thus there is no shame in cleaning chamber pots. However, some honors smell better than others.

It was three days prior to the mid-summer festival, time for The Feast of the Chicken, to be followed by The Feast of the Duck, The Feast of the Goose, and finally, on solstice eve, The Feast of the White Crane. (The last, being our namesake, was the only one not consumed.) It was a time to create charms to ward off pestilence, bad weather, and evil spirits.

After I finished the odious task and performed a purifying ritual with water and salt, Master Lao sent me back to the kitchen to help our cook Jade Willow with the preparations. Due to an unfortunate incident involving a simple fire spell and a pot of cooking oil, Jade Willow held an irrational and entirely unwarranted grudge against me. Upon my entrance, she gave me a deep frown, then set me tending no fewer than six pots.

After a good hour of vigorous stirring, Old Zhong, the temple servant, finally came to relieve me, and Master Lao had me change into my ceremonial robes of gold and cinnabar.

For the feast, the oldest apprentices sat closest to Master Lao, so I sat immediately to his right while Kua Qing sat to his left. Further down the table were Ba Le, Lai Wang, Dai Li, and Bang Zhou. At the end of the table were the four "tadpoles," the novitiates pledged to the temple just a month before. There had originally been six,

but two had already hobbled home in splints, unable to stand up to Master Lao's rigorous training methods.

Once we were seated, Master Lao struck a small silver gong, then began the ritual invocation against evil.

When he reached the third stanza, someone chuckled.

Master Lao paused, then resumed the chant, looking from face to face, trying to determine the culprit. Because of certain unfortunate incidents in the past, I was frequently the subject of his scrutiny in such matters, but this time the voice was clearly too deep and far away to be my own.

The rest of the invocation passed without incident, until Master Lao finished up by burning a prayer offering. Then the same voice coughed.

Master Lao looked around again, craning his head to see if anyone was lurking around the rest of the temple, to no avail. Still perturbed, he rang the dinner gong, and Jade Willow and Old Zhong came out of the kitchen bearing the feast.

Any lingering uneasiness over the odd voices dissipated as the steaming platters were laid before us. Though the temple diet usually consisted of meager portions of rice and fish, feast days always offered up a sumptuous and dizzying variety of food, as well as an opportunity to imbibe the rice and plum wine usually forbidden us. Moreover, on such days eating and drinking as much as possible was considered a sacred duty, a way of showing respect to the Celestial Masters, from whom

all bounty flows. It was upon these occasions that my own devotion was unsurpassed.

Rice wine and jocularly flowed freely as we quickly slurped down gallons of noodles, devoured heaps of sticky buns, and consumed dozens of rice balls. Only Master Lao seemed lacking in festive spirit, still brooding over the mysterious voice.

Then Jade and Zhong brought out the chickens, laying them out along the table. Using my superior speed, I had just snagged a drumstick before Kua Qing could reach it, when a frightened cry at the other end of the table silenced our revelry.

Xau Qu, the roundest of the tadpoles, was backing away from the table. In front of him, the roast chicken he had been reaching for only moments before was moving.

Not just moving, *dancing*. It took two steps forward, then two back, then turned in a circle, all the while swinging its cooked wings as juice dripped down its still-moist carcass.

"Chou Lin, bring my pen and inkpot, quickly!" said Master Lao, and I scurried to obey. Thus armed, Master Lao quickly transcribed a prayer against evil on a sheet of rice paper, rolled it up in a ball of sticky rice, then cast it at the possessed bird.

The roast chicken gave a painful squawk, then flopped lifelessly back to the table. The younger apprentices, who had been holding their breath, let out a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.

Another chicken, this one in front of Ba Le, stood up and kicked over his wine cup. Master Lao dashed off and rolled up another prayer ball and dispatched this one as well, but he had no sooner vanquished that chicken when a third popped up.

After dispatching two more unnatural chickens, Master Lao changed tactics. "Chou Lin, fetch my silver rope."

In the great prayer cabinet against the north wall were tucked many of the more esoteric tools of a White Crane priest. In one of the bottommost drawers was a thin rope of purest spun silver, knotted and braided for strength, its handle carved from the hardest of ram's horn, intricately inscribed with the most worthy verses of Lao Dan. It was this tool that I quickly retrieved and rushed to Master Lao's hands.

Master Lao whirled the silver rope around his head three times, chanting out an invocation to banish evil spirits, then launched it at the latest dancing chicken, ensnaring it.

There was a cry of pain high up in the rafters. Master Lao, slowly and with a surprisingly great effort for something so small, hauled the chicken toward him. As he pulled, an evil, leer-ing face high in the temple shadows was pulled into the lantern-light.

It was Old Man Zhang's head. Or rather, slightly *more* than his head, as a long trail of writhing viscera snaked behind it.

"Filthy priest! Your silver cord will not save you!"

"Kua Qing! Begin the chant to drive

out evil spirits!" said Master Lao, slowly pulling the roped chicken toward him, which also drew Zhang's head lower. "Quickly!"

Kua Qing began the chant, which was soon picked up, somewhat unsteadily, by the other apprentices.

"Doom will come to your temple! I will eat your livers, and pluck out your eyes!"

"Chou Lin, you know the first refrain of the third Crane Exorcism?"

"Your corpses shall litter the earth, and I shall suck the marrow from your bones!"

As Zhang was pulled closer, it became apparent that his eye teeth were unnaturally long and curved.

"Yes master!"

"Scribe it on the paper, then roll it up in a sticky rice ball as you saw me do!"

"The Queen shall suck down all your souls, and you shall serve as her slaves in Hell!"

I have always considered my calligraphy inferior to my martial arts, but never had I scribed ideograms so quickly in all my life. In ten seconds I had written out the refrain and rolled it into the center of a ball of sticky rice.

"Now, throw it at the head!"

With a stone I am regarded as a pretty fair shot, having once managed to destroy an expensive vase at no less than 50 paces. (My reasons for doing so were entirely salutary and justified, but too complex to relate here.) However, when I tossed the rice ball, Zhang's head jerked with an amazing fluidity,

and my shot sailed just wide of the mark.

“Again!” said Master Lao, still slowly and carefully pulling the chicken, and Zhang, closer.

“The worms shall eat your flesh, and your heads shall hunt the night at the Queen’s command!”

I completed and threw a second prayer ball, but Zhang again ducked out of the way.

“Again!” said Master Lao. The exertions of the chicken grew ever more frantic, and it was all he could do to keep it captive.

Once again I scribed and enclosed a prayer, took careful aim, and threw. This time the ball hit the upper left side of Zhang’s face, disintegrating in a shower of smoke and rice as the impacted cheek caught fire.

Zhang screamed and jerked violently. At that jerk, the captive chicken went barreling over the edge of the table, slipping out of the silver loop. Still screaming, Zhang’s burning head flew up and out one of the second floor windows. By the time Kua Qing and I had raced up the stair it had already escaped into the night.

“Close all the windows!” ordered Master Lao. During the summer, the screens were left open due to the heat, but none of us argued.

“Master Lao, what was it?” asked Ba Le. “And how could it have gotten into the temple?”

“And who is the queen it mentioned?” asked Bang Zhou.

“It must have flown in through a

window,” said Master Lao. “We have not blessed the charms there in over a year. As for what it is, I have an idea, but I shall have to consult the sacred texts. In the meantime, continue the feast. We’ll deal with Zhang and his ‘queen’ tomorrow.”

We resumed our seats, but the other apprentices only picked at their food, leaving their chickens untouched. Fortunately, my quick thinking in grabbing a drumstick as soon as it arrived meant our chicken was the only one not possessed, and thus still safe for consumption. However, my chain of logic seemed unconvincing to the others, leaving me the entire chicken.

Once again I proved unsurpassed in my devotion to the Celestial Masters.

Most of the next morning was taken up with making new charms and re-blessing the ones around the temple. Master Lao observed the rituals, then, content that Kua Qing was capable of supervising in his stead, pulled me aside to help him in his study.

Along with the standard works of Lao Dan, Zhuang Zhou and Confucius, Master Lao possessed a number of ancient books and scrolls, many of them on esoteric subjects. There was Hai Yan’s important book detailing the many varieties of hopping vampires, Yu Wei’s obscure treatise on magic involving turtles, and a mysterious volume written in an unreadable script by a

mad Arab with an unpronounceable name.

After several minutes of study, Master Lao finally found what he was looking for in a particularly large leather-bound tome. "Here, take a look at this," he said, pointing to a woodcut depicting three flying heads trailing viscera behind them, with terrified villagers running about below.

"What are they?"

"Here they are called the Kongbu Feixing Tou. It says that they are demonic spirits which possess the heads of those who have died without being properly blessed. Those so possessed can infect others by biting their necks or wrists. Unless the wound is purified within an hour, the victim also turns into an evil flying creature, enslaved by the one that bit it."

"How do we fight them?"

"They cannot stand sunlight, and strong light of any kind causes them pain, especially when reflected from a silver mirror. Prayers and charms can harm them, but because they are encased in human flesh, not actually kill them unless placed directly in the mouth. And the queen herself can only be killed by a blessed arrow carved from a branch of a weeping mulberry.

"It also says that once the Kongbu Feixing Tou queen has three servants to do her bidding, she can use them to consecrate an unholy temple, and from there open a gate to summon more of her kind."

"A temple? Like our own?"

"Perhaps. According to this, it must

be equidistant from the sites of the three slain acolytes. Perhaps we can—"

I'll never know what Master Lao was going to say next, because at that very moment Kua Qing burst into the room, his face stricken.

"Master Lao, you and Chou Lin must come quickly! There's been another murder!"

"Another one?" Master Lao stood up. "Chou Lin, you stay here and supervise the other apprentices."

"No Master, Chou Lin should come as well," said Kua Qing, bowing sadly. "The murder was at Dancing Petals'. It was . . . it was . . ."

At that Kua Qing bowed and raced out of the room, unable to meet my eyes. It was then I knew.

It took all my training to stay composed as we ran to Dancing Petals'. In the front room, her other girls issued wild lamentations and copious tears. Dancing Petals herself wore a mournful expression, and silently gestured for us to follow her up the stairs to Orange Blossom's room.

It pained me greatly to realize that the same room I had experienced such ecstasy in the day before had become the site of such a foul crime. The smell of her namesake perfume still lingered in the air, but was now mixed with an undertone of corruption and decay.

When Dancing Petals lifted the sheet away from the covered body I had to turn away, unable to look at the ruin where her head had been. I stood

there staring at the wall while Master Lao administered the proper rituals. Then he finished and turned up the sheet.

“Tell undertaker Zu I will send him special charms and ointments to prepare the body with. In the meantime, there is a great evil loose. Tell all the girls to close their windows by sunset.”

When Dancing Petals had left Master Lao turned back to me. “Chou Lin, do you see now why I said these places are magnets for evil spirits?”

“Master Lao, with all respect, I do not believe this is what you had in mind. Nor do you.”

At that he looked nonplussed for a moment, his eyes showing a trace of the stormy look that usually preceded a beating. But this time he merely grunted and nodded, then turned away.

Soon the entire village had been instructed to close their windows by sunset, no matter how they might swelter in the summer heat.

Despite the tragic occurrences, it was the night for the Feast of the Duck, and preparations had to be undertaken. The seasons would not halt for our mortal problems, nor would the Celestial Masters step down from Heaven to dry our tears. In fact, with such evil abroad, there was all the more reason to seek their favor.

And so it was with heavy hearts that Master Lao and I once again found ourselves in Spring Moon’s noodle house. Autumn Wind greeted us and I

felt my spirits lift somewhat, though she was still struck by our long faces.

“Both of your faces are too sad for a festival day! You look like someone died!”

This caused a brief and uncomfortable silence as Master Lao and I looked at each other, then he started explaining Orange Blossom’s death, though not the precise nature of her murderer, and Autumn Wind looked positively stricken. News travels fast, but evidently the doings at Dancing Petals’ were not considered polite conversation in the company of one so ethereal as Autumn Wind.

“That’s horrible! Oh, I’m so sorry! Did either of you know her?”

“Yes,” I said, then immediately regretted it, fearful of what Autumn Wind might think of such a friendship, but she seemed far too good-natured to draw such scandalous (if admittedly correct) conclusions.

“Oh you poor man!” she said, giving me a hug. At that moment I must admit that thoughts of Orange Blossom moved very far away from my mind indeed. “Here, the two of you sit down. I’ll go fetch mother and get you some tea.”

Autumn Moon glided away from us in a way that confirmed, once again, her heavenly origin. I reflected that, if one of them had to survive, then better Autumn Wind than Orange Blossom. Then I immediately felt a sharp pang of guilt, for Autumn Wind, while beautiful, was someone I barely knew, while I had known Orange Blossom very well

indeed. But then I thought that, on the strength of merit and virtue, Autumn Wind was clearly the more deserving. But *then* I thought—

There are times when I am proud of my learning. My father had been an illiterate ox-herd, while I was more than halfway to being a sage and respected White Crane Priest. However, at that moment I felt dumber than the dumbest ox, not knowing what I felt or thought. Master Lao often said that the road to wisdom is a very long and painful one. I thought that was merely an easy way to justify our beatings, but the longer I live the more I fear he is right.

Spring Moon insisted on leaving the kitchen to serve us tea and sympathy. Like her daughter she was slim and graceful, and carried her mature beauty well. She asked us gently for details about the murder. Master Lao was circumspect about the cause, but emphasized that a killer was loose in the night, and that all window screens should be closed and doors locked.

After this genial chat, Spring Moon insisted on making this order of buns an offering to the temple. Master Lao refused twice, then graciously acceded the third time, offering to send charms and blessings over the next day.

Back at the temple, Master Lao pulled out the village map he used to advise businessmen on the most auspicious location for a new enterprise. He made a small mark for Zhang's house, then another for Dancing Petals' place, then laid a reed between them. Then

he took out two more reeds of the same length to form a triangle, with the temple squarely in the middle.

"Just as I feared," said Master Lao.

"Who lives here?" I asked, pointing to an estate on the edge of town at the triangle's apex.

"Hmm, that would be Hu Feng's place," said Master Lao darkly. Feng ran a distillery which decanted plum wine of unusual potency. His position at the edge of town was necessitated by the unfortunate tendency of his production apparatus toward periodic explosions. Despite these occasional setbacks, Feng was a remarkably successful businessman, as his libations were a favorite throughout the province, and he had steadily improved his father's original recipe to the point where cases of permanent blindness resulting from its imbibing were now exceptionally rare.

"Obviously, someone will need to protect Honorable Feng's establishment," I said, rising, "So I'll just go over there and start—"

At that, Master Lao extended his bamboo staff and pushed me, quite forcefully, back into my seat.

"Neither you nor Kua Qing will defend Feng's, despite your obvious knowledge of his establishment. I will go myself and take Xau Qu with me. You and Kua Qing will guard the temple. But first, we must prepare the Feast of the Duck."

There followed more feast preparations, although this time I was not stirring pots but inspecting the temple to

make sure charms had been appropriately situated and blessings properly scribed above all doors and windows. For once Kua Qing seemed to have done a good job supervising the other apprentices, rather than his usual half-hearted and slipshod efforts, perhaps because this time his own safety was at stake.

Some may believe that I have unfairly exaggerated Kua Qing's numerous deficiencies in these pages, but they don't know him as well as I, nor have they witnessed his underhanded dealings at close range as I have. It is true that I myself am not free of sin, and that I have not always followed the Celestial Masters in all things. However, there is an important difference: the errors I have committed have been but youthful indiscretions and small lapses in my otherwise laudable life, while Kua Qing's deplorable actions stem from deep and abiding flaws in his character.

Besides, as any number of bruises and scars on his body will attest, my kung fu is demonstrably superior.

The feast itself was more subdued than the night before. Because we would be taking turns guarding the temple, we were allowed only one cup of plum wine each. (There is one traveler of my acquaintance who claims that his kung fu is improved immeasurably by imbibing vast quantities of alcohol before every bout, but this person is known far and wide as a shameless braggart and liar, so I shall refrain from naming him here.) This time no

supernatural forces interrupted either the blessing or the meal.

After a necessarily abbreviated feast, Master Lao went to his cabinet and withdrew several implements. For himself he pulled out the silver rope, a small whisk broom with bristles of tiger fur, and a slender bamboo rod covered with strange symbols. For myself and Kua Qing he pulled out a hooded prayer lantern and an octagonal silver mirror inscribed with the eight trigrams of the Bagua. The lantern he poured a measure of purified palm oil into, then lit. Next he wrote out a long prayer on a piece of vellum, chanting over it the entire time. When finished, he skillfully folded it into the shape of a crane, then inserted it into the flame. Suddenly, the lantern light seemed to increase ten fold, making it bright enough that I briefly shielded my eyes.

"If one of the Kongbu Feixing Tou attacks, shine the lantern off the mirror to reflect the beam onto them. It may not destroy them, but it should cause them great pain. Chou Lin, head the first watch, and Kua Qing the second." At that, Master Lao and Xau Qu headed off to Feng's.

That night was the first time I had ever viewed the wide courtyard of our temple as anything but an inviting refuge. One corner held the stumps we balanced upon for our White Crane training; we practiced our forms outside when the weather was good, and held the harvest festival for the whole village there in the fall. Yet tonight, despite torches burning in the corners,

it seemed a strange and ominous place, filled with dancing shadows as the willow trees whispered in the breeze.

Bang Zhou was my companion for the first watch, and it was he who carried the silver mirror. Born the youngest of nine sons in a poor fisherman's family near Canton, Bang Zhou was thin as a rake and wore a perpetual hang-dog expression. Despite his slight build he was a sturdy fighter and a graceful acrobat.

"We'll patrol around the entire length of the temple together," I instructed Bang Zhou. "If we see anything, we'll use the lantern and mirror and call out for the other apprentices to help."

"What if it's not a demon? Or what if the lantern doesn't work? Shouldn't we have swords?" asked Bang Zhou.

"Master Lao said the lantern should be effective," I answered. But then a snake of doubt uncoiled its head as I remembered how unnaturally strong Old Man Zhang's head had been. "But it wouldn't hurt to have swords," I concluded. "Run in and fetch one for each of us."

"Chou Lin..." whispered a strangely familiar female voice as soon as Bang Zhou had disappeared.

"Who's there?" I asked, shining my lantern into the gloom of the courtyard.

"Why, it's just me, Chou Lin," answered the voice, and when I turned I saw Orange Blossom's face staring at me from the edge of the torchlight.

"Orange Blossom!" I said, stepping toward her, flooded with a feeling of relief. But then I stopped, uneasy. "But I thought you were dead!"

"Oh no, that wasn't me!" she said, laughing her delightful peasant giggle in a way that sounded slightly strange. "That was another girl that looked like me. When that horrible thing came in through the window I escaped out into the woods. I've been out there all day. Oh, Chou Lin I'm so cold! I wasn't able to grab any clothes before I escaped..."

This particular detail interested me greatly, but there was still something that didn't quite add up. "What was the other girl doing in your room?"

Orange Blossom laughed again. "We were doing something terribly naughty! So naughty I can only whisper it. Come closer and I'll tell you."

This too interested me greatly, but it was at this moment that I finally remembered to think with the large head rather than the small one. I held up the lantern and aimed it at Orange Blossom.

Orange Blossom's head recoiled and hissed at the sudden radiance, which revealed, just as I feared, the absence of her body and a long trail of viscera floating behind her. "You fool!" she screamed. "You had to go and ruin it! I'll do it the hard way!"

At that she flew straight for me, her unnaturally long teeth now visible. Her rush was so quick I had no time to think, whirling around and bringing the lantern in an arc head-on into her

face, sending her recoiling away, a scream of pain on her lips.

“You wretched little worm!” she screamed, her pale face turning red where the lantern had connected. “You’ll pay for that! Your pain will be unimaginable!”

“Orange Blossom, please, don’t do this! Remember all we shared when you were alive!”

“Shared?” She let out a cruel, chilling laugh. “We never *shared* anything. You bought me like you bought chickens at the market! And I pretended to love you to keep the coins coming. ‘Oh Chou Lin, you’re the best! Of course I love you!’” She laughed again. “Look at the strutting, arrogant ox-herder, so proud of his kung fu, and his position at the temple, and his pitiful lovemaking. You weren’t even the best among the temple apprentices! Kua Qing is a better lover than you’ll ever be!” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “You know, he was so good, I often let him visit for free.”

“Begone, demon,” I said, thrusting the lantern toward her again. “I will not listen to your lies!”

“What’s the matter, Chou Lin, don’t you have five coin on you to buy my body with? Oh wait, I don’t have a body anymore.” At that she let loose another cruel laugh, then snarled and dove for another attack.

I launched a palm-heel strike to send her spinning back, then grabbed the floating trail of viscera, swung her around a couple of times, sending her spinning out into the courtyard, a

move I instantly regretted. My hands, now covered with the vile, unnatural secretions of her demonic organs, immediately began to tingle unpleasantly, followed quickly by a painful burning sensation. I dropped the lantern and pulled off my robe, trying to dry my hands.

Orange Blossom took that opportunity to attack again. With my hands trapped, all I could do was wrap the rest of the robe around her.

There followed a most ignoble episode of my being dragged across the courtyard as Orange Blossom attempted to escape my robe’s confines. I was shocked at the strength a single flying head could display, though in life certain parts of Orange Blossom’s body had displayed a remarkably strong grip. She finally wriggled free, and I took this opportunity to race back to the lantern, Orange Blossom in hot pursuit.

“Chou Lin?” asked Bang Zhou incredulously, having finally located the swords.

“The mirror!” I screamed. “Quickly!”

For a moment, Bang Zhou looked stunned, then came to his senses and held up the mirror. I quickly directed the lantern’s beam at it, which Bang Zhou moved to reflect squarely at Orange Blossom’s head. She let out a scream as she burst into flames, then quickly fled over the wall, leaving a trail of sparks behind as she escaped into the night.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Just my pride.”

Kua Qing and Dai Li relieved us at midnight, and the rest of the night passed without incident. The next morning, Jade Willow shot me a dirty look over the ruins of my robe, as if flying monsters were part of a complex plot to deplete the temple's meager clothing budget. (I will admit that a certain incident or two in the past requiring her to spend several hours removing plum wine stains from my robes may have contributed to her prejudice.)

Master Lao and Xau Qu returned from Feng's just as breakfast was being served. (Though Master Lao has the lean, muscled body appropriate to a kung fu master, I have noticed that he never misses a meal, and I have always sought to emulate him in this regard.) His night had passed without any sign from the Kongbu Feixing Tou, and Master Lao listened with great interest to my description of Orange Blossom's visit (though I did omit certain slanderous lies she told as not being relevant to the matter at hand).

"Maybe the worst is over," said Master Lao. "Without a third victim, they won't be able to consecrate their temple. But just in case, I want Kua Qing and Bang Zhou to bring back branches from a weeping mulberry today."

That said, Master Lao wrote down the needs for that night's festival and sent me out to procure them, then went to his room to sleep while he could.

Kua Qing returned with the weeping mulberry branches, and Master Lao brought us into his study to observe how arrows were crafted and consecrated. First the ends were cut off with a blessed knife, then the bark was carefully stripped away with a special circular tool. Next the shafts were cleansed in purified water, then again in salt.

Master Lao wrote out several prayers against evil, burned each in a silver tray, sifted the ashes into the ink dish, then pricked his thumb and let a single drop of blood fall into the concoction. He wrote out a very specific prayer against evil in a tiny hand on a slip of parchment, then carefully rolled it around the arrow shaft, repeating the process until he had 20 blessed shafts laying in various states of drying.

Next he took out a bag of eagle feathers, sorting through it for suitable candidates. Finally, he feathered and pointed each shaft. Though I'm sure a true fletcher could have done better and quicker work, each seemed lethal and well-honed.

That accomplished, Master Lao placed the arrows in a quiver, then took down the ceremonial bow which hung on his west wall, both of which he handed over to Kua Qing. (As much as it pains me to admit it, bowmanship is the one area of martial arts where Kua Qing's prowess exceeds my own. However, I attribute this to an entirely inadvertent incident early in my apprenticeship that resulted in my being

banned from using the bow for three months, thus allowing Kua Qing to gain an unfair advantage.)

However, any pleasure Kua Qing had in this assignment was short-lived. Since the events of the last few days had interrupted our usual kung fu training, Master Lao decided to put us through a particularly grueling two-hour workout.

As twilight descended, Widow Zi came waddling up to the temple. She was a pleasant, matronly woman whose husband had been executed (for smuggling opium) by a most unpleasant method involving blocks of granite, a brazier, and a long, thin metal rod. She arrived out of breath and Master Lao invited her in to sit down. While Jade Willow made tea, she asked if anyone had seen Gau Lou that day. Gau Lou was a local handyman who lived in a shack at the far end of the village. He never did work at the temple because my fellow apprentices and I were always available to provide manual labor. He was supposed to visit that morning to help clear brush around her house, but had never shown up. The news seemed to disturb Master Lao, who sent me to fetch the village map.

"Can you show me where Gau Lou's shack is?" he asked.

Widow Zi took a few moments to find her own house on the map, then pointed to a clearing near the forest. "There."

Master Lao made a charcoal mark, then brought out and laid down his

reeds again, forming another triangle. This time the triangle was centered on a large building near the heart of the village.

"What's that?" asked Kua Qing.

"Spring Moon's noodle house," said Master Lao. "Quick, gather everyone up! We must go over there immediately!"

Master Lao quickly sorted through his prayer cabinet, gathering items for the coming battle: his herbal medicine kit, the lantern and mirror, rice paper and ink, several swords, two spears made from an ash tree, a bowl of sticky rice, and Kua Qing's bow and arrows.

We raced over to Spring Moon's. When we arrived, the door was closed, the screens drawn and the lanterns extinguished. Master Lao banged on the door several times. It was finally unlocked and Spring Moon, her hair down, looked out quizzically. "Oh, Master Lao, it's you. Is there something wrong?"

Master Lao bowed apologetically. "Very possibly, madam. Please allow us to inspect your premises to ensure you come to no harm."

We entered quickly and formed a circle around Master Lao and Spring Moon, scanning the area for signs of the Kongbu Feixing Tou in the flickering lantern light. Except for the lovely Autumn Wind walking out of the kitchen, the building seemed empty.

"Check the windows," said Master Lao, and we moved to comply.

"What's going on?" asked Autumn Wind.

"There's a great evil at loose in the night," said Master Lao. "Are all the windows barred and charmed?"

We went forward to verify that every window was locked, and that charms against evil were situated in every corner, a silk string connecting each to each in the shape of an X. We all nodded in turn, indicating that our window was secure.

"Let me check the windows upstairs," said Autumn Wind, already starting up.

"It might be dangerous—" Master Lao began, but by that time I was already racing up the stairs just behind her. I arrived at her side just as she reached the second floor.

"It is dangerous for you to be up here alone!"

At that she smiled and I felt my heart melt again. "I already feel safer with you here, though I think you're being silly. There's nothing up here, but we can check the windows together."

We did so, and each appeared to be closed and properly charmed. The building appeared to be protected.

"See? Nothing to worry about," she said, smiling.

I returned her smile, but something nagged the back of my mind. "Is there no other way in? How about a back door? Or the chimney?"

"No, the back door is locked. And the flu is always closed when we're not cooking."

I looked around, then up. "What about the skylight? Is it locked?"

She frowned. "No, I didn't think of that. But who could possibly get in from the roof?"

Faced with the difficulty of explaining the exact nature of the evil loose, I avoided it entirely. "It should be locked just like the windows and doors."

"There's no lock on it," she said, "but I suppose we can tie it down." At that she had me fetch a small ladder, which she braced against the nearest pillar and started up.

"Do you need any help?" I asked.

"No, I can do it," she said, reaching for a black rope caught under the edge of the skylight door.

Only it wasn't a rope.

Autumn Wind screamed as the thing coiled around her hand, then jerked her upward as the skylight door flew open. Instantly I leapt up onto the ladder and grabbed her foot before she could be pulled out by her inhuman assailant.

Whatever writhing thing gripped her was strong, but not quite strong enough to lift both of us. Still gripping Autumn Wind's foot, I leapt up and wrapped my legs around the pillar, pulling against the creature with all my might. Inch by inch I gained against it, Autumn Wind screaming all the while. I began to think I might be able to best it, when another half-dozen ropy tentacles descended from the darkness to grip Autumn Wind's arms and head. Suddenly I was wrenched from the pillar by the unseen foe's inhuman strength, and feared that both of us were doomed to be pulled into the

night when I felt two hands gripping each of *my* ankles.

I looked back and saw Xau Qu and Bang Zhou hanging on. For once Xau Qu's bulk served him well, as the fiend we fought was not strong enough to lift all four of us. However, it still lurched and heaved against us, causing us to jerk and ripple like a segmented festival dragon. Painful as this was, my discomfort was increased by the disparity in weight between Xau Qu and Bang Zhou. However, Xau Qu had his own cause for complaint, as every jerk sent his head crashing into the pillar, each eliciting most strong and unpriestly oaths from his lips. And I can only imagine how much more agonizing the entire struggle must have been for poor Autumn Wind.

My own discomfort increased momentarily when the limber Bang Zhou climbed up my body as though it were a rope, then gripped my hair most painfully with one hand while he pulled a sword from his belt. Then, timing the swings, he leapt up to slash through the tangle wrapped around Autumn Wind's head. For a moment we had the advantage, but Bang Zhou's blow caused the beast to jerk so violently that a momentarily stunned Xau Qu lost his grip.

Though her head was free, Autumn Wind's arms were still in the monster's clutches. Bang Zhou raised his sword for another chop, when the strands holding Autumn Wind's right hand suddenly let go, only to instantly wrap themselves around Bang Zhou's swor-

darm. With a wrenching jerk, the sword fell from his grasp. I caught it as it fell, and it was now my turn to leap up and grab Autumn Wind's arm with one hand, while severing the strands that bound Bang Zhou.

Suddenly, the beast released its last grip on Autumn Wind and all three of us fell heavily to floor, scattering tables and chairs in our wake.

"Are you all right?" I asked Autumn Wind.

"My ankles hurt, and I think I'm an inch taller," replied Autumn Wind, "but other than that I'm AGGGGGGHHHHHH!"

Autumn Wind held out her arm, and the source of her distress became apparent. The black, ropey strands entangling her were revealed to be braided hair. Moreover, the strands still wrapped around her wrists seemed *alive*, and slithered steadily up her arms like snakes up a tree branch.

Dai Li and Ba Le came running up the stairs, spears in hand, as Bang Zhou and I each pulled the animate hair off Autumn Wind. "Quick, get a prayer lantern!" I instructed as the braids writhed in our hands. When Lai Wang brought the lantern, Bang Zhou and I both consigned the unnatural locks to its flame. As they burned, there was a terrible scream above the noodle house.

Then the skylight door flew open, and *they* descended.

Orange Blossom was there, and Old Man Zhang, and Gau Lou, whom I vaguely recognized. But all our eyes

were inevitably drawn toward the inescapable presence of the Kongbu Feixing Tou Queen.

She possessed a cold, inhuman beauty, with pale skin, high cheekbones, long, thin fangs, and onyx eyes with cats-eye pupils of fire. All around her, several yards in every direction, floated myriad ropey tresses of lustrous black hair, each of which seemed to writhe of its own accord. However, it was what was *in* her hair which was most alarming of all.

Dozens of shriveled heads, pale skin stretched like parchment over their skulls, floated entangled in her hair. Their eyes were dead except for tiny flames in each orb, pale reflections of their Queen's fiery visage. Each of their mouths moved wordlessly, issuing the rattling, hissing sound of a dying old man's labored breathing.

"Well, look what we have here!" she said in archaic Mandarin. "A clutch of fresh and juicy worms for the nest! If you think your old man's pathetic bush magic will thwart my will you are sadly mistaken!"

"Demon, I've faced far worse than you before," said Master Lao, raising his staff. "Be gone from this place, or face your own destruction!"

"Your soul will make a most splendid feast, little priest!" At that her unnatural hair convulsed, sending a screaming horde of her skull minions flying toward us, teeth bared.

Thrusting Autumn Wind toward the stairs behind me, I split the first attacker in half with Bang Zhou's

sword, and then struck another a glancing blow. Ba Le managed to skewer still another, but both he and Dai Li were quickly forced to use their spears as staffs as more and more attacked. Behind us, the other apprentices lobbed sticky rice prayer balls at the horrors, and where their shots connected the skulls blackened and fell to the ground. But every time one was destroyed, two more seemed to take its place. Soon there were too many to stand against, and I and the other apprentices fought a desperate withdrawal down the stairway.

"The lantern!" cried Master Lao. "Quickly!"

Lai Wang unhooded the lantern and directed it toward Master Lao, who reflected the beam off the octagonal silver mirror and into the creatures. The beam caught one of the flying skulls squarely, and it uttered a horrifying shriek, then exploded in a shower of dust. So too, when the beam passed across Gau Lou's head, his hair burst into flame before he fled its radiance. Soon Gau Lou's panicked flight resulted in several small fires around the noodle house, Spring Moon and Autumn Wind following frantically in his wake with pitchers of water to douse the flames.

However, when Master Lao directed the beam against the Queen, she laughed as her hair readily blocked it.

"Your little mirror might work on the undead, little priest, but do you really think it would affect one forged in the Lower Hells?"

“Kua Qing, the bow!” cried Master Lao.

Kua Qing hopped up onto a table, pulled out an arrow, aimed, and fired all in one smooth motion. The arrow flew straight at the Queen, but she easily plucked it out of the air with her hair, then gasped in pain and dropped it as her strands caught fire.

“Weeping mulberry arrows!” hissed the Queen, shaking out the flames. “You’re more clever than I thought! But it will avail you nothing. Get the bowman!”

The mob of skulls we had been fighting suddenly rose up and over our heads, making a beeline for Kua Qing. Chanting, Master Lao leapt up onto the table in front of him, assuming the crane stance as his palms took on the unmistakable glow of Lao Dan Hands.

And then the fight was *truly* on.

We raced back to form a protective perimeter around Kua Qing. Swords, hands and spears struck with all the skill we could muster, sending the skulls hurtling back from our blows. Gau Lou (his head finally extinguished), Orange Blossom and Old Man Zhang each swooped and dove, trying to sink their fangs into our necks, or, failing that, entangle us in their viscera. As Master Lao’s glowing blows hurtled around him like a firework prayer wheel, Kua Qing hunkered low on the table, popping up every now and then to shoot another arrow, but none ever made it beyond the Queen’s hair. Spring Moon and Autumn Wind cowered beneath the

table, stabbing out with their kitchen knives anytime one of the horrors came near.

Alas, they had not counted on the speed of a White Crane apprentice, and an instant after I had kicked one of the skulls across the room, I received a painful but shallow wound in my right calf from Autumn Wind’s knife.

“Sorry!” she cried, aghast. But there was no time for recriminations, as Gau Lou suddenly raced for my neck. I jerked back just in time for his lunge to miss, then slashed him with the sword. It connected cleanly, almost cleaving his face in two and getting stuck in his skull. Despite the blow he was far from finished, as his viscera snapped up and around my neck.

“You’ll pay for that!” he said wety.

There proceeded a most strange and desperate dance, as I simultaneously attempted to pull the sword free and remove Gau Lou’s burning tendrils from around my throat, succeeding at neither task. Soon Bang Zhou and Ba Le came to my assistance.

“Is that my sword?” asked Bang Zhou, as Ba Le attempted to unwrap the tendrils.

I nodded and answered to the extent possible, but due to the circumstances my assent sounded rather like a choking sheep.

“May I have it back?”

I agreed as best I could, sinking to my knees as my sight started to dim.

Bang Zhou gripped his sword with both hands while levering his left foot firmly against Gau Lou’s entrails. With

a mighty tug he wrenched the sword free, then swiftly brought it to bear on the exposed length of viscera mere inches away from my throat.

I would have thought the blow sufficient to sever it, but it was unnaturally tough. However, it did cause the creature to let me loose and attempt to ensnare Bang Zhou instead. The three of us quickly wrestled it to the ground, ignoring the pain in our hands as we held it down, Bang Zhou bringing the sword down again and again without apparent effect.

“Quick, hand me a prayer ball!” I cried, and one of the younger apprentices complied. Avoiding Gau Lou’s unnatural teeth, I spread apart his jaws.

“Happy festival day!” I said, then shoved the sticky-rice wrapped offering into his mouth. Gau Lou let out an horrific scream. Then exploded.

Whatever demonic magic had held Gau Lou’s decay at bay ceased, and the three of us found ourselves covered in tiny bits of putrefying remains. As we attempted to wipe them off, the Kongbu Feixing Tou Queen screamed in rage. “You wretched little maggots! You think slaying a single acolyte will stop me? Your pain shall be legendary!”

The battle seemed to be turning, if ever so slightly, in our favor. The blackened remains of a dozen skull servants littered the floor, but more still swooped above our heads. Kua Qing was down to his last six arrows, having dispatched several of the skull minions, but unable to bring down the Queen. Encouraged by our example, he took

aim at Orange Blossom’s flying form, launching an arrow that missed by a hairsbreadth.

Master Lao leapt up yet again to dispatch two of the flying skulls trying to swoop in on Kua Qing, but as he landed the much abused table issued a loud *crack* and collapsed under him, and he and Kua Qing went crashing down upon Spring Moon and Autumn Wind.

Our enemies took that moment to redouble their assault, and it was all we could do to hold them back as Spring Moon and Autumn Wind sprinted for another table. However, Old Man Zhang managed to evade Dai Li’s spear thrust and attached himself to Spring Moon, sinking his fangs into her neck as his tendrils wrapped around her body. In a flash, Kua Qing drew an arrow, aimed, and fired, striking Zhang’s head dead center. Zhang let out a bellow of pain as his head and viscera ignited, quickly burning down to ash in a matter of seconds.

Autumn Wind frantically batted out the tiny flames on her mother’s dress caused by Zhang’s combustion. “Mother, are you all right? Mother? *Mother?*”

Spring Moon didn’t answer, her breathing shallow and unnaturally raspy, a fine network of dark lines already starting to spread out from the wound in her neck. Seeing this, Master Lao sprung into action, laid out both his herbal kit and his brush and ink set, then instantly started scribing runes around the wound. “Chou Lin, this will

take several minutes. You must defend Kua Qing!"

I nodded and raced back to the fight. There seemed only a half dozen of the skull things left, in addition to Orange Blossom, but the Queen herself had waded into the fight. She had ensnared both of Xau Qu's arms, but was unable to bring her fangs to bear upon him due to the chair he held between them. I quickly grabbed the prayer lantern from Lai Wang and raced to Xau Qu's side. As they struggled, I wrestled one of the ropey strands from his arms and stuck it into the lantern's opening. The Queen let out another bellow of rage as her hair ignited, letting loose of Xau Qu and knocking both of us across the room in her haste to shake out the flames.

"So you like fire, little man? Then have some fire!" At that the Queen opened her mouth and let loose a jet of flame, singing my robes as I leapt away. I rolled across the floor to extinguish them, then scurried under a table to avoid the next fiery assault, which set it ablaze. Grabbing the table by its legs, I rushed back at her, using it as both shield and weapon.

Unfortunately, I did not count on the Queen plucking the table from my grasp and tossing it back at me. I leapt just in time, receiving only a glancing blow to my left shoulder as it hurtled past.

Thinking the Queen distracted, Kua Qing let loose another arrow, but once again she snatched it from the air in mid-flight. Worse still, Orange Blossom

chose that moment to swoop in on Kua Qing, wrapping her entrails around the bow. Kua Qing resisted with all his might, refusing to let the weapon be stolen from him without a fight. For a moment it was a tug-of-war.

Then the bow snapped in two.

Kua Qing went flying back, half of the broken bow still gripped in his hands, the remaining arrows in his quiver scattering across the floor. The Queen laughed, a sound inhumanly shrill and throaty at the same time. "Time's up, vermin! Your pathetic attempts have failed! You may have slain two of my acolytes, but it's easy enough to make more!"

At that the Queen rushed forward and snatched up Kua Qing, Autumn Wind and Master Lao, binding each so tightly with her hair that they were unable to free their arms no matter how hard they struggled.

"You've got spirit, little priest! That is why you shall make such a splendid slave when I eat your soul!"

As the Queen raised Master Lao to her lips, I grabbed one of the arrows off the floor, leapt up to grab his robe, and then clambered onto his shoulders just before the Queen bestowed her deadly kiss.

"Eat this!" I said, thrusting the arrow directly into her gaping maw.

The Queen let out a deafening bel-low of pain and rage, dropping her captives (and myself) unceremoniously to the floor. Flames licked out of her mouth and the wound at the back of

her neck where the arrow had pierced, and then expanded until an inferno raged where her head had been, her hair writhing madly in its death-throes. All around the noodle house, Orange Blossom and the remaining skull minions suffered a similar fiery fate. The Queen let out a last scream and exploded in a shower of vile dust and ash.

We lay on the floor for a long moment, victorious, befouled and exhausted. Bang Zhou took the initiative to grab a pitcher of water and douse those portions of the noodle house set alight by the final conflagration. Master Lao climbed unsteadily to his feet, dusting himself off and coughing, then turned to me and bowed, a gesture nearly as shocking and unusual as the battle had been.

“Chou Lin, you are a credit to the temple, and it is an honor to have you as a White Crane apprentice.”

For a moment I was struck entirely dumb, as Master Lao’s compliments were nearly as rare as summer snow. Finally, I got unsteadily to my feet and returned the bow. “It is, and has always been, a great honor to serve as your apprentice.”

Master Lao merely grunted, then returned to ministering to Spring Moon. “Will my mother be alright?” asked her daughter.

“Yes. Look, the unnatural infection is already starting to fade.”

Autumn Wind sighed in relief, then wrapped her arms around and

kissed me, an event as shocking as it was welcome. I could not tell you how long that kiss lasted, though it seemed as if several dynasties rose and fell during its duration. It was far too short.

“Thank you for saving us, Chou Lin,” she said at last. I’m sure I made some reply to this, as I distinctly remember my mouth moving and sounds coming out of it, but I could not say with any certainty what was said for all the taels in Shanghai.

At that moment, exhausted and exultant, I truly knew what it was to be one with the Celestial Masters, to know the perfect contentment of balance and being, to move with the wind and be as still as the earth, to bask in the fullness of the world like a flower in the sun.

But even as I felt that moment of divine clarity passing, I thought I could see the path before me: A life together with Autumn Wind, a wedding presided over by Master Lao, a clutch of laughing, exasperating children, agile as cats and as mischievous as imps (how could they be otherwise, given their father?), growing old in joy and contentment.

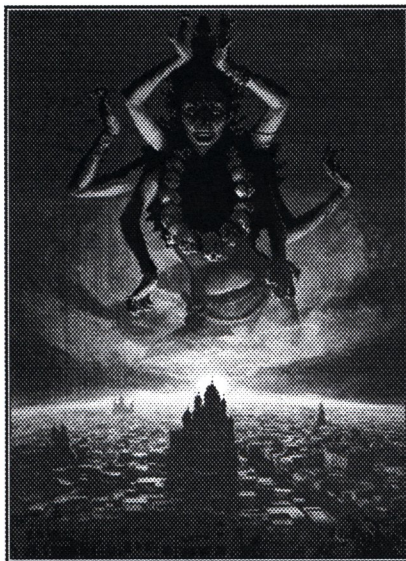
Alas, it was not to be, as Autumn Wind and I would soon be ripped apart by the strange events surrounding an ancient scroll, a most unusual monkey, and three cursed coins.

But that’s a story for another day.



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Paul Di Filippo considers this story to be the completion of a long cycle begun almost thirty years ago with his first sale, 'Falling Expectations,' a Malzberg pastiche published in the old UnEarth magazine. "Not surprisingly," he adds, "the chance to collaborate with Barry on a 21st-century version of his seminal 20th-century tropes meant the world to me." Paul's next book-sized offering will be his new collection, The Emperor of Gondwanaland and Other Stories, due in spring from Thunder's Mouth.

"As it is with Paul, 'Beyond Mao' closes an arc for me, too," Barry offers. "But thirty-four years in my case since 'Beyond Apollo' was completed. Here is Harry M. Evans's spawn, drifting, mumbling in Sino-space. Here is the Long March as Long Scream. What I found most interesting about this collaboration is how easy it was for Paul, how difficult for me. His masterful handling of exposition (which I felt, wrongly, at the start was over-exposition), his integration of stolid character (Mao's New Man) and utter madness filled me with incapacity. Feebly, in a stricken way, cane extended, I followed him tap-tap-tap. Any credit found in this work must be given him; any blame is mine."

Beyond Mao

Barry Malzberg and Paul Di Filippo

Halfway to Mars, Wu Yuèhai calls out to He Keung.

He Keung is startled. More than startled, alarmed and shaken. Even terrified.

In the close quarters of the *Radiant Crane*, a Shenzhou-11 module only three times the size of the compact Shenzhou-5 that lofted Yang Liwei into his historic orbit twenty years ago, there is no room for stowaways. He Keung and his two fellow taikonauts are jammed into quarters which even Mao on his fabled Long March would have found primitive and uncomfortable. The cockpit of the *Radiant Crane* is studded with instrumentation and storage lockers holding the ample supplies of freeze-dried shredded pork

with garlic sauce on which the taikonauts mainly subsist. The three form-fitting chairs which double as bunks are separated only by centimeters.

He Keung, occupying the middle of the couches, turns first to his left, to confront Huang Shen. A thin ascetic figure, Huang Shen reminds He Keung of old digitized newsreels of the Cultural Revolution, one of those dedicated cadre members who would turn in his own parents for ideological trespasses. How such an archaic man—notable prior to this expedition mainly as the chief tax enforcer for Shanghai—came to arise in the twenty-first-century market-socialist China which has been in existence since before any of the taikonauts was born is a puzzle to He Keung. Perhaps such creatures are

eternal, springing up despite external circumstances.

Whatever the mystical explanation for Huang Shen's origins, it is plain that the sober-sided, calculating man would not be the one to play a cruel practical joke involving the taping and disseminating through the ship's cabin speakers of Wu Yuèhai's voice.

That leaves Wang Yu, on He Keung's right. Now, Wang Yu is a likely suspect. Burly and over-full of energy, the piggy-faced taikonaut has been renowned for his jests and japes since the days when he was a famous fighter pilot in the short war with Taiwan. Wang Yu has chafed on this long mission, finding little to occupy his enormous energies as the *Radiant Crane* hurtles under precise cybernetic control toward Mars. Yes, Wang Yu possesses the kind of coarse nature that would conceive of such a mean-spirited burlesque.

Yet, He Keung recalls, Wang Yu was once romantically linked with Wu Yuèhai. He Keung himself saw the authentic flow of his comrade's tears when Wu Yuèhai broke up with Wang Yu. There was no bitterness or desire for revenge then on Wang Yu's part, only black despair. Surely he would not disgrace her memory in such a manner.

The ventilation unit blows clammy air redolent of that uncontrollable HVAC mold-spore infestation over He Keung's face, adding to his unease. Odd ping-pong noises from the skin of the *Radiant Crane*, evoked under the almost unimaginable stresses of interplanetary space, sound like the temple

bells of some unearthly monastery.

Discarding his only two suspects as agents of the jest, He Keung is left with a pair of equally repellant alternatives.

Either He Keung is going insane.

Or Wu Yuèhai is truly addressing him.

From beyond the grave.

For Wu Yuèhai is dead.

The first female taikonaut perished in orbit during an unpredicted solar storm seven years ago. Her body riddled with radiation, her craft disabled by electromagnetic surges along its circuitry, Wu Yuèhai lasted for a week after the storm hit, broadcasting her final experiences to a world that had hung on her every steadily weakening word. She became the very emblem of Chinese strength and courage, the shining symbol of both the triumphs and the necessarily harsh costs of the Chinese conquest of space.

Like everyone in his generation of the taikonaut corps, He Keung idolizes Wu Yuèhai. He has had frequent dreams in which she figures, both erotically and heroically. Indeed, she surfaces randomly in his thoughts every day, a beacon inspiring him onward toward Mars when his spirit flags.

But this instance is different. He Keung can swear he actually heard her voice.

And then, even as he seeks to replay the incident in his mind, Wu Yuèhai appears in the cabin of the *Radiant Crane*.

The female taikonaut's form is translucent, shimmering like a bad

holo. Yet there is some indisputable element of vitality about the apparition, a sense of living interactivity and presence that belies any mere recording.

"I am come for you," Wu Yuèhai says. She seems to be addressing He Keung directly. At least the others, drowsing almost narcoleptically, as they all three often do to pass the interminable hours, pay this apparition no regard. "You have been waiting for me, yes? All of your life?"

Her face is radiant; her features now are fully formed, well-defined in the haze of the enclosure; if he did not know that she was dead, had not listened to her death agonies transmitted by private circuit long after the inspirational sections of her address had run out, he would think that she was alive. She beckons toward him. "Come with me," she says.

The situation is absurd. On his left in the module Huang Shen, dreaming of double-entry bookkeeping, arms folded across his chest, the little drafts of his breath stirring embers in the space surrounding; on his right in the *Radiant Crane* the formerly merry Wang Yu similarly gripped in slumber. The woman with whom he was rumored to have had liaisons—all in the name of China's greater glory in space—drifts within two feet of him, but he pays her no heed, no mind. Only He Keung seems to be alert to her presence and yet her imminence, rather than stirring him as it had through all of the years he idolized her, seems rather to stun; he finds him-

self shifting toward lower levels of inhabitation.

"I have long been dreaming of you," Wu Yuèhai says. "In all the stuffy and infinite volume of space, an empire vaster than any ruled by the Yellow Emperor. But only of you. You and you alone."

Her tone startles; it is the same lustrous, slurred enunciation with which she called from the broken craft, the *Lacquered Barge*, announcing her travail, from the first jolt of the storm to the slow and unintelligible jargon with which some time later she announced the end of consciousness. Her voice in his ear then was like her voice all over the globe: personal, intimate, focussed, as if she were drawing him not to her death but to her bed. It is this Wu Yuèhai who he sees before him and He Keung turns left and right again, sees his drugged or sleeping companions as they fail to remark upon this at all and finally, feeling foolish (as well he might), he speaks.

"Why are you still alive?" He Keung says. "Why are you here? You died far from the *Radiant Crane*, locked in darkness. You were mourned. The Honorable Companion described the heavens as your shrine. There was mourning for three days. Now you are here. Is this you or have you only found the spirit of your ancestors to blame?"

I am babbling, he thinks, I am not being scientific. I am not being precise. I am overwhelmed. I should be brave and decisive, like Lin Xiangru when he faced the fearsome King of Zhao. So much is depending on this

flight, which will have repercussions that radiate throughout the Chinese economy and culture. Why, already action figures of the three taikonauts are available in the department stores of Beijing. Commemorative wrist-watches bearing the likeness of the *Radiant Crane* are being sported by proud teenagers in the Tibetan province. A beer bearing He Keung's visage on its label is being quaffed this very moment in Macao.

"Watch this now," Wu Yuèhai says. "Attend to the spirit of the Suns." She bridges the distance between and embraces him; even through the intelligent metal and sophisticated fabrics which swaddle him he can feel the force of that embrace. She has been garbed in the simplest way, not in the equipment of space but almost as a courtesan. He Keung knows that he cannot be aroused, thanks to the anti-priapic treatments enforced upon the taikonauts prior to the flight, but he finds himself mockingly considering what Wu Yuèhai's embrace would feel like if he *were* aroused. There is no love in space, only engineering; that had been the link of their training. But this spectral clasp has been an utterly startling experience.

"The Suns are revolving," she says. "They are rotating within your spirit. I am infusing you with my portion of the Tao."

At any moment, He Keung knows, the two others will come to awareness and the situation will become uncontrollable. The accountant soul of Huang Shen will demand to know what

his teammate is babbling about, what sensory derangements the youngest of the three taikonauts is experiencing. If He Keung reveals the truth of his encounter with the ghost of Wu Yuèhai, the others will surely clamp him into one of the American-made neural-restraint devices which the *Radiant Crane* carries as a precaution against just such a lunatic spree. (Nowadays the Americans excel at nothing so much as the "deaccessioning of transgressive personal liberties." The Waldrop-McAuley Shock Carapace is one of their finest and most in-demand export products, rated with a 1.5 Hulk-disabling factor.) Nor can He Keung count on the jovial nature of Wang Yu to help him slough off any charges which Huang Shen might level. Wang Yu is only two years away from the iron rice bowl of retirement. He need only complete this mission, then adjourn to his state-owned mansion on the banks of the virgin lake formed by the Three Gorges Dam. Wang Yu will not jeopardize such a sweet deal to cater to the erotic, cosmic delusions of a youngster.

No, he will have to lie to his teammates, tell them that he was merely reciting aloud the text of some fondly recalled Japanese manga, for his own amusement. (The music MP3s and compressed video files and engineering PDFs supplied by the National Space Administration have already palled for all of them, only a quarter of the way in what will hopefully be a roundtrip.) But will his comrades believe such a shabby pretext? And if they do believe, will

they not still forevermore look askance at He Keung, as one who betrays the necessary vigilance and concentration demanded by this historic mission? (And yet dual super-cooled, cross-checking computers, no bigger than one of the many Olympic gold medals China will surely reap this year, are the real pilots of the vessel, at least at this uneventful stage.)

Even as He Keung parses his options regarding his fellow taikonauts, Wu Yuèhai, squirming in his lap, renders both truthfulness and deceit moot by her next words.

“He Keung, I can sense that your soul is fully invigorated by the immortal solar fluids which I have shared with you, a portion of the etheric stellar radiation which did not end my life, but caused me to be reborn, along with the ministrations of the Tian Shi Yu. And now that your *qi* is flowing richly, I need you to terminate your fellows. They are a poisoned cargo you must jettison.”

He Keung feels his heart stop beating, suspending itself for a seeming eternity, then hurl itself against his ribs like one of the oxen on his grandfather's farm in Honan province, maddened by flies, running full tilt into a barn wall. To kill his comrades, the men he trained so long and hard with! He Keung recalls the weeks they lived in simulated Mars quarters in Antarctica, relying on each other for sheer survival. The time the two older men took him on a bawdy drinking binge in Hong Kong. What has either man done to deserve such a cruel end?

As if half-cognizant that their fates are being debated, both Huang Shen and Wang Yu stir fitfully on their couches, their respectively cadaverous and infantile cheeks bedewed with sweat. Their hair, though close-cropped, stirs under the ministrations of the personal blowers which prevent the carbon dioxide of their own exhalations from hanging around their faces in zero gravity and smothering them as they sleep. (How easy, simply to shut those fans off. What a reputedly comfortable death.)

Seeking to delay the mortal answer he must make to Wu Yuèhai, recalling the proverb which advises, “When you want to test the depths of a stream, don't use both feet,” He Keung seeks initially to unravel the mystery of her continued existence. “You claim the solar flux did not kill you, but instead brought new life. How can this be? And who are the Tian Shi Yu?”

Wu Yuèhai rears back from her close proximity to He Keung's face (is that her breath he feels, or only his own anti-CO₂ fan?) and assumes a serious, yet still somehow flirtatious mien. “The radiation triggered ancient programming buried in my cells, in the human genome. When I fell silent, it was because I was encysted in a cocoon. My nascent transformation sent FTL impulses along the Tao, and summoned my new mentors, the Tian Shi Yu, the Jade Angels. They were waiting to receive me into their loving arms when I hatched into my superior form, and to teach me the true meaning of

the cosmos. They brought me to Mars, where I found a community of endless bliss and perfection. A community I wish to share with you. But only if you reach me alone.”

He Keung would like to believe this fairy tale. Wu Yuèhai alive, and desirous of him. A world thought to be forbidding and sterile, instead hosting some kind of pan-galactic utopian outpost. It resonates with his fondest hopes and dreams. But the sticking point is Wu Yuèhai’s insistence that he murder his fellow taikonauts.

“Why cannot Huang Shen and Wang Yu also enter into this lotus land? Are they not as human as you or I, just as susceptible to the beneficial influences of your Jade Angels?”

“No, they are not. Human, I mean. The Earth has always hosted two species, true humans and a parasitic mimic race. It is the mimics who are responsible for the endless litany of human suffering down the ages. You are human, holding within you the potential to become as I am. Your false mates are not. And in fact, they and their ilk know of the existence of the Jade Angels and the Martian redoubt. They are ancient enemies. And their intention is to destroy it utterly. Have you never wondered why the habitable space of the *Radiant Crane* is so small, why it represents such a slight improvement upon the ancient Shen-zhou-5?”

Sensing the answer will not please him, He Keung asks, “Why?”

“It is because the bulk of this vessel

is given over to weapons of mass destruction, bombs of surpassing ferocity which your fellows intend to rain down from orbit upon the heads of all we Martians.”

We Martians. This is a startling statement and He Keung feels his sensibility tilt at its outrageousness but before he can contemplate further (Wu Yuèhai a Martian? but was that before or after her soliloquy of mourning and farewell?), Wu Yuèhai speaks in a dramatic new tone, a voice of imperiousness and certitude.

“The amplitude and oscillations of your *qi* indicate you are loath to rid the ship of these two parasites, even though they are like camels standing amidst a flock of sheep. But how can you expect to put out a cartload of wood on fire with only a single cup of water? Yet even this contingency has been foreseen. In different circumstances, you will find the strength perhaps to do what needs to be done. Remember, He Keung: Great souls have wills; feeble ones have only wishes.”

The ship, subjectively stationary until then, seems to tilt, lurching and bucking improbably like a fragile life raft in the wake of a robot supertanker. At the same time, the yawning, gleaming haze which has surrounded the apparitional Wu Yuèhai seems to bloom and exfoliate, filling the small cabin. An odor of dusty poppies infiltrates He Keung’s space-dulled nostrils.

Their restraints suddenly rotting

like the Yellow Emperor's ancient silk robes, the three taikonauts are propelled into that gaping, devouring haze with enormous force, and before He Keung can access the stabilizers which might possibly arrest the situation he is instead pressed with enormous force against the bulkhead. He tries to struggle against the alien gravities pinning him in place but cannot and from the others come strange, bleating cries as they emerge from their drugged state into some kind of transitive half-life in which they neither achieve consciousness nor lose it.

The *Radiant Crane* is shaking now; shaking in the vacuum of space as was never supposed to be possible and, caught in some approximation of fetal-ity, He Keung is shaking too, in sympathetic and terrible vibration. If the other two are in a half-state of ascension toward consciousness, He Keung is now otherwise, he seems to be descending toward some enveloping dark star. Wu Yuèhai, invisible in the dominant cold nebulosities contained in the cabin, is giggling; the embrace which locks him is not hers but some aspect of descent and yet he has never felt as close to her as he has at this moment.

"Be not afraid of growing slowly, be afraid only of standing still," Wu Yuèhai's voice whispers close to him. He cannot touch her but she is there. "You are embarked fully now upon your journey. We greet you, we raise the flag of liberation. Soon you will join us on the surface of the Red Planet

and we shall together celebrate the will of the people. And remember: even a single ant may well destroy a dike." He feels invisible lips against his ear, another harsh giggle, and then space itself in its full and irreversible emptiness seems to swaddle him, not the illusory haze which the *Radiant Crane* has furnished its three voyagers but the vast and abandoned tableland of the heavens themselves. Breathing seems an outmoded luxury. His companions appear to be flickering before him. He wants to speak but cannot. He wishes to confer or failing that, at least make their new condition known to Grand Mao Station back in Earth orbit, but he is beyond speech.

"Thus ends the first part of your journey," Wu Yuèhai whispers. "Now the true testing can begin."

Mars hangs in the sky like the mass of Jupiter's Great Red Spot scooped from the mother planet and given independent existence, or like the promise of a placid uterine existence, all artery-filtered light and dear protective enclosure. He Keung feels resilient solidity beneath his back. His limbs are free of the encumbering spacesuit for the first time in months, protected from whatever environment surrounds him only by the skintight green undersuit he donned before departure from Grand Mao Station.

Shakily, He Keung rises to his feet and gazes about.

He is evidently standing on a small-

ish world, for the very curvature of the globe is half-perceivable, the horizon oddly close. The ground beneath his booted feet is irregular in a natural manner, but covered with a kind of uncanny springy mouse-gray turf composed of long interlocking cilia finer than the downy hairs of a woman's back. The sky above his head is a cloudless violet, with the brighter stars of the Milky Way shining through, where the Mars-light permits. The air he breathes is redolent of novel proteins and pheromones.

Incredible as it may seem, He Keung can draw but one conclusion. He is standing on one of the satellites of Mars, either Phobos or Deimos. He takes a tentative step, and the bounciness of his stride supplies another confirming datum. But how came the airless, barren moon known to science for centuries to host an entire ecology and atmosphere, however primitive? Is the change so recent that terrestrial telescopes have not yet detected it? Or if they have done so, why were He Keung and his comrades not informed of this miracle? Can it be that their masters do not want them to know of such a crucial change in their destination? Would the taikonauts hesitate to deliver their putative cargo of WMDs if they knew in advance they were bombing a living world?

He Keung can only assume that this enlivening of the formerly dead satellite is a result of cosmic machinations by Wu Yuèhai and her unseen peers in the Martian community, and possibly

by their mentors, the Tian Shi Yu, the Jade Angels. This satellite must have been set up as an anteroom to the glories of the Red Planet, a kind of quarantine chamber for imperfect visitors. Realizing this, he regards the hovering bulk of Mars with altered sensibilities. Now the planet looks like a monitoring eyeball or the working end of a telescope, sucking in data to be processed by the no-longer-human minds that dwell there.

Have He Keung's cabinmates also been deposited here? If so, why were they not all three dumped side by side? Is it intended that He Keung rest alone for a moment to muster his energies and willpower for some upcoming competition? These must be the "different circumstances" into which Wu Yuèhai promised to transplant him, the arena in which he must decide whether to slaughter Huang Shen and Wang Yu, according to her instructions, to earn celestial merit and her undying love.

Or his place in hell.

He Keung realizes that he can advance no further in his destiny until he reunites with his two comrades, whether they be fellow humans or an antagonistic species. Since every direction appears identical, He Keung sets off in an arbitrary vector.

It is his own Long March, his trudge toward some kind of goal shrouded now but only by his ignorance. All he can hope is that his ignorance will dissipate as he trudges, and so He Keung stumbles across the slick panels of the

moon (Deimos or Phobos? he cannot know; very well, he will call it Mao and claim it in the name of the People's Army) feeling all of the elements of his life to this moment impelling him, dragging him through this strange, expressionless landscape.

The repetitive muted squelch of his boots upon the living carpet of Mao falls into a metronomic rhythm, lulling He Keung slightly, despite the toxic, the absolute strangeness of it all. At one moment in the capsule his companions to the sides, at the next the strange and intimate discourse with Wu Yuèhai, the breath of her confession, her shocking revelation, as shocking as the landscape of Formosa must have been for the evil and exiled Chiang Kai-Shek in those early, frantic, wonderful days of the Revolution, and then to the asteroid itself, no transition: truly the Little Red Book was filled with alerts of a world gone suddenly incomprehensible and threatening . . . but still the experience is overwhelming.

And then also there is He Keung's sense of shame and failure, his betrayal of his glorious mission. He feels like Su Qin, the "criss-cross philosopher" of the Warring States era, returning in defeat to his native Luoyang, going back home in despair and rags, having spent all his resources fruitlessly. Is it possible he can ever atone for his moment of doubt and indecision in the *Radiant Crane*, can somehow salvage his mission?

The lonely man pushes forward across the unvaryingly desolate land-

scape for hours. His mind begins to drift back to his childhood, his early manhood, the time spent on his grandfather's farm, when everything seemed so certain and straightforward. Half-dreaming, He Keung continues to lift and plant one foot after another, until he is brought to an abrupt halt by a voice at once anticipated and dreaded.

"He Keung," Wu Yuèhai says out of the empyrean. Her voice is intimate, confidential, as if she were resting her chin on his shoulder, and yet there is that iciness as well; that glaze of distance which has always surrounded her even in life. "You are not doing well. You are set upon a course of betrayal, betrayal of the true cause of all humanity. You must cease your impetuosity, you must think."

"Think?" he says, speaking the word into the violet atmosphere, and, in sudden, lurching panic, "What is there to think? I am here because of what you have done to me. I was in the *Radiant Crane* dreaming, then you spoke to me, then I was dislodged. What do you want?"

Wu Yuèhai says something so shocking that He Keung feels his frail senses waver, the small lamp of his sensibility, of his struggling intellect, which once seemed able to cast some light on this wretched Moon, seeming to gutter and die.

"I want nothing," she says. "I failed in my mission, don't you understand? Now I am reduced to searching here, searching there, looking for you to bring this to an end. The Martians, my

Martians cannot help me. They say that I have been corrupted, that I have chosen the path of an exile, allowing my memories of mere flesh and blood existence to contaminate my proper relationship with you. What I should have done, by their ethical standards, was to assume control of your neural structures in the *Radiant Crane* and forced you to carry out my wishes. But I could not bring myself to damage in such a fashion one whom I—respected.

“And so I unbalanced the Tao, they claim, and their words have disarmed me. I cannot help myself because I have lost all belief. It is there for you then to change or it cannot be at all.”

Wu Yuèhai as desolate as He Keung? Herself bereft of her comrades' trust? All her seemingly godlike powers rendered impotent by some breaching of the finer parameters of her arcane assignment, by mission creep that came to include sympathy and empathy and—and affection?—for a young taikonaut who once worshipped her? He Keung would like to believe this, but cannot rid his mind of the suspicion that this confession is merely another stratagem to insure his cooperation. So his response to Wu Yuèhai is rather formal and chill, tepid as the noodle soup young He Keung would eat upon his midnight return home from his university cram courses.

“And what kind of end do you want?”

“It does not matter to me; what matters is that I be at last permitted to sleep. They promised me sleep; they

said that if I made my appeal, if I stayed to mark the truth no matter how painful, I would be permitted to move on to another plane, where life is effortless and uncontested. But they were lying. I have no sleep, I have no peace.”

As if excited by her intensity the satellite Mao begins to shake, the fibrous panels underfoot surge and heave with the volatility of liquid. He Keung finds himself in perilous balance. Space madness! It must be that ultimate discomfiture of which they had been warned throughout all of the arduous training. The madness which cuts like a knife through all the truisms and teachings of the Great Revolution itself!

“Wu Yuèhai, help me!” calls out the young man alone in the seeming face of imminent destruction, just as, centuries past, the brave warrior Han Xi made his desperate plea prior to the descent of the headsman's axe. And just like Han Xi, who was pardoned at the last moment by a prince eager for brave soldiers, He Keung is saved.

After a complicated fashion.

The surface of Mao blisters upward just a few meters in front of him, the gray tapestry formed by the cilia stretching to cover the new extrusion. It is as if the planet's elastic skin sprouts an immense boil or sarcoma that swells in speeded-up malignancy. This is an objective phenomenon; He Keung is certain of that. In the face of this enormity, all his self-pity and epistemological uncertainty implode. No delusion

or hallucination, hence not space madness, but rather the alien workings of a globe rendered intelligently totipotent by the Jade Angels and their unfathomable technology.

The blister ceases its exponential growth when it is as large as a peasant's cottage. Then a portion of the curved surface facing He Keung melts away, revealing a cavern, a wetly crimson interior that is a mockingly obscene echo of the dry russet planet hanging above as mute witness.

And inside the hollow blister stand Huang Shen and Wang Yu, his fellow taikonauts. They stand, but they are not unsupported, instead hanging like puppets. They are wired into the substance of the blister by numerous living tendrils and conduits, neural bundles piercing them like the claws of a sky dragon. Surely this is their unmerited punishment, imposed by Wu Yuèhai for daring to approach Mars, the sanctuary of the Jade Angels.

"Wu Yuèhai!" shouts He Keung. "What have you done? Release my friends!"

The voice of the martyred female taikonaut whispers despondently in He Keung's ear. "This is not my doing. Rather, it is the end of all hope."

As if to confirm the woman's speech, Huang Shen now speaks, his pinched bookkeeper's face bearing a malicious leer incommensurate with any real suffering.

"Your ghostly bitch is correct, He Keung. Wang Yu and I have assumed control of this construct, the moon you

once called Deimos. We found the supervisory ganglia exactly where the Jade Angels always install them. They are such trusting creatures, so intent on making it easy for their subordinate races to adopt and work their puny gifts. But this time their mania for standardization has betrayed them. We have made a long and diligent study of these so-called Angels and their technologies, across a thousand, thousand solar systems, until we know them better than they know themselves. For any race which limits itself to only half the spectrum of existence—that which is conventionally called 'goodness'—cannot, by definition, understand as much as another race which spans the whole continuum of motivation and desire, from light to dark."

He Keung is nearly dumbstruck. At last he babbles out, "But, but—what are you? What have you done with my comrades?"

Wang Yu speaks like a jolly demon. "We are still your same comrades in truth, He Keung, but we were always more than you knew. Our kind is called the Shih Chieh Hsien."

The Bodiless Immortals. Only an ancient myth—or so He Keung has always believed.

"The birth-souls of your fellows," continues Wang Yu, "were driven out years ago by the force of our superior *qi*, to perish howling in the aether. We used their bodies as we have used many in the past, as meat machines to accomplish our goals. In this case, we always intended to crush the beachhead estab-

lished by the Jade Angels in this solar system. We have enjoyed unimpeded rule of your primitive sphere too long to relinquish it now. Therefore, Mars must be destroyed.”

“What do you intend?”

Huang Shen makes an answer, quite forthrightly and unconcernedly, as if He Keung is a child being told the reason why grass is green. “This modified satellite possesses powerful engines. We will drive the whole globe now out of orbit and into the Red Planet, creating a world-shattering cataclysm such as that which, eons ago, wiped ninety-nine percent of life off Earth itself. The colony of the hybrid Martians will be extinguished; all individuals no matter where or how concealed will be destroyed. Including your precious Wu Yuèhai. These mortal containers temporarily housing our essences will of course be evaporated as well, along with yourself. But our essential selves will simply be released back into the Tao.”

The Tao! The Jade Angels! The Bodiless Immortals! Celestial layers upon layers! It is of such enormity to He Keung that he feels the cosmos, or at least this small part of it to which he has been sentenced, lurch. Meat machines! All of the curses of the Ancients seem to have descended upon him through this sudden and shocking confidence and He Keung, his legs like his soul seemingly encased in cement, finds himself unable to move. He stands supine to Huang Shen’s valediction, waiting for some awful judgment

to descend upon him, to tell him what must come next, but nothing at all happens in this glazed and sudden circumstance.

He Keung realizes he has reached the nadir of his quest. All roads leading either to fulfillment of his original mission or to wholehearted adoption of Wu Yuèhai’s imperatives seem barricaded. Within He Keung’s heart, mind and soul, all the tugging, tensioned polarities that have kept him a-jitter and incapable of decision-making resolve into one gaping nullity, a black hole compounded of the impossibility of wisdom in a delimited framework of knowledge and the utterly dire necessity of action.

At this moment of He Keung’s inverted satori, Huang Shen and the silent Wang Yu suddenly implode, they collapse as if those hanging puppets were deflated, and with no transition whatsoever they are ragged blotches staining the red cavern of the blister with a soup of foul yellow matter.

His nemeses are naught but small, indistinct puddles upon which he glances and then his perspective shifts, rises toward the ruddy and damaged surface of Mars hanging above and Wu Yuèhai, returned inexplicably from the exile of her abysmal and despairing silence as He Keung never expected she would or could resurface, says: “Amazing! It is the most ancient, the greatest of powers you have shown! An unflinching warrior’s spirit, like that of Su Wu sent to face the Huns. You have vanquished them!”

The wavering, exultant exclamation of her voice is so unlike that quiet, insidious tone with which she so movingly tracked her own orbital expiration that He Keung's own spirits are comparably lifted.

"Come with me," she says, "Come with me now before these two perfidious Immortals are reconstituted in some other vessels. On Mars, we shall devise counter-schemes that will yet secure this solar system as a bastion of the Jade Angels."

Reconstituted? He Keung, deep in service of the Great Revolution, deep in his fathoming and dedication to the cultural enlightenment which the space program has brought to his country and his life, has never felt as confused as he has at this moment; it is as if he were not a taikonaut but an innocent, somehow stripped of memory and desire, hanging (hanging like a puppet?) within some deep well excavated in the name of the Ancients. He cannot move; movement is beyond him and yet he can feel some force, perhaps generated by Wu Yuèhai, which flutters at the rim of sensibility and begins to guide him, stumbling, away from the decaying blister and its slimy contents.

"You must hurry!" she is saying, "You must not let this triumph pass; you must be opportune and take the moment," and the shuffling He Keung, lashed by a kind of insistence which he cannot comprehend, stumbles forward, stumbles under the guidance of the more-than-human Wu Yuèhai toward some dim conception of the light.

Is he going to Mars? Has he been granted entrance to the community of transfigured souls whose existence Wu Yuèhai has hinted at, a comity of blissful demigods who, under the tutelage of the Jade Angels, all work toward evolving the plenum to some form of transcendental perfection? Will he make his ascent toward the mythic planet that has for so longed fascinated mankind? Or he is instead doomed to shuffle like some broken automaton across the gray plains of Deimos? Can this be some monstrous illusion; some hallucination on the Journey of a Thousand Knives patched into his dying sensorium only to torment him?

He does not know. He cannot know.

How he loved Wu Yuèhai in those hours of dictation of her loss; how he loved the Great Leader in all of the years before that; how, dreaming, he loved the skies and stars when even the issue of the Revolution fell away and it was only he and possibility close and alone in the night.

He takes a step. He takes another step. Something systematic, something greater than he seems to be guiding. Wu Yuèhai laughs in his ear and it is a laugh both gentle and ferocious, laughter of absolute insistence and yet yielding. Mars, the great Red Planet of dreams, hangs ever lower in the distance. If he could but expand his arm by just a little, if he could just reach a little further, he would be able to touch that great snare, hanging low like fruit in the heavens. All that he must do is stretch a little further . . .

Behind the ripe beckoning pomegranate of Mars, misty figures larger than the prominences of the solar flare that killed or metamorphosed Wu Yuèhai now appear, viridian specters whose outlines fluctuate like flames in accordance with some half-sensed cosmic tempo. Are these the Jade Angels, come to assist He Keung in his transition, or only artifacts of his derangement?

Wu Yuèhai says, "And soon, believe me, He Keung, as it did for me as I lay dying all alone, the Earth so near, yet so far, in this darkness everything will appear," and he reaches adamant to embrace her.

Soon.

Soon all will be revealed.

Soon he will be a Martian too.



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According to Adam Roberts, 'And Future King . . .' is somewhere between a serious story and a parody of the conventions of Arthurian fiction. "When I wrote it," the author explains, "a PhD student of mine at the University of London, Una Tate, was completing her study of Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy (it's done now; she's now Dr Una Tate PhD), and modern retellings and reworkings of Arthur were very much on my mind. In fact, years ago I published a critical study of modern Arthurian Fantasy under the un-euphonious title Silk and Potatoes, long out of print now. 'And Future King . . .' encapsulates my feelings on the subject: less on Arthur himself, and more the wide-eyed romanticism that so often mystifies him in the contemporary imagination." Adam's recent publications include the novels Polystom (2003) and The Snow (2004) and the parodies The Soddit (2003), The Sellamillion (2004) and The McAttrix Derided (2004).

And Future King . . .

Adam Roberts

1

49-6-30. *MetaTab caught up with Herr-Doktor Professor Sir Allen Fergus late last month at his Orcadian workshop, to ask his opinion on the latest political developments, and find out about his latest research.*

[topic: politics] Stream: Fergus laboratory. RPSP Logo.

METATAB: Professor, our readers would be most interested to learn your opinion on the latest political developments.

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: There have been riots, I understand?

METATAB: Some recent disturbances in Manchester, although they were easily contained. More worrying, for the Designers of government, such as

yourself, is a shift of public mood. A recent BBC12 poll of "hundred worst developments in human history" voted the Replicant Public Servants first, a little way ahead of last year's decision to impose a levy on the money raised from web gaming.

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: There are, if you'll forgive me, [*laughs*] better ways of testing the effectiveness of the Androids than TV polls! All the social and economic indicators are that government by well-programmed android is three or four times better than government by humans. There's a chip in your car running it, isn't there? There's a chip regulating and cleaning your house? Of course there is. Would you prefer to take over management of all aspects of those chores yourself? Of course you would not. I had a heart attack in '44, and now I have a chip reg-

ulating my heartbeat. Does a perfect job. However-much superstitious humans transfer their own negativity onto them, Androids are merely machines programmed in the execution of good government.

METATAB: You have no worries about RPSP at all?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Oh, I'm human, just as you are, and of course there's a part of my animal-brain that wouldn't like to see *all* government handed *entirely* over to machines. The president, the three senior ministers, they will *always* be human; that's a constitutional absolute. Nevertheless, if all the civil servants and other ministers are programmed to do their jobs flawlessly, 24-hours a day every day of the year—as is the case—it can only promote a more smoothly functioning governmental machine. Can it not? This must be understood: *most* of the jobs of government do not need human input; they can be done better by computers programmed precisely to follow the law, and the codes of employment and public servants. These Replicants can never be bribed, will never allow personal considerations to interfere in the commission of their duty, will never make a mistake or act incompetently.

METATAB: In your opinion—whence, then, the public disquiet?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: It is difficult to say. One theory prevalent amongst the Political Programming community at the moment questions whether the

Modelled Personalities have actually made matters worse. They were designed, of course, to make the Androids more palatable to the general population. But perhaps by making Androids more human, by improving the modelling of physical features and so on, we are actually making them more threatening to the average citizen. I mean, to the National Wagers, those whose days are empty enough to fret over such matters.

METATAB: Do you believe that is the case?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: I suppose we must concede: there *is* something uncanny in a machine that mimics humanity so precisely. In fact, I believe the future of the Replicant Public Servants Programme lies in a more exaggerated set of Modelled Personalities. Make the RPSP agents *larger* than life, more cartoony, play up their artificiality. Social research suggests that the public will accept such creatures more readily.

METATAB: Which leads us onto to the question of your present research. Are you working upon such personality redesigns?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Indeed. [[LINK: *topic: future research*](#)]

[[topic: location](#)] Stream: Fergus laboratory.

METATAB: Professor, were you sorry to leave London?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: I was indeed. I'd been based at my former workshop in Reading for several years. But last year Reading was declared capital of west London, and the resulting brouhaha, the fuss, the new buildings works and so on, made it a much less pleasant place to live and work. Scotland is appreciably quieter: still mostly suburban, with some spectacular private parks. And up here in the Isles, the light-pollution counter-measures are much more effective than in the south. The Hebridean wavelength-inverter is a marvellous piece of work. You can really see the stars.

Slide: Purple-black sky, only palely orange at horizon. Meteor streaking down in midframe, like luminous dew-drop dribbling down dark glass.

[topic: future research] Stream: Fergus laboratory.

METATAB: Professor, can you tell our readers a little about your plans for future research?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: We've been working with the corporation patent-copyright department to acquire the rights to a number of screen soap stars, to famous figures from Classic visual culture, and to a number of historical figures. I myself am working upon the personality of King Arthur

METATAB: The historical figure?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Yes, although

it's a rather complicated matter. In fact, the material we have to hand (upon which to base our programming) is a composite of quasi-historical sources and literary or mythic adaptations; and the historical context stretches over several centuries. It's a challenge to reconcile it so as to construct an internally coherent personality. Chronicles, Malory, Tennyson, Zimmer Bradley, it's a varied spread. But I think I'm coming up with something true to the original force of the myth itself, something that captures the reason why so many people are still fascinated by the legends of King Arthur. My personality-fitted Replicant will be as close to a real "King Arthur" as can be imagined.

METATAB: Herr-Doktor Professor, thank you very much.

.2.

50-5-21. *MetaTab caught up with Herr-Doktor Professor Sir Allen Fergus earlier this week at his Avebury apartment. We are lucky enough to have an exclusive interview with this key figure in the world of Political Design.*

[topic: election] Stream: Fergus (now pluckBald) in black sleeveless suit and white strand-shirt in lounger. ART Logo. Apartment: Purple/Orange décor.

METATAB: Professor, it has been almost a year since you last spoke to MetaTab. Might we ask how things have progressed?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: It has been an extremely eventful year. My split with the RPSP has been well-publicised I suppose, and it was far from being a pleasant thing to go through. But I believe it better to part with one's colleagues openly than try to struggle on hypocritically when the differences between you are so marked. They think that Sportsman analogues for senior civil service positions, and Soap-Star analogues for junior Ministers, will restore public trust. But I firmly believe that the people will never truly trust actors and sportsmen in politics.

METATAB: But isn't it true that the Replicant personalities constitute separate routines to their processing and intellectual powers?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Of course; a Replicant with a personality based on a famous sportsman has exactly the same administrative competence as a regular Replicant. That's not the issue. The issue is public perception.

METATAB: Is this why you have appealed to the public through the voting system?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Voting had become a minority pastime. People have believed for years—and not without reason—that one company's Public Service Replicants were as good as another's for the job they are designed to do, and that therefore there's little point in going through the charade of voting for one or other. But introduc-

ing celebrity personalities provides a new reason to vote. The populace is excited at the coming election, in a way it hasn't been for decades. I believe my Mythic Politicians will appeal to the public more than RPSP's Sporting and Screen star line-up. It's as simple as that.

METATAB: And yet you have often placed on the record your contempt for the public at large, and your disillusion with the voting process?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: "Contempt" is a strong word. Most working people in this country feel a certain condescension towards the National Wage layabouts. That's undeniable, I think.

METATAB: And yet over two thirds of the population live on the National Wage.

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR SIR ALLEN FERGUS: True. Of course, not *all* of them are the loutish, hanging-around-on-street-corners, petty vandalism and substance-ingestion types. But many are, and I think all of us Political Engineers and Programmers need to look that unpleasant fact clean in the face. As for the question of the validity or otherwise of the voting process: yes, for many years, with the service provided by the Replicants, it was an anachronism, and, yes, I was amongst its critics. But recent events have seen a new use for the otherwise antiquated principle.

METATAB: Is your King Arthur here, in Avebury, now?

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: He is out canvassing at present. Election laws allow me three versions of any one candidate, and all three are out in the country at the moment.

METATAB: Good luck, and thank you

HERR-DOKTOR PROFESSOR

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Thank *you*.

.3.

50-7-11. *MetaTab spoke briefly to Sir Allen Fergus yesterday.*

[topic: Allegations] Stream: Fergus in silver. ART Logo. Walking rapidly along Fulham Walkway.

METATAB: Sir Allen! Sir Allen! Might MetaTab ask you a few questions?

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: In a fearful hurry . . .

METATAB: How do you respond to the allegations that your candidate, King Arthur, has raised a private army and committed terrorist actions against the state on a number of occasions?

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: I reject these allegations. King Arthur has been moving amongst the real, the real people in the *real* country, not the media bubble. The people have, have, they have taken him to their breast. It is true he has recruited a number of National Wagers to assist his election campaign.

METATAB: Some authorities estimate that number at eighty thousand.

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: I cannot

comment upon figures. What is important is that he has given these people back their hope, purpose, and self-respect.

METATAB: And he has armed them?

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: These are dangerous times, riots, civil disturbance. In my opinion, Arthur is to be commended for taking a firm line with social malcontents and criminals. I think you'll find that polls place my candidate firmly in the lead. People respect his strong stance.

METATAB: Isn't it against the law to recruit a private army?

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Desperate times require extreme solutions. You must remember that this is not some publicity stunt, this is the real King Arthur—as near as modern science can reconstruct him. He is true to himself: a warrior, not an equivocating and corrupt politician. A *dux bellorum*. And it is as such that the people want him.

.4.

50-11-20. *MetaTab today attended a press briefing by Sir Allen Fergus.*

[topic: Battle] Stream: Fergus in black. ART Logo. Virtual environment.

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: I am here to confirm that a battle has recently been fought at Camden, between human troops loyal to King Arthur, and the largely android forces of the RPSP Government. Arthur was triumphant. The Presidential order declaring last

week's election result void has been overturned, and King Arthur is once again the constitutional leader of our nation, in line with the result of that ballot. The President, and all employees of RPSP, are now public enemies, and should present themselves to the authorities within three days. Failure to do so will result in police seizure. People! I bring great news. A new dawn commences! King Arthur himself has returned to lead his country, a rebirth made possible by new developments in science! The old decadence will be burned away, and a golden age inaugurated!

[*Applause. Cheers.*]

KING ARTHUR: I would like to thank my trusted advisor, Sir Fergus, who is true and noble. I feel the force of destiny working through me. Britain, awake! The National Wage shall be abolished. All unemployed citizens will be given the choice of joining the army or supervising their own destinies without leeching upon the state. Web access will be curtailed. Roads will be built. A new moral code of purity and honour will be made law. Chivalry will govern all citizens' lives. The glorious return is now! To those Saxons amongst us, I say this: we do not intend to expel you from our country, and we invite you to serve the greater good of New Britain. We believe it is possible for Saxons to be patriotic, and the first year of our reign will be devoted to giving them the chance to prove their devotion. Naturally, for reasons of national security, all citizens racially

Saxon must now report to new Citizenship Stations and register their addresses to receive citizenship-reallocation. This process will *not* result in stigmatisation as second tier subjects, provided *all* Saxons collect their new work permit-directives. Those who do not register are liable to imprisonment. Citizens who are racially Celt, and who can prove genuine Celtic blood on both sides for three generations, may apply to be admitted to the Order of the Round Table. My mandate is from the people! A great day is dawning!

.5.

52-1-2. *Excalibur National Press Services are pleased to announce that they were permitted an interview with Sir Allen Fergus last week.*

ENPS: You have achieved so much, Sir Fergus. Are you planning the well-earned retirement of which you have sometimes talked, or can a grateful people persuade you to continue shouldering the burden of responsibility that goes with being the King's most trusted adviser?

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Ah, how tempting it would be—to retire to the country, to live out the rest of my days in peace! But I fear the enemies of the state, within and without, press us too closely to allow me to lay down my burden. Arthur's great mission, although it has achieved so much, is not yet complete. The shocking, riotous violence of the inmates of His Majesty's Prison Salisbury Plain show

the dangers posed by Saxon criminals, even when under lock and key. This is a problem that may require a longer consultation period, more thought, and perhaps a more fundamental approach before we can reach a solution.

ENPS: Are you managing to keep up your scientific research, on top of the arduous duties of political high office? I understand a group of true citizens has presented a million-signature petition to the Nobel Committee on your behalf?

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: I can hardly comment on that, flattering though it is. No, I am still managing a little non-

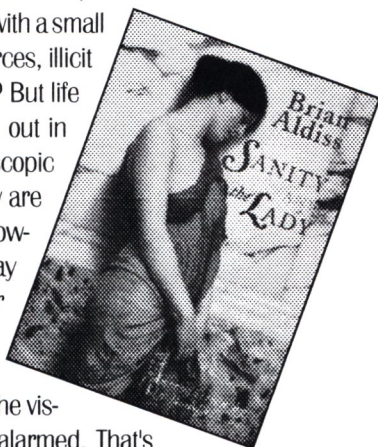
political work, a little bit of science. For the good of mankind, you see. A deputation of German citizens recently approached me, and I'm working with them on resurrecting a great hero of German history, in Programmed Replicant form, to help bring their country back from the political brink on which it, lamentably, sits. I am only happy to be of service.

ENPS: Sir Fergus, I speak on behalf of the whole nation when I say: thank you.

SIR ALLEN FERGUS: Don't mention it.



Every family has its problems. Take the Laurences, for example. There's an unmarried mother with a small child. There are mobs at the gates, divorces, illicit love affairs and a suicide - or is that two suicides? But life goes on. Until the night when a meteorite burns out in earth's atmosphere. It releases a number of microscopic beings. Well, if not beings, at least functions. They are a mystery, a challenge to human imagination. However, if you have one entering your brain, you may be able to communicate with it, perhaps to your advantage. Here is what humans have long wanted, a chance to study alien life. They do not like it when they get it. Laura Broughton defends the visitors while the world becomes more and more alarmed. That's what gets her into trouble. And finally, the visitors astonish us all.



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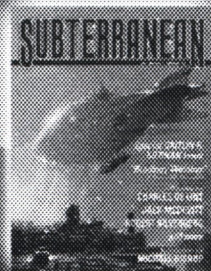


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Following on from last issue's 'Dreaming With The Angels', 'Dharma Bums' is yet another part of my James Dean sequence of stories, which includes the novel The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean. "If Dean had lived," Dann says wistfully, "perhaps he would have become acquainted with the Beats, with Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg. Perhaps he would have gone to Tangiers to have adventures, sex, and help Jack Kerouac rewrite—"Ah, but that would be giving the story away. "Dharma Bums' is fiction, based on facts, which I've skewed a bit. For instance, Kerouac did go to Tangiers to visit Burroughs, but he went with Ginsberg. My overriding interest in writing this story was to explore the characters at their limits. I've tried to sketch the real Burroughs, the real Kerouac, and James Dean as he might have been but for that mythic car crash on September 30, 1955 on Highway 466. I didn't start writing the story until I could hear all the characters whispering insistently in my ear. . . I can only hope I've done a proper job of transcription." Currently underway for Dann is the tentatively titled Extra Duty, a mainstream novel about wealth, high politics, and a murder in a military academy.

Dharma Bums

Jack Dann

Sunday Jan. 6, 1957

Won't be here for long, so

CALL ME!

WRITE ME!

c/o Geraldine Kasten

Stagler House

1212 East 7th Street, Apt. 3, NY NY

Dear Jimmy—

You owe me a letter, man, and it's decision time . . . if you want to make the trip to Tangier with me. Look, I know you can afford to take a cruise ship, the queer Queen Mary or Elizabeth, but as an old Merchant Marine man, let me tell you, there ain't nothing like being on a freighter, none of that swishy-swashy (your word!) uptight chitter-chatter and mahogany ball-

room shit, just blue eye and green eye water undulating forever, the lap of the world, and the sky fingers touching it. You, me, clouds, the sunflower sun, and real honest working sailors, who aren't eating cucumber sandwiches and groveling around like your Cunard line white-suited faggot stewards. Sounds of the sea, man, it moves, it stretches, and you can hear it groan, it's not the earth groaning, Jimmy, but the blood/water/spirit of the world, and the ship creaks like an old woman, whispers you right to sleep, and the sky—I could go on, but if you want to experience the womb cunt of the world and drink gallons of rectified spirits and smoke granaries of dope and fuck a million chicks and hang, bang, with your dick out, as you say, and see the weird corners of

the world where the juice is thick, then you've GOT to let me know like yesterday because we can share a cabin on the good ship *Slovenia*. Yugoslavian. We drink VODKA!!! I can set it up. The ship will dock at the Brooklyn Busch Terminal in February. Leaves on the 15th, and I'm on it, Jimmy, unless my legs and dick fall off—and maybe even then.

If you want to come, you'll need to wire me some money to make it happen. Call me at Murray Hill 3-3495. Call me as soon as you get this missive and I'll give you the details for Western Union. I'm broke — or I'd call you. I moved in with this chick Gerry Kasten (Polski, her parents from Prague)—you met her with Lucian and Cessa Carr on your last trip, remember? And then you wanted to go downtown and get drunk at the White Horse with that girl we gang-banged. Gerry took me in off the street after I got thrown out of my last place. That's another story. Gerry wants to come with ~~us~~ me to Tangier, but I can't handle the hassles of having a woman on the trip, not this one, not if you come WHICH YOU SHOULD!, not with old Bill pervert Burroughs, and, like I told you, it's going to be good sweaty holy artists' work. We're going to turn Burroughs' theatrical routines and bird dropping notes into a real honest-to-goodness publishable novel. We're going to see the unzipped side of the world. You've GOT to come. We'll make history.

But shit fuck piss, I know you probably can't make it, even though you

said you would last trip. (Well, you DID, remember?) Read that you're slated to be nominated for an Academy Award. For *Giant*? I can't remember and don't really read the gossip column shit, but Gerry works for somebody in the business—not that that's ever done me any good!—and knows everything that's going on. She told me that they give out the award at the end of March. You'd be back by then. Are you done with *Somebody Up There Likes Me*? I saw Tony Zale fight once. Original Man of Steel. Long story. And what about your Billy the Kid picture? You nail that yet? Hey, while I'm on about you, man, all the beat boys are scarring up their faces to look like you. It's become part of the uniform, peg pants, shades, and James Dean scars. Shit, maybe I should get into an auto accident and fuck up my face too. Look like you. Doodledeedoo! Did you see that piece in *Time* about you? Hot shit, scarface!

Okay, enough of this, or I'm going to embarrass myself. Look, last tug on your sleeve, you come with me to the fabled east and I'll teach you about the Dharma, the fucking quiet steady truth of the world. Are you reading the stuff I gave you? I wrote *Some of the Dharma* just for you, man, for YOU! Doesn't matter we didn't know each other. You'll see yourself if you read it. It's the true Morphine!

Read as I'm doing, the Diamond Sutra, every day, man. Sunday: the Dana Charity chapter. Monday: Sila kindness. Tuesday: Kshanti patience. Wednesday: Virya Zeal. Thursday:

Dyana tranquility. Friday: Prajna wisdom. Saturday: meditate on it. It will wake you up, wake up your eternal self, your starbody. It will give you total control of your art. It will play you. You'll apprehend knowledge directly by intuition. Divine osmosis.

You come with me and I'll show you how to fumigate the universe with hot mind-essence. I showed Allen G., and you heard him read *Howl*. It's in there, man, it's fucking in there.

Oh, shit shit shit, I don't want to scare you off. I ~~want~~ just have this intuition that it's important for us to do this thing together. I've got a plan to reach Nirvana by 2000, and you're in it, Jimmy. I'll tell you about it on the ship. On the ship!

Repose will come.

In repose the secret.

In the secret: ceaseless ecstasy.

See you on the golden sea
of the world,
Jack Kerouac

"I'm freezing my ass off," James Dean said, stomping around the room. "If I wanted this, I could have stayed in New York. This is the worst of everything, man."

"Go look out the window and tell me that," Jack Kerouac said. He was lying on the mattress in the corner and had covered himself with a richly colored, cheap Berber carpet they had bought in the souq for six dirhams, about forty cents.

Jimmy stood before the arched win-

dow and gazed over his red tiled patio at the flat tenement roofs and the rust red, gold, and white minarets that rose from the blocky blue-gray mosques. The minarets reminded Jimmy of the colored crystals that his mother had bought him for his eighth birthday. She had dropped a few "seeds" into a jelly glass that she had filled with some sort of solution, and, to Jimmy's delight, they grew overnight into delicate crystalline towers.

The sky was eggshell blue and flat. The water of the bay of Tangier was jewel green and still as a photograph.

"Okay, this is the worst of everything, man," he repeated, and then he poured gasoline from a can into a pot on the floor in the middle of the room. The floor was covered with stained, cracked, and faded tiles of such an intricate design that the swirls and cross-lacings seemed to be in constant movement; old and broken as they were, the tiles still overpowered the room. Stepping backward, Jimmy lit a match and flicked it expertly into the pot. Orange flames shot up from the pot with a whooping sound. Jimmy felt the heat roll over him like a hot wind.

"You're going to burn us out, doing that," Jack said.

"It works."

"It stinks to high heaven in here, open the window."

"Now that would defeat the purpose, wouldn't it," Jimmy said. The room did smell bad. It reeked of gasoline, sweat, and rancid fat, yet there was

also a sweet hint of cinnamon, honey, and nutmeg—Burroughs had taught Jack how to cook his own *majoun*, a potent sweet made with chopped marijuana.

“If you don’t, I will.”

Jimmy shrugged and opened the door that led out onto the patio. “Only for a minute.” It was a losing battle, he thought. The dampness was in the stone and plaster and wood itself. Mold spread across the walls and ceiling. “Hey, it’s warmed up a little out here.”

“Then leave the door open,” Jack said.

“It’s not *that* warm.”

“Leave the door open,” Jack said, kicking away the blanket and shifting his weight onto his elbow. Although Kerouac suffered from chronic phlebitis and was addicted to alcohol and the pharmacopoeia available at the pharmacy on the Rue Bourraquia in the Grand Socco—*Sympatina* for wake up kicks, *Diosan* for calm comedowns, and *Soneryal* for instant sleepy-by-baby oblivion—he looked like an athlete. He seemed to be in perfect shape. His stomach was flat, his arms well muscled, and there were no phlebitis boils or scars or swellings on his muscular legs. He had great reserves of strength, and bragged that all the *majoun*, kif, black hash, alcohol, coke, opium, dolophine, smack, and pills in Tangier would just blow right through him. Drugs were his allies, but he acknowledged that they denied him enlightenment.

He was going to stop . . . tomorrow.

“Didn’t your mommy open the windows when you went to bed so you’d have fresh air?”

Jimmy gave Jack a dirty look. “Don’t talk about my mother here.”

“What is this, the land of no mommies? Sorry . . . You want to come to bed?”

“I thought you were so hot to work on Burroughs’ mess of a novel.”

“He’s fucking brilliant,” Jack said.

“So you say.” A chilly breeze fluttered the curtains hung on either side of the blue patio door, and Jack looked out at the early boats arriving from Casablanca. “You still think he’s so brilliant after he gave you that opium? You’re a fucking masochist, man.”

“Wasn’t his fault.”

“He brewed that disgusting black wodge up himself,” Jimmy said. “And cut it with arsenic, for Chrissakes.”

“He didn’t cut it. He got just as sick as we did.”

“As you did,” Jimmy said.

Jack gave him the finger.

“I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t trust anybody, man.”

“Okay, I don’t like him.”

“Shit,” Jack said, “you don’t know him yet.” He sat up on the mattress, his hands clasped around his legs, knees pulled to his chest.

“Cover yourself up,” Jimmy said. “That’s disgusting.”

Jack didn’t seem to be listening. He shook his head at Jimmy and mumbled something about praty-h-ra concentration. He was taking all the energy

out of his heart and liver and spleen and kidneys and gonads and fixing it, concentrating it in his mind. But it didn't seem to be working because he had a throbbing erection.

"I'm going out," Jimmy said.

"Where?" Jack asked, having obviously shifted his concentration.

"That Spanish restaurant we went to last night in the Zocco Chico. I need to get out of here."

"Stay here, man. Just for a while. My legs are killing me. Let's hang here a bit, and then we'll go out and turn ourselves into fat men, I promise." Jack looked up at Jimmy, chin against chest, mimicking Jimmy's bullfighter gaze. "I'll pay."

"You think you can afford it?" Jimmy asked sarcastically. A meal of noodle soup and shrimp, pork in tomato sauce, bread, eggs, sour wine, espresso, and an orange would cost around thirty-five cents.

"I'll rob the piggy bank," Jack said. "Well, you coming over here or what?"

"Shit, we're acting like the faggots next door," but Jimmy felt himself getting excited.

"I'm not a faggot, and neither are you," Kerouac said sharply. "Bill, now *he's* a stoned-out faggot, although he's a good one; he's not swishy, prissy, and all that shit, although you should hear him when he's doing some of his routines. You haven't seen him being a governess. He tell you yet about all his personalities?" Kerouac waited a beat. "No . . . you haven't given him a chance to tell you *anything*."

"We ain't hardly seen him," Jimmy said, turning away from Jack to hide his erection. At least he, Jimmy, was dressed.

"He's just a little weird because he's off junk," Jack said. "That cure he took with that Doctor Whatsis in London really freaked him out. He told me that when you come off junk, you're weak as a kitten and horny as hell. It's like being a kid again, you get wet dreams. Man, what I wouldn't give for a good old nocturnal emission. Anyway, Bill's out and about in the medina chasing boys and counting his orgasms. You know, I once swore off sex, and he talked me back into it. Told me jerking off counted as sex, so what the hell. Anyway, he won't be back until late, and then you and me, we'll sweat over his novel. So we got time."

"For what?"

"Oh, shit, Jimmy, for anything we want to do. Look, let's clear all this up once and for all. You ever blow me?"

"Go to hell. You know the answer to that."

"Okay, did I ever blow you?"

"No."

"Then we ain't queer." Jack chuckled and said, "Anus *probandi*."

Jimmy shook his head.

"Christ, I'm married, get it?" Kerouac continued. He pounded his chest. "Fuck woman, me Tarzan, married hetero man, you Jane," and then reverting to his normal voice, he said, "and you've just pissed me off. So I'm going to tell you the surprise I fixed up for tonight. I fixed us up with some

whores. It's going to be orgy-heaven right here on this here mattress you're so shy about. So if you're feeling like a fruit, you don't have to participate. I'll keep the trick-turners for my own lone self."

Jimmy moved closer to the mattress and playfully kicked at it. "So you can be the fruit bowl queen, oh mighty Tarzan?"

Jack laughed and swung his leg out in a gentle roundhouse, catching Jimmy off balance. Jimmy fell onto the mattress, and Jack grabbed him, squeezing his crotch. "This isn't how Bill does it, I can tell you that."

"You'd know," Jimmy said; he let Jack unzip his fly while he squeezed Jack's penis, rubbing, caressing, then working it with both hands.

"Just a matter of omniscience," Jack mumbled, closing his eyes; and Jimmy focused his own praty~h~ra back into his crotch, let everything squeeze down into his balls and dick, all the warmth and emptiness and fear and loneliness, and his jizzum would be gray matter and he'd let his brains come all over the new Berber carpet blanket, and he'd dry up here in Tangier, no more Pier Angeli, no more Marilyn Monroe, no more movie star ratbags, no more hassles and hustles; and he was alone in this mold crawling room, absolutely alone, deep in and ready to come out and dry up dead, a spot on the carpet that was James Dean, actor; and he came, poured out all the emptiness. Wished he could stay in the orgasm instant of death.

The Mar Chica was a local's dive near the port. Sawdust covered the floor, and the place smelled of *majoun*, the sick-sweetness of pot, body odor, tobacco, spices, cheap perfume, and beer. The chairs and tables were old and wobbly. The light was bad and the smoke thick. The crowd was a combination of Arabs, Moors, Berbers, and slumming expats, mostly Spanish. The place was sleazy, but the flamenco music was the hottest in Tangier; and the gypsy whore Carmella, who had a face as beautiful and flat as a Slav, could sing like Broadway. Louis, the waiter, danced; he, too, was stoned-out beautiful, with fine features, long arms and legs and fingers, and thick, oiled Rudolph Valentino hair.

Jimmy and Jack sat near the bar and ate sweet pies of chopped pigeon, almonds, and eggs seasoned with sugar, onion, coriander, saffron, and ginger, all wrapped in layers of flake pastry that had become soggy and lipoidal. They drank green tea with mint, and something watered that came out of a bottle of Jack Daniels. They ate two sticky bars of Kerouac's strong and bitter *majoun* (had he forgotten the honey?), and within fifteen minutes the café expanded, shimmered, took on tapestry richness, de Chirico depths, and Klee color; and the susurrating, catwailing conversation all around them became bright as beads.

Carmella sat down beside an old man playing a beat-up upright Steinway and began to sing, her contralto voice heavy as the air. A group of young

Spaniard tourists accompanied her with guitars and castanets.

Earlier, they had been singing for beers.

“You told me we were bringing the whores back to our room.” Jimmy said, leaning toward Jack to be heard over the noise. “That was the deal.”

“Yeah,” Jack said, dipping his fingers in a mess that consisted of couscous and gravy with raw looking spots of meat.

“So what’s this shit about a pimp taking us to the girls?”

Jack shrugged. “Seemed more interesting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait ’till you see the pimp. You’ll piss yourself, man, guaranteed.” Kerouac wiped his hands on the tablecloth and leaned back in his chair. The dancer came to the table with a woman who was so thin she could have been in a concentration camp. She had bulging brown eyes, long straggly hair, and she wore black. She was dressed like the old Greek women Jimmy used to see in downtown New York.

“Hey, Louis, my man, my main man,” Jack said. “How de do.”

“Hallo, my very good friends,” the dancer said. He looked at Jimmy hungrily and said, “I introduce you both my best friends to my wife, Hasnah, who has made for you your delicious food and gave me eight strong sons.”

As Jimmy and Jack greeted her, Louis produced a chipped yellow plate piled with pesetas, francs, pounds, and faded dollar notes.

“Well, thank you, that’s very kind of you,” Kerouac said.

Jimmy grinned at Louis and Jack, but didn’t look at Hasnah, who seemed to sense his discomfort and moved closer to him. She smelled ill and unclean. She smelled like Jimmy’s mother during her last days in the hospital.

“Ah, *hab*, Mister Jack, very good.” Louis said “hah” so loudly that Jimmy flinched in surprise. It was a magnified *hab* from the throat of a whale . . . a skinny, dancing black Spanish whale. “No, this plate is for my poor wife, who cooked your food for you tonight.” He smiled, then waited. Jimmy tossed a few pesetas into the plate.

“He’s my banker,” Kerouac said. “I never carry any money.”

Louis was fixed on Jimmy. “You know how you could make my wife oh so happy, yes?”

“No, how could I do that?” Jimmy asked, feeling a rush of *majoun*-induced dread. He could almost see it as tendrils, sticky cables, extruding from the dancer’s toothy mouth.

“You give to my poor wife a few American dollars? That mean everything to her because”—he waved her away—“she’s very sick, *signor*, sick sick sick, ah she was so very beautiful when I met her, you can see how beautiful she was, can’t you? But now . . .” He sighed and said, “*Imaab*,” which meant “Mommy,” the universal Tangier plea and invocation. Jimmy thought the saying true and tender. Here he could cry for his mother to his heart’s content.

But he wasn't going to give this bunco artist any more money.

"It would be a blessed thing, a blessing for you," Louis said, "because you're rich with everything"; and he stood there, a conquistador general staring down the front line of the enemy. He held his sacramental plate for all to see. Then he smiled and nodded at a filthy little ragamuffin who arrived at the table. The boy was dressed in beggar's rags and furiously smoking a cigarette. He inhaled so deeply that he made a wheezing sound at the back of his throat. "La," he said to Louis and Jack.

Jack started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Come, we go," the boy said. "Cigarette, give me another cigarette, please."

"Does your father know you smoke, and where you are?" Jimmy asked.

Jack couldn't stop giggling.

"Yes, he know," the boy said. "He know everything." He had a beautiful, angelic face wreathed in dark curls.

"I'll bet he doesn't know what *you're* up to," Jimmy said.

"Poppa, you know where I am?" he asked Louis.

"You smoke too much. Gitanes bad for you, too strong."

"He's your son?" Jimmy asked.

"*Si*, is he not a beautiful boy?"

Jimmy nodded, and Jack said softly, "Give Louis a dollar for his poor wife."

"Correct," the boy shouted, as loudly as his father had shouted *hab* earlier.

The son of the whale.

Jimmy gave Louis a dollar, and they followed Louis Jr. outside into the winding maze of streets and alleys. There was still some rust orange left in the sky, a color Jimmy hadn't seen anywhere else, and the shadows were long and edged in purple. Then, as if all the lamps had been turned off at once, it became dark, a palpable, thick darkness, although the sky above was milky with wan moonlight. The boy, whose real name was Nimún, led them through winding streets and dark alleys. Then he ran ahead and when Jimmy and Jack didn't quicken their pace to keep up, he stamped his feet, and shouted "*Zid!*" which was Arabic for "hurry up."

Jimmy had memorized a few Arabic phrases from a Baedeker he had found in Burroughs' apartment and shouted back, "*Bshbal b'eid?*" He meant to ask how far, but had obviously got it wrong. Nimún stood under a lamp that gave off a weak, flickering light and gave him the finger very dramatically.

"What the hell did you do?" Kerouac asked, grinning.

"Let's give it up," Jimmy said. "I'm tired."

"Hey," Nimún shouted. "*Zid!* We got to hurry, they not wait too long for us."

"Forget it," Jimmy shouted. "We're going back."

Nimún ran back to them and said anxiously, "Deal has been made. They wait."

"Who waits?" Jimmy asked.



Illustration by James Hannah

“Beautiful girls.” Nimún made the “V” sign to indicate two girls.

“I’m going back,” Jimmy said to Jack. “If I wanted a whore, there are plenty in the Socco. I’m stoned and tired, and I’ve had enough. I’m going to bed.”

“No, no, not whores,” Nimún said. “Whores anywhere, you right. But these not, I promise, I swear.”

“What, on your father’s head?” Jimmy asked.

“Yes, on there.”

“On Louis’ head?”

“He not my father, he lied, I take you to my father.”

“And I suppose the girls are your sisters,” Jimmy said.

“No, not mine, but friend of mine. They’re good girls. Not whores.”

“Then we don’t pay, right?”

The boy shook his head and stomped his feet in the stone alley. The dark walls of chockablock buildings rose claustrophobically above them. Sulphurous yellow light could be seen in windows, and noise was everywhere, bubbling, rushing streams of garbled words. Jimmy felt his head pounding, felt pressure building in his temples, felt red acid bubbling and frothing in his sternum, *majoun, majoun, majoun*, and he was sure that the buildings were going to collapse onto the street and crush him. They were the color of snow, and if Nimún kept shouting and speaking loudly, the stone snow buildings would shift and fall, and they would all be buried in the shaking shattering shouting avalanche of buildings.

“Come, we can’t stay here,” Nimún said. “Dangerous to stand here.” He cocked his head, an affectation obviously practiced, and asked Jimmy, “*Tu estás tan enfadado conmigo?*”

“What?”

“English,” Jack said. “English.”

“Are you so angry with me?”

“I’m not angry with you,” Jimmy said, softening to the boy, although he knew he was being manipulated. Why not? He, Jimmy, would do the same.

“If you not angry, then why break deal?” Nimún asked, pleading. “I get you nice girls, I promise, I swear, I cross my heart and go to die.”

Jimmy laughed. “It’s *hope* to die. Where’d you hear that?”

“In streets. All over. It’s expression of my people.”

Just then a clattering, clamoring tour group of English schoolchildren materialized out of the darkness. The boys wore blue and green blazers, striped ties, knee socks, and caps and were led by a tall man wearing the same school colors. As they passed, they laughed and pointed at Nimún. He shouted at them in Arabic, French, Spanish, and English, threatening to defecate on all their mothers.

They disappeared into the short-circuited neon avenue ahead, and for an instant, Jimmy thought he had hallucinated them.

“This is what Bill meant,” Jack said, laughing and shaking his head. “This is it, right here, right now. It’s magic, man. Pure opium sorcery. Bill dreamed it all up, he smoked it all into existence,

and now . . . we're in it. This is what he's writing about, Jimmy: Interzone, he calls it. You know what that means?"

Jimmy looked around. He was lost and as stoned as Jack. He realized he couldn't get back to the room by himself and tried not to panic; but the *majoun* was an engine working inside him, lighting him up, sparking his every emotion. He was totally dependent on this little Arab ragbag, who was begging him for another cigarette, even as he begged him to visit his friends who weren't whores.

"Bill told me that Interzone is the place where three-dimensional fact merges into three-dimensional dream," Jack continued. "It's where dreams erupt into the real world. Like those tourists. We made them up, didn't we, man? They were fabrications, part of our consensual dream. Right? They couldn't be real, right Nimún?"

The boy grinned at him and said, "We got to go right now, yes?"

"Yes!" Jack shouted, and they were off. Jimmy followed Jack and the boy, who were singing and laughing and shouting, and their voices echoed in the streets until Jimmy imagined that the echoes were taking over their voices. Although Jimmy wore a jacket, he was shivering in the damp chill. The cold seemed to come up from the cobblestones, and Jimmy equated it with darkness and death. He hurried to keep up with Jack, paranoia a hot, bitter juice leaking into his chest; and stoned-out and blitzed, they followed Nimún

right out of the neon shivering, cold-shaking, shadowed city. Streets became paths. The sky was cloudy, stars faded, occulted by the maggot-gray, gibbous moon. The wind was cold fingers snapping at their faces. Around them were moon-limned hills, trees, vines and shrubs. Forests of oak, mastic, arbutus, and what looked like Japanese pine reached red sandstone cliffs that fell to the sea. Jimmy could smell a faint, tart, fishy odor. It was as if he could smell the expanse of the wine dark ocean, breathe in all the fishes and exhale sand and mollusks and all the crabby creatures of the bottom. As they walked, the way became rocky, and it was difficult to keep their footing. Jack slipped on a stone and swore he'd turned his ankle, but Nimún slipped himself under his arm and said, "I will help you, don't worry, we are almost there. Just a little more, you'll see, and you will be happy, very happy."

"I don't like this," Jimmy said, as Nimún tried to lead them down what seemed to be a ledge littered with broken stone. "Too dangerous in the dark."

"Follow me," Nimún said. "Very safe, and not very dark."

Jimmy lost his foothold, and slid past Jack; he cut his hands on the sharp rocks.

"Use the steps," Nimún said, crawling around Jimmy. The boy was like a little crab on the rocks. "We fix when we get to the tents, see right there, we're almost there, only a little . . ."

Two large Berber tents were set up

on a forested plain that descended to the sea. Jimmy inhaled the Christmas smell of pine mixed with the salty smell of the sea.

“Come, we fix you,” Nimún said to Jimmy.

“Who owns this place?” Jimmy asked.

“I told you, friends.”

“Jack . . . ?”

“Yeah, Jimmy, I know,” Jack said.

“But we’re here now. Might as well check it out.”

Nimún said something in Arabic, and a veiled woman opened the tent flap and welcomed them inside. She wore a headscarf, a gauzy caftan, and electric blue plastic sandals. Her hands were dyed orange. She looked young and fragile and delicate, and Nimún spoke to her in Arabic again, and she shyly removed her headscarf and caftan, revealing dark, wide eyes, Clara Bow lips, astonishingly even, white teeth, and long, curly black hair. She could have been Nimún’s sister, for their features were similar and proportionate. Before proceeding to prepare green tea and mint over a fire that was burning brightly at the far end of the large tent, she tenderly cleaned the scratches on Jimmy’s hands and wrapped them in clean gauze.

Nimún, Jimmy, and Jack sat on one of the many carpets scattered over the ground. Large sacks and mat screens separated the space into rooms. Beside them, a simple vertical loom was attached to one of the tent poles.

“You see, she fix everything,”

Nimún said, patting Jimmy’s hand. Then he started the haggling over her price.

“You mean, she’s it?” Jack asked. “Two girls, that was the deal, remember?”

Nimún blinked at Jack. “No, I have only one, but she is more beautiful than two, is she not? She is not what you see in the Socco. Yes? You do not think she’s beautiful?”

“Yes,” Jack said impatiently. “She’s very beautiful. But that wasn’t the deal.”

Nimún shrugged and folded his arms over his chest. “Then after we have tea, we go.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Jimmy said, relieved.

“Someone else will pluck her flower,” Nimún said.

“So now she’s a virgin, is that it?” Jack asked, rising to the bait.

“I explained she was special, not like in Socco. Explained to me needed gentle man. You and Mister Jimmy seem to me gentle and good, so I bring you here.”

“If that were true, you would have told us before,” Jack said.

Nimún shrugged. “You believe like you like.”

“We didn’t come here to deflower virgins,” Jimmy said, looking to Jack for confirmation. Jack nodded, smiling.

The girl served the tea, which was steaming hot and sweet with mint and sugar. She seemed to pay special attention to Jimmy, as if he were her ward. Nimún asked her something. She

shook her head and kneeled down beside Jimmy.

"I made mistake. She's not a virgin." He said something else to her, and she bowed her head, as if shamed.

"What did you say to her?" Jimmy asked.

"I told her you don't want her."

"You're a little shit, do you know that?" Jack said.

"Yes, big brother, I know that."

"I'm not your big brother." After a beat, Jack asked, "How much?"

"Very reasonable.

"How much?"

"Fifty dirham."

Jack laughed at that, and the girl stayed behind Jimmy, as if she understood what was being said, but couldn't bear to hear it.

"Look, I'm out of here," Jimmy said; he tried to stand, but the girl held on to him. She looked terrified.

"She likes you very much," Nimún said.

"Five dirham, and that's it," Jack said.

"Twenty . . ."

"Ten."

"Fifteen . . ." and Jimmy found himself alone with the girl.

"Where are you going?" he called through the tent to Jack.

"I'll be right back." Rustling outside the tent. The wheeze of the wind. The crackle of the fire. The girl looked at Jack, her eyes intent. The flickering of the fire seemed to change her features, transforming her from a mature woman to a twelve year old girl, or a

pretty boy, Nimún, then back again, old, young, boy, girl, woman; her lips full, purple, her face and eyes glowing, then shadowed, and she whispered to him, keeping close to him and nattered on in Arabic while she undressed. She stared at him, holding his gaze, and Jimmy felt awkward and embarrassed, too embarrassed to look down at her until they were lying down, and she was in his arms, rubbing against him, then turning around so that her buttocks were pushing against his groin. She was in fetal position, and he was wrapped around her. Her hair was thick and coarse and tickled his face. She smelled of lavender and sweat and the astringent she had daubed on his cuts. He held her small breasts as she worked him inside her, into slippery soft warm oil, moving back and forth, suction popping, and he kneaded her breasts, making bread, and his breathing quickened while hers stayed the same, and as he came, she gasped; he brought his hands up to her face and felt wet tears on her cheeks.

"Are you all right?" he asked, but she couldn't answer, of course.

He rolled away from her. He was limp now, and angry—angry with Jack and Nimún and this little whore, angry with himself for even being here—and she remained in fetal position, her body shivering. He tried to comfort her, but she stared ahead, neither accepting nor rejecting him. He wiped the crusted blood away from his crotch with one of the bandages he found on the carpet. As he dressed, he

heard something outside. Jack was calling him; there was desperation in his voice.

Jimmy glanced at the girl as he left. She was staring at him, a look of pure hate . . . and triumph on her face. She had duped the whoremaster. She had won. Kill him dead, *Imaab*.

Jimmy hurried out, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

Jack ran toward him from the other tent. Two Arabs scrambled after him; behind them was Nimún.

"Come on," Jack shouted. "We got to get out of here."

"You stay," Nimún called. "They not hurt you, want to talk, is all. I promise."

But one of the Arabs, a tall husky, square-faced man who looked to be in his thirties, hissed and grabbed at Jack's shirt. He wore a black *djellaba* and held a knife in his left hand. The other one, who was younger, in his twenties, wore Jeans and sneakers and a white tee shirt. He looked like a Phoenician James Dean.

The boy in the white shirt took out a switchblade and advanced on Jimmy.

Jack pulled a large, black handled flick knife from his pocket and waved it at the man in the *djellaba*. "Run, Jimmy. Let's get the fuck out of here."

Jimmy ran toward the ledge of broken stones. He could feel something hot opening up inside his chest—the *majoun* kicking in, the drug that slept inside him until he needed it; and then it exploded, and he was all needles and heat, awake and aware and vibrating, as sensitive as the whiskers on a cat. He

could hear the others behind them. Then Jack yelled, and there was shouting. Jimmy kept scrabbling up the stone steps. He felt something hot grab his foot, and he kicked backward, his heel connecting. Jack shouted to Jimmy "*Keep moving*" and there was a cry in Arabic. Jimmy looked behind, saw Jack fighting with the boy in the tee shirt and jeans, heard Nimún and the girl—who must have left her tent—screaming. Jimmy scrambled up the path, *majoun* terror gave him strength, and then Jack was behind him and they were running along the littered path in the moonlight; trees crouched and bent all around them like menacing Halloween crones.

"*Sheffa . . . sheffa!*" Nimún shouted. He was calling them thieves and calling for help, as if the police would arrive like the cavalry to rescue the bandits. "*Teqn? . . .*"

Jack and Jimmy stopped for breath in a copse of sweet-smelling pine, a hot, momentary celebration of Christmas, then ran back to the familiar dangers of the shadowed city, resting in alleys lit by flickering lamps, stumbling past neon bars and street cafes and sullen boys, through the *majoun*-scented maze that swallowed them . . . and let them out.

Into the crowded, beer-stinking Socco.

Home . . .

Jack was still holding his flick-knife, its blade smeared with blood, as were his hands and pants, where he had wiped them.

William Burroughs expertly bandaged Jimmy's foot.

"Doctor Willie always takes care of his poor lil' chillun," Burroughs said in a high voice, as he examined Jimmy. "Not unusual, not unusual at all that you wouldn't feel anything, Jimmy. The body keeps its secrets until you're ready to receive them, and when you were running for your life, you . . . weren't quite ready. My stitches will hardly leave a scar when we take them out." He chuckled, clacked his teeth, then stood up and paced around the filthy, paper-strewn room. There were two antique black Remington typewriters on a makeshift desk; between them was a huge pile of typed manuscript, and hundreds of pages of yellow foolscap scattered all over the floor, along with rat droppings, half-eaten sandwiches, and open tins of sardines.

Burroughs was tall and bony, wizenfaced and sickly-looking. He had deep-set brown eyes, a long, thin, flat-edged nose, and a tight, unforgiving mouth. Jimmy thought it cruel. He was definitely a predator, an eagle without wings, or a wrinkled, drug-denuded vulture.

This was the first time Jimmy had seen Burroughs act merry.

"I didn't know I was being stabbed," Jimmy said. "It just felt hot. Wasn't any pain all along the way . . . until now."

"Yes, yes, that's how it feels; the tablets I gave you will smooth the pain. But you should have turned and fought, like Action Jackson over here."

Jack Kerouac was sitting nervously on a stuffed chair.

"Screw you, Bill," Jack said. "We're in deep shit, and you're off on one of your stupid routines."

"I didn't have anything to fight with," Jimmy said lamely.

"You lost a lot of blood, Master Jimmy," Burroughs said. "Perhaps it was your duty to become a work of art. Victim art. Blood art, now holy cow *that's* one hell of a routine." He turned to Kerouac and said, "Everything is a routine, Dharma one. That's the beauty of it all, and, Jack, why would you deny me being in the moment, living on the top, when you've just been alive in the moment? I need to live *your* moment. We're all vampires, aren't we? A French writer said, 'Only those who love life don't fear death.' When you were fighting with those curs, you didn't fear death did you, my boy? Did you . . .?"

"I didn't have time to feel anything," Kerouac said, shifting in his chair.

"There you are," Burroughs said. "And you Jimmy?"

"I don't remember. I felt . . . stoned."

"Exactly right," Burroughs continued. "A knife fight is a mystic contest, a discipline like Yoga. You must eliminate fear and anger. The fight is an impersonal process. Like a primitive artist paints the parts of the animal he cannot see—the heart, the stomach, the spinal column—so the self-aware knife fighter learns to see the inner organs of his opponent, his heart, liver,

stomach, neck, veins, which he is attempting to externalize and delineate with his knife." Burroughs paced faster as he talked. Watching him made Jimmy dizzy.

"It's Jack's Zen Buddhism applied to knife fighting. I didn't have to teach you any of that. All I did was give you my flick knife, and you owe me big time, Jack. Saved your big football ass. Although when I gave you the knife, I created the possibility, didn't I? I created the dream that could erupt into the real world, and, dee-dill-dee, so it did." He grinned at Jack, went into the kitchen, and picked up a square of his homemade *majoun* from the table. "There's fish in here if you want it," he called. "I made it an hour ago." He ate some of the *majoun* and followed it with a piece of fish.

Jack looked at Jimmy and shook his head.

Burroughs returned with two plates piled with a white-fleshed fish. "Those who eat live to fight another day."

Jimmy was ravenous, but Jack didn't touch the food.

"Look, man, we're in trouble here." Kerouac looked at Jimmy and said, "Well, *I'm* in trouble."

"You saved our lives," Jimmy said.

"Look, I don't know if I killed one of those Arabs or what."

"You probably didn't," Jimmy said.

"But we don't know," Jack said; he was shaking. "And I've *got* to know. I've got to get my ass out of here, Bill, before they come looking for me or something."

Burroughs laughed. "It's over, Jack. All done, gone, bye-bye, this is Interzone, remember? It's not New York. It's not San Francisco. Or St. Louis, thank the good Lord. It didn't happen, man. It just didn't happen. Time and causality work differently here. Haven't you got that yet? You should read what you've been typing. It's all in my book. All in there. You know what your problem is?"

Jack blinked at him.

"You don't have enough personalities. You'd need a bunch of them, like I've got. The one that shot my poor wife, may she rest in peace, in Mexico City—that was the Ugly Spirit. I never did time for that, but I probably would have if I had a single personality like you. On the other hand, you might have other personalities, and you just aren't aware of them. Like I wasn't aware of the Ugly Spirit until my friend Brion saw the Ugly Spirit in a trance, and he wrote it down, he wrote—"The ugly spirit shot Joan because—"

"You see, you just proved my point," Jack said.

"Look, maybe we should get out of here," Jimmy said. "Go home."

"No," Burroughs insisted, "you can't do that. Allen Ginsberg and his asshole boyfriend will be here in less than a week. What am I going to tell Allen . . . that you got so scaredy-cat piss-my-pants-oh-goodness-me scared that you up and left before he got here? I think not, Mister Kerouac. Anyway, you think you can just walk out to the dock and walk onto a ship?"

"We don't have to stay in Tangier," Jack said. "And we probably can catch a ship out of here tomorrow."

"Allen and his big, beautiful friend are coming here to see you and the big movie star, and to exhaust all my desires, mainly the latter," Burroughs said. "You can't be impolite and piss off." He turned to Jimmy and said, "Allen is coming all this way to torture me, to fuck my brains out, to flatten me, deflate me, eviscerate me, yet your friend Jack can't even do me the simple courtesy of staying a few more days to get me through my lonely nightmare routines, can you, Jack, you selfish bastard?"

"Now I know why Allen complains to me about you all the time," Jack said. "You're poison, man, and you're crazy. You got to get off Allen."

"He receives my routines," Burroughs said. "No matter what. You . . . you make deals. Either I behave, or no reception for me. No cookies for old Bill." His voice crept back into a high register, and he sounded like someone's old auntie.

Jack stood up. "I'm out of here."

"Make you a deal," Burroughs said. "I'll prove to you that you're safe here, safe as houses. All you have to do is . . . receive communion and break bread with me and continue to type my manuscript. Do you know how much I appreciate what you've done? All this paper would be nothing without your typing and correlating and collaborating. And you, too, Jimmy. You type fast for an actor."

Jimmy laughed, a nervous reaction. He was thinking back over the last few hours. He should have had a knife. He shouldn't have been in the tent with that virgin whore, he—twitched, as if someone had slapped him, and then settled back into the pill drug fog. Nomindedness, Jack would call it.

But Jimmy was reaching for something, yet his thoughts couldn't touch it.

"How can you prove I'll be safe here?" Jack asked.

"This is Africa, son. No consequences. *Nada*. I told you, I wrote you all about it. This is life without guilt. But you need proof, okay, okay," and Burroughs called for his houseboy Joselito. "Joselito knows everything that's going on, or he can find out. But I can tell you right now that everything that happened to you boys . . . didn't happen. It got swallowed up in the dream. Everything here gets swallowed up."

"Like the schoolboys," Jimmy said to Jack.

Jack laughed at that; it seemed to calm him down a bit. He sat back down in Burroughs' soiled, stuffed chair that reeked of fish.

"Joselito, wherever you are, get your ass out here!" Burroughs shouted, and a mangy-looking, swarthy-skinned boy of about fifteen appeared. He was almost as tall as Burroughs; he wore brown pants of a good quality and a torn yellow shirt. The pants were too large for him. He was dirty, awkward, long-faced, and smelled bad. "He steals

all my clothes," Burroughs said cheerfully to Jimmy. "But what can I do? Everyone takes, nobody gives. Isn't that right, Joselito."

Joselito looked sullenly at his master, but didn't say a word.

"I need you to find out information, and if you fail me you are out of this house for good," Burroughs said. "And I'll know because I'm going to ask for details, and if you don't have details, you don't have to come back, is that clear?"

"Is that clear?"

"Clear."

Joselito had perfect teeth, white as dentures. Up close, he was a beautiful ragamuffin.

Burroughs told him a distorted version of what had happened, showed him a handful of coins, and sent him on his way.

"He'll bring back the police," Jack said.

"No, he's even more afraid of them than of me," Burroughs said.

Jack agreed to wait until Joselito returned; then he would decide what to do.

They shivered and sat in the garden and smoked kif. The night air was cold, invigorating. Although they couldn't see the harbor from here, as they could from Jack and Jimmy's room upstairs, red light from the distant lighthouse would periodically flash-splash across the garden and building. Upon Jack's instigation, Burroughs described his

various personalities—there was, of course, William himself, a Harvard-educated son of the wealthy Burroughs Adding Machine Corporation family; then there was the English governess whose voice Jimmy had already heard; and pushing deeper one would find the psychotic tobacco-chewing, good-old-boy sheriff called Old Luke; twisting and writhing at the bottom of Burroughs' soiled and guilt infested psyche was a mute, starving Chinaman who had no friends and no life, only cold, consuming hatred.

"What about the Ugly spirit?" Jimmy asked.

Burroughs shrugged. "He's in there, too, boy, but I've never seen him. There are some things we must just take on faith, right Jack?"

Jack didn't answer. His arms were folded over his chest for warmth,

Jimmy could feel himself shivering, but the painkillers and kif muffled everything. He nodded off to sleep, a dream-haunted midnight in the garden sleep, and then snapped awake to the sounds of Burroughs working up one of his routines.

"I'm going inside," Jimmy said, and he stood up with difficulty.

Jimmy started to walk though the garden toward the stairwell in front of the building, but Burroughs blocked his way; and stoned, drunk, and crazy, he looked quite menacing. "No, Master Jimmy, please, stay here a while with us. My boy will be right back, and, anyway, you and Jack came here to type up my manuscript." Burroughs looked

at his watch and tapped its face. "It's time to type, right Jack? It's time."

"It's time to get warm," Jimmy said.

Burroughs nodded, but didn't move out of Jimmy's way. "Yes, and it's warm in my apartment. Warm as tea."

"I'll go inside with you, but I'm not typing tonight," Jack said.

"Why not?" Burroughs asked.

Jack went inside without answering.

Burroughs motioned Jimmy to follow.

"Who the fuck are you to tell me where I have to go?" Jimmy demanded as all the meanness that was choking him suddenly came up like a refreshing burp. Jimmy wanted to go to his room. He wanted to be alone to figure everything out. He wanted to be in control, and this skinny, crazy queer standing in front of him wasn't going to push him around. He'd been pushed around enough.

Burroughs looked at him, his eyes dark and hollow, and Jimmy knew who was looking out at him—it was the Ugly Spirit. He recognized it, and he suddenly knew Burroughs, knew secret things about him.

"I know who you are," Jimmy said.

"Who?"

"You don't know, do you? You think you do. You think when you raise your voice that you're the English nanny, or whoever the hell she is. And I bet when you put a twang in your voice, you're the sheriff. Otherwise you're . . . you. Good old Bill who knows how to use a knife and a rifle and knows everything there is to know about junk, right?"

"Very illuminating, Jimmy. Is that your complete, comprehensive analysis?"

"No, I forgot the Chinese guy," Jimmy said. "I guess he pops up when you're pissed off and quiet. You're one of those guys who gets quiet when he's really pissed off, aren't you? Then you're dangerous, man. You're the big Chink, thinking cold, dead dangerous thoughts, thoughts that can kill anyone dead, ain't that right?"

"Close, Jimmy," Burroughs said. "Close." He smiled tightly, the merry cadaver. "You're goddamn smart and goddamn close."

"But that's all the bullshit part, isn't it?" Jimmy said, teasing him, getting ready to cut him up. "The truth is . . . you don't know the truth."

"Ah, the profundity of stating the obvious. Is it not true that none of us know the truth?"

"But I can see the Ugly Spirit, just like your friend Brian could."

"Brion."

"Whoever."

"What do you see?" Burroughs asked, obviously caught up in Jimmy's game.

"The Ugly Spirit only seems like he's hidden because he's there all the time. He's *you*, man. The William Burroughs guy—he's only there once in a while. He's just another personality. But the Ugly Spirit, he's what all the others are set in. He's the whole you."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I can see him staring right out of your eyes," Jimmy said. "Right

now. Just like I saw him staring out your eyes when we first met, and every time I ever saw you.”

Burroughs stepped toward Jimmy, who reflexively backed away. Suddenly, Jimmy felt clear and cold. Drug free. Frightened. He was running a game on Burroughs. That was all. Just blowing scat, saying whatever came into his head. But he knew, knew he was right.

Burroughs embraced him. “Then I didn’t kill my wife.”

Jimmy pulled away from him.

Burroughs lunged forward and kissed him. “You’re the baby Jesus, man. You just gave me my essential epiphany, and, in return, I’ve got something for you.”

“What?” Jimmy asked warily.

“You got to come into the house to find out.”

“I’m not typing tonight,” Jack told Burroughs.

“Why not? We could finish it before Alan gets here.”

“Then what’s the purpose for Alan to come?” Jack sighed and said, “Except to see you, of course.”

“Thank you for that little scrap,” Burroughs said. “But the idea is to get *Naked Lunch*—that’s *your* title, Jack; I still think *Interzone* is better—the idea is to get everything as close to finished as possible before Alan gets here. Then he can do the final polish.”

“Yeah,” Jack said.

“Well, it was all your idea. Christ, it was your idea for me to write this fuck-

ing thing, and now you won’t help me. You quit, thanks loads. What about you, Jimmy, will you help me, please?”

“You said you had something for me,” Jimmy said.

“And so I do, son.”

“Well . . . ?”

“Well, all good things come to those who wait,” Burroughs said.

“You’re so full of shit,” Jimmy said.

“No, please, wait, I promise, everything will be as I said. Just stay a little while and help me, please, please, please . . .”

“Jesus Christ,” Jimmy said.

“Amen,” said Burroughs. “Look, these bits and pieces of paper are all that’s keeping me from Mr. Junk. The book may be complete shit, but it’s my lifeline, please help me, everything feels shaky tonight. I don’t want to be alone.” Burroughs was begging, and there was no hint of irony or sarcasm.

“All right, I’ll type,” Jimmy said. He grinned. “Provided you’re my slave and bring me food and any other necessities. You got an hour maybe, and then I’m gone. But first, I want to know what you meant outside in the garden. What do you have of mine?”

“Please, Jimmy, I promise I’ll give you everything before you leave.”

“Oh, sure,” Jimmy said, getting up and sitting down at the makeshift desk. Jack was right: Burroughs was a complete nutcase. Attractive and repulsive, all at once. He’d offer anything just to have company tonight. Jimmy looked at Jack and asked, “How come you don’t want to type tonight? We got this

here big black extra typewriter. You wanna keep us company?"

"No, I think I'll just hang out, stay stoned, and watch you," Jack said. Then he addressed himself to Burroughs. "I need a rest from what you got on those pages. Too fucking weird for me, all that twisting around reality stuff. I love it, but it gives me nightmares, man."

"That's what it's *supposed* to do," Burroughs said, delighted. "Maybe it's not all shit, after all. I learned the technique from you, man. Automatic writing. Your idea of spontaneous prose . . . wild form. I couldn't go for six hours at a stretch, if you hadn't offered me your technique, Dharma One, and, for me, the purpose of all of it was to shit out my Midwest background once and for all. It's a matter of daily keeping-the-needle-out-of-my-arm catharsis where I say the most horrible thing I can think of.

"But none of that comes close to what you gave me," Burroughs said to Jimmy.

"I was just fucking with your head."

"Yeah, well it worked."

"What worked?" Jack asked.

"Your friend Jimmy Jesus saw right through me, Jack. Released me from prison. Only now I got to deal with something much worse."

"Which is . . . ?"

Burroughs laughed hysterically. "Me."

"I'm going upstairs," Jack said.

"No, please, stay a little, just while Jimmy types," Burroughs begged. "Tell

me your dream. I need it right now, man."

Jack shrugged and said, "Okay. When I was outside and fell asleep, I dreamed I was typing right across from Jimmy there, and then I started gagging, vomiting, spitting up, and you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I was choking on your words, man, only they weren't words, they were these mile-long salamis; and I kept pulling them out of my mouth, tearing them out, but there was always another one behind it. Man, I could have actually died in that dream."

"That's wonderful," Burroughs said. "Don't you agree that's wonderful?" he asked Jimmy, but Jimmy, for his part, started gagging and choking and wheezing and fell off the chair. He writhed around on the floor, pulling invisible salamis from his mouth. Then he lay perfectly still, his face in mock, stretched rictus.

Burroughs laughed hysterically.

"Don't do that to me when I'm stoned," Jack said.

Jimmy got up and then sat down again in front of the typewriter. "Then come over here and help me type up this mess. I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"You just type what I've got on the paper," Burroughs said.

"Who the hell could read your handwriting?"

"Doesn't matter. Whatever you type out will be the novel. What's the difference?"

“No difference at all,” Jack said and sat down opposite Jimmy. “Come on, Jimmy, we’ll just sit here and write ourselves a novel.”

“But I get the credit and the money,” Burroughs said playfully.

“From what I’m looking at, you won’t get either,” Jack said, and Burroughs stormed out of the room. He was faking it, slipping into his high-pitched old English nanny personality.

“He won’t be back for a while,” Jack said. “He’ll run around being an old lady and then he’ll disappear. He always does that. I don’t know who he becomes, or where he goes, but he’ll away for at least an hour.” Jack riffled through Burroughs’ foolscap and shook his head. “Man, this is sick stuff. Have you seen the Mugwump pages, with all the freakazoid sex and torture and hanging? If Bill means it about getting his technique from me, man, what have I done? I’ve created Faggot Frankenstein.”

Jimmy laughed, “No, he was already Faggot. God, it’s a good thing he’s not here. He’d love that, would go into another one of his routines . . . he’d be Faggot instead of Fagin. You read Dickens? I bet he has.”

“I think he’s rubbing off on you, Jimmy. You’re starting to think like him. That would be *your* routine. Not his. Or mine.”

Jimmy shrugged, and continued to type. He hadn’t actually read *Oliver Twist* all the way through word for word. He’d read the first chapter. “The hanging scene is pornographic, but for

a reason. It’s an indictment of capital punishment.”

“Or it’s just old Bill getting his pervert kicks,” Jack said. He combed his fingers nervously through hair. “I can’t do this, man. Being stoned doesn’t even help. It’s just making me more paranoid. Old Bill is whizzing around doing who knows what, and you and I are typing away like little assholes.”

“I really liked his talking asshole scene,” Jimmy said. “You were right. Bill is a funny guy.”

“You want to listen or what? I’m trying to tell you we’re in trouble. I’m scared, man. We should get the hell out of here. Go to a fancy hotel. I’ll pay you back whatever it costs. We should get out of Tangier. I can’t even imagine being in jail here. They nail a murder rap on me and—”

“Cool out,” Jimmy said, “and stop eating that *majoun*. It just makes you worse.” Jimmy’s foot began to hurt again; he would have to take another tablet. “We’re safer here than anywhere else, and if you want, we’ll try to get out in the morning. But you can’t do anything tonight, so we might as well hang here.”

“Yeah,” Jack said. He was typing as he talked, and Jimmy wondered if he was transcribing Burroughs’ text or just making something up. As he was about to ask, Burroughs entered the room . . . with Joselito in train.

It was Bill, or the Ugly Spirit. Same difference, Jimmy thought.

Burroughs and Joselito seemed out of breath.

“Okay, tell them everything, and don’t leave out anything.”

“You just left,” Jimmy said to Joselito.

Jack looked at his watch and said, “No, man, you’re more out of it than I am. It’s almost morning. You need a watch to keep you straight.”

Jimmy would never wear a watch.

Joselito looked at Burroughs, as if he couldn’t understand a word, then shrugged and told them that “it was easy, I find Nimún”—looking at Burroughs—“he stinks, shits, pukes, no good, you keep cock out of him, or you be sorry, and then I leave, and you have no one threaten, but them”—he nodded towards Jack and Jimmy. “I find piece of shit Nimún with his cousins.”

“Cousins?” Jack said.

“And Nimún crying and making all kind of noise, but nobody hurt, just the knife from you”—again, nodding to Jack—“which didn’t do shit nothing, but make blood and scar that make Moulay big man now.”

“Moulay?” Again, Jack.

“You crazy one, huh,” Joselito said and shook his head. “Moulay, yes. Boy you stuck with knife. He said one day good people make *jihad* on Christians and Jew-bastards, and kill all of you.”

Burroughs clapped. “You see . . . ?”

“But before that, they leave. Not tonight, or today, or tomorrow, but they afraid that you fix things with government and get them arrested because shithole Nimún tell them how they know you”—he looked at Burroughs

sweetly and took his hand—“and that you greatest of men, greatest of Christians and Jew-lovers, and that you will kill them all, I tell them that, so they going to take down tents and go.”

“Where?”

“Again, you?” the boy said to Jack. “Where you care? They go.”

“Show respect,” Burroughs said.

Joselito bowed his head, as if he had truly come to know who provided his bread and board and spiritual succor. He shrugged and said, “They go. Out of city. Be with other family. Also, they very . . . shamed.”

“Why?” Jack asked.

“You cut them both, they not cut you. I tell them you go to *lk?m?sar?ya* and come back to find them.”

“You said I only hurt one . . . Moulay,” Jack said. “I can’t remember . . .”

Looking frustrated, Joselito said, “Both. I mean both, but Said, his brother, you only scratch, but in place he can’t tell nobody, so he”—Joselito looked questioningly at Burroughs and said something to him in Spanish.

“He means I took you to the police station,” Burroughs said, looking pleased with himself. “And by cutting that boy in the balls, which I assume you didn’t intend to do, did you?—well, you made him lose face, so to speak.”

“Yes, I mean what Bill say,” Joselito said. “You go there—I take you—tomorrow night maybe and they not be there. I take them?” he asked Burroughs.

Burroughs shrugged.

"You see. I'm right," Joselito said, and he stepped away from Burroughs and held his hand out for money, which Burroughs gave him.

"Like one of Pavlov's dogs," Burroughs said. "Operant conditioning. You should read B. F. Skinner's *Science and Human Behavior*. Quite illuminating.

"On your way now," he said to Joselito. After the boy left, Burroughs said, "You see, you've cost me Nimún." Whispering, as if Joselito were still in the room: "He was my best boy. If you keep going at this rate, there won't be any boys at all for me in Tangier."

"Yeah, right," Jack said.

"Well, are you satisfied now?" Burroughs asked.

Jack leaned back in the rickety wooden chair and said, "I still think we should get out of here."

"Jack!"

"Okay, we'll stay long enough to check out your boy's story. If it's cool, we'll hang here for a while longer, if Jimmy wants to, that is."

"I want to know what you have for me," Jimmy said to Burroughs.

"You deserve the world," Burroughs said. "You deserve everything," and he reached into the inside pocket of his worn overcoat. He was wearing a tie and jacket, and to Jimmy he looked like the quintessential drug dealing pimp.

Dr. Junk.

Burroughs shook his head, sighed, and said, "You'll get what I've got tomorrow night. And that's a

solemn promise. Once I know Jack's satisfied."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"That Jack's not going to leave me here high and dry."

"And what about me?"

"Jimmy, you leave everybody high and dry. I don't have to know you very well to know that."

Joselito was right.

They stood on the stone littered ledge and looked down where the two Berber tents had been. All that remained were three charred shadows that had been fires and refuse flapping about in the wind like birds. The sun was warm on their faces, but the wind was cold, and it shivered the surface of the ocean ahead and blew across the sandstone cliffs and through the Japanese pines that were so green as to appear almost black. True to his word, Burroughs handed an envelope to Jimmy. It was of the thinnest of paper and addressed

PRIVATE FOR MR. JAMES DEAN
C/O MR. WILLIAM BUR-
ROUGHES

VILLA MOUNIRIA
1 CALLE MAGALLANES
[CORNER CALLE COOK AND
MAGALLANES]

"Why have you opened my mail?" Jimmy asked.

“This is Tangier,” Burroughs said, squinting and looking out at the sea, which was the palest of aqua. “Nothing’s private here. The post office opened it, or Joselito opened it . . . or I opened it.” He smiled. “Anyway, it was addressed to me.”

Jimmy dropped the envelope, which, caught by the wind, gentled down the stony ledge and rested in a dark circle where a fire had been. Jimmy unfolded the blue Western Union telegram.

17 JAN 1957

JIMMY DEAN

COME HOME STOP NEW DEAL
ON BILLY THE KIDD PICTURE
STOP YOU STAR STOP WE DI-
RECT TOGETHER STOP NEED
YOU HERE NOW TO CLOSE DEAL
STOP NICK

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“Telegram.”

“I can see that! From who?”

“Nick Ray. My director. I should get back to LA.” Jimmy looked at Burroughs, who shrugged.

“I had to make sure,” Burroughs said.

“Make sure of what?” Jimmy asked.

“That everything would be settled.” Burroughs looked at Jack, and then spoke to Jimmy. “You’ll be leaving, I presume?”

Jimmy nodded.

“And you’ll stay?” he asked Jack.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to see.”

Burroughs smiled. “Yes, we’ll just have to see.” After a beat, he said, “I shall miss you, Jimmy. After all, you gave me my epiphany. I haven’t had one for some weeks.”

“My pleasure.”

“You saw though me last night,” Burroughs said. “Maybe I see through to your Ugly Spirit.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” Jimmy asked, preoccupied.

“Roles,” Burroughs said. “I may be my various routines. You’re whatever role you happen to be playing.”

“And what role am I playing here?”

“Doctor Bill already told you that when he stitched up your foot,” Burroughs said, referring to himself. “You’re the victim, the helpless pawn of circumstance.” Burroughs laughed. “But I have a feeling you’ll rewrite that as soon as you get back home.”



We're thrilled to announce that, starting this time and running through four consecutive issues, we'll be publishing Zoran Živković's delightful new novella-suite, Four Stories Till The End. It comprises, predictably enough, four parts: 'The Cell'—this issue—'The Hospital Room' (in number 5), 'The Hotel Room' (number 6) and 'The Elevator' (number 7). "Each novella is a stand-alone," the redoubtable Mr. Živković explains, "but they are also thematically connected, forming a specific whole. Four Stories Till The End belongs to my new approach to the noble and ancient art of fantasy writing as introduced in my novelette 'Compartments' (see Postscripts 2)." He's a one, that Zoran . . . and no denying. If you need proof, well...just read on.

The Cell

Zoran Živković

Aknock was heard on the door of the cell.

I stopped playing the violin and laid it on the dresser next to the couch.

"Come in."

The door opened without a sound and the guard appeared.

"You have a visitor," he said, smiling at me.

I nodded and he moved aside to let the visitor in. I didn't immediately recognize the large figure in a dark suit that almost filled the doorway. Gloom permeated the cell, while neon lighting brightly illuminated the corridor in front of it. The contours of the man were drawn like an eclipse of the sun edged by the corona, making it impossible to see what they surrounded. It wasn't until the visitor spoke that I realized who it was.

"Good evening," said my lawyer as he walked inside. The guard closed the door after him. Once again the cell was lighted solely by the lamp with a large green shade on the desk.

"Good evening," I replied, stepping forward to greet him with outstretched hand. We shook hands warmly and then I indicated one of the two armchairs facing us.

"Please sit down. I hope you find this one more comfortable than the other, which wobbles a bit."

"Oh, it will be fine, don't you worry," said the lawyer, settling himself in the armchair as it groaned under his weight. He placed the large black briefcase he always carried with him in his lap and laid his hands on top of it.

"Would you care for a drink?" I asked. "I'm afraid the choice is rather limited. All I have is orange juice."

"I'd prefer something a bit stronger,

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tošić

but it can't be helped. Is it chilled at least?"

"Yes, it is." I opened the little refrigerator at the other end of the cell, took out a container and poured thick orange liquid into one of the four glasses. They were sitting on a tray on top of the refrigerator, covered with coasters. I put a coaster on the coffee table between the armchairs, and placed the glass on it.

"Thank you," said the lawyer with a brief nod.

I went back to the couch and sat down.

"I'm sure you're not aware, of course," said the visitor after drinking half the glass of orange juice. "You're a young man, it's ancient history to you. But when I started my law practice, many years ago, the conditions in jail weren't anything like this pleasant. All right, I agree, the choice of drinks now might not be very discriminating, and the furniture could be of better quality or at least better maintained, but those are merely details that are easy to fix. You would be horrified if I were to describe my first visits to my incarcerated clients. I myself was shocked. It almost made me change my profession. But now I'm glad I didn't. I'm not fishing for compliments, but if it weren't for people like me we'd still be in that barbaric period."

He stopped for a moment and took another sip of juice.

"It was particularly difficult," he continued, "for inmates on death row,

such as yourself. It was tacitly assumed that prisoners' surroundings during their last hours were more or less unimportant. Considering what they had in store for them, it allegedly made no difference. The trauma caused by the inhuman conditions would not be of long duration. Pure cynicism. Shouldn't the same criteria apply to those of us who, after carrying out your sentence, retire to the warmth of our homes, convinced that we are lucky not to be in your shoes? But who among us can be certain that they won't be joining you shortly? No one knows what the day may bring, or the night. And the statistics are inexorable: there are far more casualties outside of prison than inside."

I nodded. "That's true."

The lawyer's face expanded into a smile. "There, you see. I must admit, though, just between you and me, there's one thing I miss from the old days. I know it's a little selfish, but it can't be helped. I'm no saint, I have vices too. Can you guess what it is?"

"No, I can't."

"Smoking," replied the lawyer diffidently, opening his arms with a shrug. "Before, no one would hold it against you if you lighted a cigarette in a cell. Actually, no one paid any attention. You'd offer one to your client, of course. Now if I even flicked a lighter or struck a match, the alarm would start wailing the very same instant. I'd be disbarred in no time flat. It's not just visitors who are forbidden to smoke,

though, the condemned can't either. Not even one last cigarette. And that's going too far, I think you'll agree. Even hypocritical if you ask me. All right, tobacco kills, that's beyond all doubt, but in the given circumstances that one cigarette couldn't possibly do much harm. The antismoking lobby, however, is completely deaf to the voice of reason. They stick blindly to their principles and are powerful enough to put them into effect. Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Smart man. If you did you'd be in a terrible fix right now. I don't know how I'd make it through such torture. Even this short time in here with you without a cigarette is hard for me. But there's a good and bad side to every profession. Is there something else you miss?"

I thought it over briefly. "The limited number of channels on the cable television bothers me. It's almost entirely sports, action films and quiz shows. There are practically no programs on art or culture."

"Why, that's unacceptable!" The lawyer opened his briefcase, took out a notepad and pencil and wrote something hurriedly. "This is a violation of basic human rights. You have my word that we'll put an end to such mental tyranny. It won't be easy, not in the least, the members of the board who make the regulations in this place are as unbending and conservative as the church fathers. But we know how to get around them. We've been locking horns with them for decades. I promise

you that the very next man on death row will have complete freedom to choose whatever cable TV channels he wants."

"Thank you."

We spent a few moments looking at each other in silence, both of us smiling.

"You don't hold it against me, I hope?" he said at length.

"What?"

"For losing the case."

"Oh, no. Certainly not."

"You are very kind. Such understanding is rare among people who share your fate, unfortunately. They expect lawyers to be miracle workers, and when there is no miracle they shift the entire blame onto us."

"You did everything you could."

"I really did. I'm glad you realize that. It's critically important in my line of work to part with my client as friends, regardless of the outcome. Nothing distresses me more than a dissatisfied client. No matter how unfounded his dissatisfaction may be, it's always a heavy burden on my conscience. And believe me, it isn't at all easy to live with a troubled conscience."

"I believe you."

The lawyer's face lit up again. He nodded, then picked up the glass from the coaster and finished the juice.

"A little more, perhaps?" I offered.

"No, thank you. I'm actually quite fond of orange juice, but I have to watch it. Stomach acid, you know."

"I have problems with it too."

“Not much fun, is it. But it can’t be helped. You have to live in spite of adversity. All right, then. Let’s get down to business. I’m sure you wonder why I’ve come.”

“To say goodbye, I suppose.”

“Yes, of course. But not only for that reason. I’m here to tell you a story.”

“A story?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, it’s very short. I won’t take up much of your time. That would be thoughtless of me considering your circumstances. I hope you want to hear it. You’ll see, it’s quite edifying and entertaining.”

“I love edifying and entertaining stories.”

“Excellent. I heard the story early in my childhood from a distant relative on my mother’s side, the widow of a retired colonel in the medical corps. She visited us from time to time in our family’s summer cottage, when the city was overcome by unbearable heat. She told it to me behind my parents’ back, before I went to sleep one particularly sultry evening, full of noisy crickets and a looming storm that bypassed us in the end. Under the thrall of the story I couldn’t sleep for a long time that night. It became etched in my memory forever. As an adult, it has often come to mind in the most unexpected circumstances, but I have yet to tell it to someone else.”

“I’m flattered to be the first.”

“Think nothing of it. You certainly deserve it. My elderly relative heard the story from her husband, but not until he was on his deathbed, and he’d

heard it many years before from a superior officer he’d treated for a particularly serious form of tropical fever. The man had related it in a state of delirium caused by his high temperature. Later, when he recovered, he firmly denied any knowledge of it. Nevertheless, I never doubted the authenticity of the story, even though it’s quite strange, as you will soon see for yourself.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“A missionary lived with his wife and five daughters on the edge of the jungle. In his leisure time he liked to paint. He was inspired by the lush plant and animal world that surrounded him. He would take his painting equipment and head into the jungle, returning with exquisite canvases. He produced eleven paintings, but the twelfth turned out to be fatal, unfortunately. He’d almost finished it when a bird such as he had never seen landed on a nearby tree.

“The beauty of the bird was enchanting. Its feathers changed color with the slightest shift in the angle from which it was viewed and it seemed to glow with some sort of inner radiance. And when the bird started to sing, the missionary was filled with a pleasure he had never felt before. Although such a thought was blasphemous for a member of the clergy, he felt he was beholding an epiphany. He was barely able to pull himself out of this spellbound state, then fell vigorously to work to paint the bird. Just enough space remained on the canvas.

“The moment he finished, the bird spread its wings and flew off, resem-

bling a fireball rising in the air, leaving a brief trail of glittering dust. The missionary felt a sharp pang of sadness, as though suffering a great loss. He was consoled, though, by the fact that he had put the bird on canvas. He hastened out of the jungle to show the wondrous creature to his wife and daughters.

“When he finally removed the lightweight material covering the painting on the veranda of his house by the sandy seashore, having first told the household briefly and excitedly about his unusual experience, a terrible surprise awaited him. On the spot where he had painted the bird gaped white canvas, as though he had never put his brush to it. He stared at it in disbelief, paying no attention to the bewildered faces of his womenfolk. And then something seemed to break inside him. Without a word of explanation, he grabbed the canvas and rushed back into the jungle.

“They waited for him to return, but there was no sign of him anywhere. When the sun began to set on the watery horizon, his wife and daughters became seriously worried. Never before had he stayed in the jungle so late. The approaching night would bring great danger when predators set out to hunt. Something urgent had to be done. As dusk was falling, a group of natives with lighted torches headed out in search of the missionary.

“They came back one hour and fifteen minutes later, empty-handed. They’d searched intensively for the

missionary and called out to him tirelessly, but there was no trace. All they found was the painting leaning against a tree. When his wife and daughters looked at it, they had a surprise in store. The white spot where the bird had first been painted was filled once again. In its place was the missionary, gazing at something beyond the edge of the picture, his face filled with an expression of infinite bliss.

“A wide swathe of the surrounding jungle was thoroughly combed in the following days, but the earth seemed to have engulfed the painter. They did not even find remains that would indicate he’d been the victim of a large predator. Finally, they gave up the search. A new missionary disembarked with his family two and a half months later, and the wife and daughters of the previous one took the same boat back to civilization. On the fourth day at sea there was a terrible storm. The boat crashed into the rocks and many passengers drowned. All six members of the vanished painter’s family somehow managed to reach the shore, but they lost all their luggage. The missionary’s twelve paintings ended up at the bottom of the sea, along with everything else.”

After he had finished, the lawyer looked at me for several moments without speaking, then reached for the empty glass on the coffee table. He picked it up, then put it back down on the coaster, gesturing dismissively with his other hand.

“So, what do you say?” he asked me.

I responded with a short, silent look before I answered. "Edifying and entertaining, as you said yourself."

"Yes, quite so, isn't it? I hope it will be of use to you."

"I'm sure it will."

He got up from the armchair and it squeaked again.

"Well, there's nothing more to be said. The time has come to say farewell."

He held out his hand. We shook hands firmly once again.

"It was an honor and a privilege to defend you."

"And mine to be your client."

He bowed, and I did the same. Then he went up to the door and knocked. It opened the same moment and he went out without turning around. The lawyer's large figure was replaced by the smiling guard.

"There's another visitor. Would you like to receive him right away?"

"Let him in."

The guard nodded to someone who was hidden by the door. This time the visitor didn't have to speak in order for me to recognize him. The bright light from the corridor created an aureole around a body so tall and thin that it could only be the prosecutor.

"Good evening," he said in a high-pitched voice that got terribly on my nerves.

"Good evening," I replied without much warmth in my voice.

The door closed behind him, but he didn't move from the threshold. We

stood there for a while in tense silence, which I finally broke.

"Have a seat," I said, indicating the wobbly armchair.

"Thank you," replied the prosecutor. When he sat down, the chair rocked gently under him. He grabbed hold of the arms disconcertedly but didn't get up. He was carrying a briefcase similar to the lawyer's, but he didn't put it in his lap. Instead he placed it on the coffee table, pushing aside the lawyer's empty juice glass.

I had no recourse. "Would you like something to drink?" I asked.

The grimace that appeared on his face was probably a smile. "Orange juice, please."

"I'm sorry, there isn't any orange juice," I lied without the slightest stab of guilt. "All the drinks I have are alcoholic."

The new grimace was probably meant to express repugnance. "I don't drink alcohol. Not while I'm on duty, or otherwise. I had no idea that those on death row were allowed to drink."

He shook his head reprovingly.

"Oh, yes," I said as I sat on the couch. "The bar is quite well stocked. I could even make you an exotic cocktail." I indicated the empty glass on the coffee table. "My lawyer was very pleased with what I fixed him."

The prosecutor picked up the glass, brought it to his nose, then put it back on the coaster.

"Your displeasure with me," he said after a brief pause, "is somewhat understandable. I would probably feel the

same if I were in your shoes. But please believe that I have nothing against you personally.”

“Your behavior in court didn’t exactly lead to that conclusion.”

“My behavior was professional. A prosecutor is never expected to show any sympathy for the accused. That would be quite unseemly.”

“I didn’t expect any sympathy, but nor did I expect such fiery antagonism. It was almost vehement.”

“That wasn’t very spectacular. I can be far more brutal. You should have seen me at some of the other trials.”

“So that means I was lucky?”

He took off his thick glasses, retrieved a handkerchief from the inside pocket of his jacket and wiped them thoroughly.

“You shouldn’t take things so much to heart,” he said after putting his glasses back on. “A trial is actually a stage play with strictly defined roles. The fact that we have to play-act has nothing to do with our true selves. Do you really think that prosecutors are insensitive sadists by nature who enjoy raging at another human being, even if they’ve committed a capital crime?”

“That’s the impression I got,” I admitted.

“Why, that’s terrible. Being a prosecutor is one of the most thankless professions. It’s no wonder that such a small number of us reach retirement age in that position. And we do all sorts of things to make amends for merely doing our duty conscientiously. Take your cell, for instance. Do you think

you’d have all this comfort if it weren’t for our decades of persistent lobbying and self-sacrifice?”

“I thought lawyers got the credit for that.”

“Lawyers?” He seemed truly astounded. “He didn’t tell you that, did he?” He nodded toward the door.

“Yes, he did.”

“Really, now! Just when I thought their high-handed insolence had reached the limit, they manage to outdo themselves. Give lawyers credit for this?” His gesture swept around the cell.

“That’s what I was told.”

“Is that so? Well, let me tell you how things really stand. The lawyer chaps haven’t moved a finger to ease their clients’ lives, particularly those on death row. They don’t give a fig about the conditions in which you spend your last hours. The moment the trial ends and they pocket their fat fee, you cease to exist for them. Only we, the prosecutors, who are strictly speaking your opponents, are concerned for your welfare, so we can appease our guilty consciences. Fair enough, I can understand the lawyers’ apathy, they’re notorious for that, but not their propensity for posturing. Truly outrageous!”

“Well, he did come to visit me.”

“Don’t fool yourself. He certainly didn’t do it from altruistic motives. He must have gotten something out of the visit. Fellows like that never do anything unless they can turn it to their advantage.” He stopped for a moment. “What did he want, if I might ask?”

We looked at each other briefly, without speaking.

"To say goodbye," I replied at last.

"That's all?"

"And to tell me a story."

"Tell you a story!" The prosecutor jumped up out of the armchair, causing it to rock wildly.

"Why don't you move over here?" I proposed, indicating the other armchair.

"Forget it," he snapped. "This really beats all! There's got to be a limit! I'm going to send a sharp complaint to the bar association!"

With a nervous movement he snatched his briefcase off the coffee table, knocking over the lawyer's juice glass in the process. With complete disregard, he took out a notebook and started writing something rapidly in it. I bent down and picked up the glass, thinking how lucky it was that it was empty. Otherwise it would have left an ugly stain on the carpet. Orange juice stains are hard to get out.

When he had finished, he closed the notebook energetically and put it back in his briefcase.

"There! That will teach him a thing or two. I hope he gets disbarred."

"Excuse me," I said hesitantly, "but I'm afraid I don't understand. What's wrong with telling me a story?"

"What's wrong?" repeated the prosecutor in a voice whose intensified shrillness tore at my nerves. "How can you ask! What's wrong is that everyone knows we alone do that! Only prosecutors tell stories to the

condemned! That's how it's always been!"

"So you're going to tell me a story too?"

"I was going to, that's why I came, but how can I now in such a rattled state?"

"How about if I double check to see if there's a bit of orange juice left? It has a therapeutic effect on the nerves, it might help calm you down."

The prosecutor slowly nodded his head. I took a new glass off the refrigerator and filled it halfway. Before I put it on the coffee table, I removed his briefcase and put it on the floor. The prosecutor drained his juice before I even got back to the couch.

"The story I'm about to tell you," he began, "I heard in confidence from a fellow prosecutor who finally, on the seventh attempt, managed to kill himself, no longer able to bear the burden of the work we do. He took his life by closing himself hermetically in a large freezer. The autopsy established that he suffocated before he froze. I don't think his intention was to end his life in such a terrible way. He counted on a gentle death from the cold, but had overlooked the fact that he would first run out of air. Isn't it terrible how all the prosecutors are dropping like flies?"

"Awful," I agreed.

"After his fourth failed suicide attempt they put him in a mental hospital where he spent two months and seventeen days. There he became friends with an orderly. Just before they let him out the orderly told him the

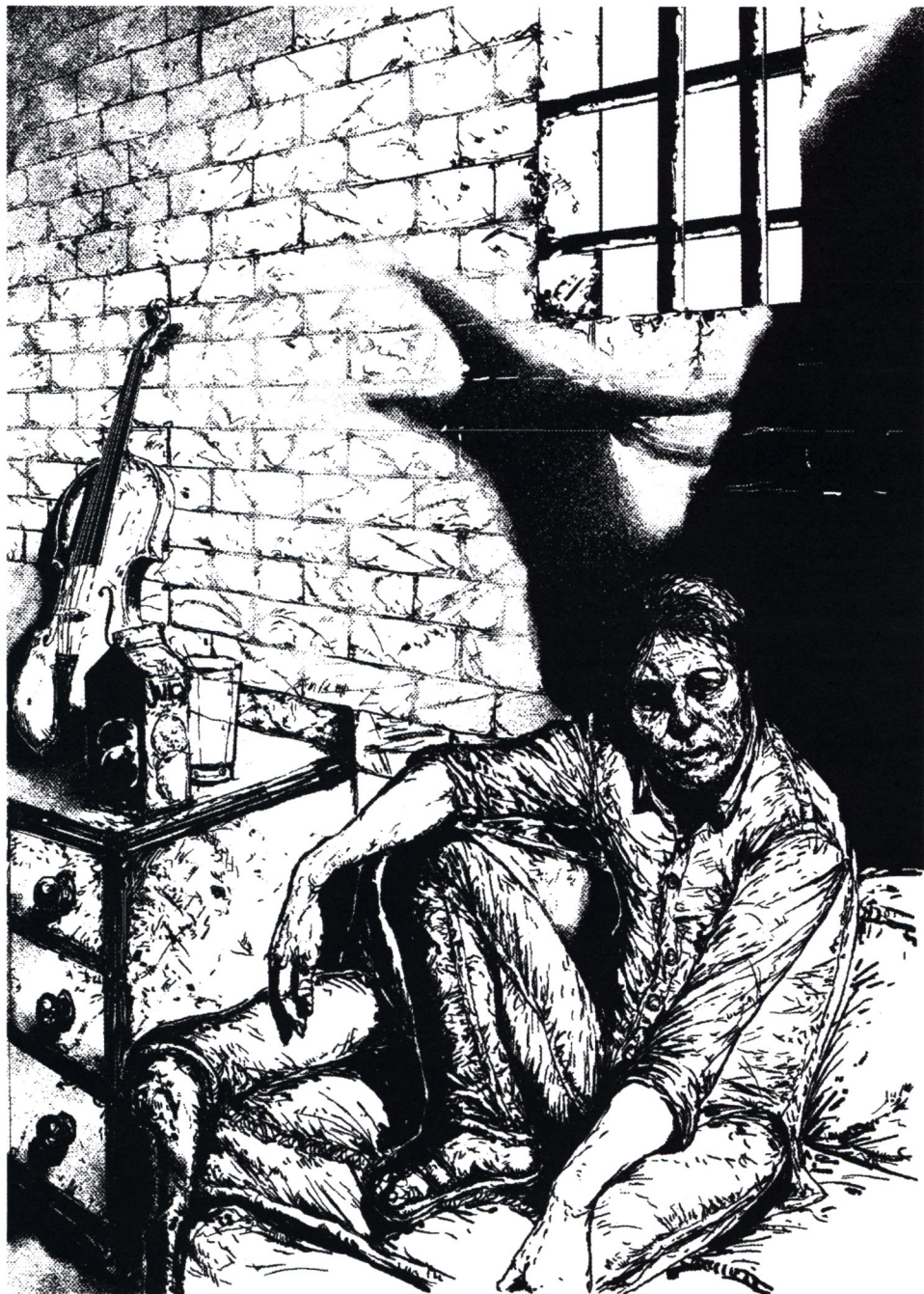


Illustration by David Kendall

strange story of a veterinarian who had been driven mad by a manuscript that later caused his death.”

The prosecutor paused, and I repeated in bewilderment, “A manuscript?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, manuscripts can be fatal. One of the veterinarian’s girlfriends secretly wrote a novel over more than three and a half years, and when she finally finished it, she took the sole copy of the manuscript to her friend for him to evaluate. He sat down immediately to read and spent the whole night at it. At dawn when he finished reading, he phoned her at once to tell her how delighted he was.

“Although the telephone rang a long time, she didn’t answer. At first he thought she was a sound sleeper and didn’t hear the phone ringing. He waited for morning to come and then called her again, but still there was no answer. When his call later in the afternoon was still without success, he became worried. He drove to her apartment, hoping that her phone was just on the blink, and that was why she didn’t answer. He rang the front doorbell for a very long time, to no avail. Not even inquiries at the neighbors’ led anywhere. No one had seen her since the morning of the previous day.

“Not knowing what else to do, the veterinarian went home. He continued calling his friend all that day, but had less and less hope of reaching her. Filled with foreboding, he finally went to bed, but sleep simply refused to close his eyes. Instead of tossing and

turning restlessly in bed, he picked up the manuscript and started to read it again.

“Towards the end of the second chapter he had a surprise in store that made him shudder. He came across a part that he was certain hadn’t been there the night before. In disbelief he read the episode about a woman whose description was very reminiscent of the novel’s author. She was carrying a large cage containing a sweetly singing bird with magnificent plumage.

“Wide awake, the veterinarian read on impatiently. He expected the woman with the bird to appear once again, but there was no further mention of her for the rest of the novel. Once again he finished reading the manuscript at daybreak. Now he wasted no time telephoning. Equipped with an axe, he went straight to his friend’s apartment. The neighbors were awakened by the din coming from her front door and called the police.

“When they arrived, the police patrol found the door broken down and the frantic veterinarian sitting on the living room floor, his head buried in his hands. He did not resist when they took him away, even though the deadly axe lay next to him. The statement he gave to the inspectors at the station was so muddled and unbelievable that instead of putting him in jail they took him straight to the mental hospital.

“The doctor whose care he was under finally agreed to grant his plea and bring the manuscript that he’d

talked about incessantly and was supposedly the cause of all his troubles. Although the doctor combed the apartment thoroughly, he found no manuscript.

“When the doctor returned to his patient empty-handed, the man’s first reaction was to explode in anger, so they had to put him in a straitjacket, and then he fell into a deep depression. All attempts to get him out of this state were unsuccessful. He faded steadily and then finally, on the morning of his ninety-sixth day in the clinic, he was found dead. The report on the veterinarian’s death made no mention, as though it was unimportant, of the colorful feather found inexplicably on his pillow, or of the unusual serenity adorning the deceased’s face.

“The police sealed the apartment of the veterinarian’s girlfriend, expecting her to appear, but she never did.”

The prosecutor picked up the empty glass, then looked at me.

“Sorry, there’s isn’t any left,” I lied again, opening my arms with a shrug.

He eyed me suspiciously. I thought he was going to object, but instead all he did was ask, “What do you think of the story?”

“Edifying and entertaining.”

This time his suspicious look lasted somewhat longer, but once again he refrained from comment. “It’s better than the lawyer’s, isn’t it?”

He paused a moment, waiting for me to reply, but since I didn’t take sides, he continued. “It must be. Chaps like that are infamous for letting their

imagination run wild. If you haven’t had any experience with them, the blarney they rely on can carry you away. We, however, stick strictly to the facts. Prosecutors’ stories might be somewhat drier, with less embellishments, but as a result you can rely on their authenticity.”

“To be sure,” I agreed.

His third suspicious look didn’t pass without remark. “Unfortunately, I see that my visit has done nothing to change your attitude towards us, the prosecutors. Frankly, my hopes weren’t very high. Only on rare occasions do we part with the condemned on at least good, if not friendly terms. It seems this is inevitable.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “So it seems.”

The prosecutor rose from the armchair carefully, making it rock again. “It can’t be helped. I did everything in my power. My conscience is clear at least in that respect.”

He extended his hand in a rather awkward movement. I hesitated a bit before I accepted it. Our handshake was weak and fleeting.

He stopped at the door and turned around. “Think about the story I told you. It’s more edifying than entertaining.”

I nodded. “I will.”

He knocked, the door opened and his slight figure quickly slipped out, as though slinking away. Just as the guard appeared in the lighted rectangle left by the prosecutor, a droning voice was heard in the corridor.

“Out of the way! Let me through!”

Having no time for words, the guard stepped aside obediently, and a short, stocky man rushed inside, his black robe fluttering around him.

“Good evening!” said the judge gaily, opening his arms. I hastened to his embrace.

“How are you?” he asked cordially, once we had moved apart, our hands resting lightly on each other’s shoulders. Before I could reply, the judge continued, “What a stupid question. Who could be fine after a visit from that guy? You’d feel more cheerful if the undertaker had come to take your measurements.” He laughed merrily at his witticism.

I waved my hand dismissively and indicated the armchair in good repair. “Please sit down.”

He ignored my recommendation and headed for the couch. He ran his fingers over it, as though checking the springs, then settled down at one end, raised his feet, and straightened the hem of his robe.

“There!” he said. “Comfort above all things. I didn’t work so hard for all these years in vain.”

“You, too?” I asked, sitting in the armchair.

“What do you mean — ‘you too’? Why, who else?”

“The lawyer and the prosecutor . . .”

“The lawyer and the prosecutor?” he thundered. He stared at me in disbelief, as though I’d uttered some inconceivable stupidity, then started to

laugh. It was an uproarious laugh that I remembered well from the trial. The entire courtroom echoed from his peals of laughter. He would shake all over, holding onto his robust stomach. I knew from experience that this could last for minutes.

I waited patiently for his attack of hilarity to pass. When he finally got hold of himself, tears started to roll down his round, ruddy cheeks. He searched around inside his robe and took out a large, white handkerchief with an embroidered monogram. First he wiped his eyes, then blew his nose.

“I have to write this one down. You’ve really made my day.” He put his handkerchief away and took a large notebook with a pen attached to it out of another inside pocket.

“What did you say? The lawyer and the prosecutor?” He stopped writing because he was overcome by another seizure of laughter. It was shorter than the first one.

“That’s what they claim,” I said, trying to defend myself after he’d put away his notebook.

He waved his hands dismissively, then said through his giggles, “Please stop. That’s enough. I’ll die of laughter. Besides, my doctor has forbidden it. Because of my blood pressure. He says a capillary might burst, and then there will be hell to pay.”

He cracked his knuckles, and then laughed at that too.

I brought my index fingers to my lips and nodded.

“The lawyer and the prosecutor?”

he repeated once again, but this time managed to get hold of himself. He nodded in return and put his index finger on his lips too. "All right, if laughter is forbidden, other pleasures aren't. What will we use to toast with?"

"I'm afraid all I have is orange juice," I replied, but even as I said it I realized I'd made another mistake. I couldn't take back my words, however.

"Orange juice?" said the judge, not hiding his amazement. A moment later the cell resounded with his merry laughter once again.

After using his handkerchief to remove the traces of laughter from his face, the judge wagged his finger at me threateningly. "You're really determined to do me in!"

"Forgive me," I said contritely. "I'll be careful what I say."

"Orange juice, indeed! Not even blockheads like the lawyer and prosecutor would drink that!"

He gazed at me fixedly, expecting me to substantiate this. Even though I failed to do so, the expression on my face seemed to be explicit enough.

Now his laughter was accompanied by clapping hands and banging on the back of the couch. The judge even raised both feet briefly and kicked them in the air. When he got hold of himself, he reached for his notebook once again.

"I have to write this one down too. Orange juice, was it? Divine."

"Just one glass each," I said, trying to soften the effect. "The prosecutor actually drank barely half a glass."

This was also a mistake. "Barely half?" repeated the judge, losing his breath once again. I concluded that the best thing would be to keep my mouth shut.

He took out another handkerchief, gray in color, with the same large monogram. He was clearly well prepared for the calamities that struck him.

"All right, give me the glasses," he said after returning the handkerchief to his robe.

I looked at him in bewilderment.

"You don't think I came unprepared, do you?" He patted the bottom part of his robe. "Glasses, if you please!"

Even though I had no idea what was on his mind, I headed obediently for the refrigerator and picked up the two glasses that were left. When I returned to the couch, the judge was holding a bottle filled with something strong.

I handed him a glass. "I really shouldn't," I said.

He frowned at me as he took the glass. "Why?"

"It's against regulations."

"Regulations?" repeated the judge, his face immediately flushing. As he shook with laughter again, I seriously worried that the doctor's warning about bursting capillaries might come true.

"Please don't make me laugh," he said after using his handkerchief once more. "Have you forgotten who you're dealing with? Judges make the regulations here, don't they? As far as I can recall, I'm still a judge. Your glass!"

I had no recourse. I held out the glass and he filled it almost to the brim with the reddish liquid in the bottle. He poured himself the same amount, then raised his glass. We clinked a bit too strongly, spilling some of the drink on his robe, bringing a chuckle from the judge.

“Don’t hold back,” he said, seeing me hesitate. “You’ll be in need of a strong drink, considering the story I’m about to tell you. It’ll be easier for you to take.”

“You too,” almost slipped out. Luckily, I bit my lip at the last moment. I sat down in the armchair in good repair and took a cautious sip. My care was well taken. The drink was fiery. This didn’t stop the judge from swallowing half his glass in one gulp.

“I heard the story from a stuntman I sentenced to life in prison because he killed forty-three animals in a zoo. Not at random but with cold-blooded calculation: he attacked only the poor females. His victims included a beautiful white elephant, three penguins, a very rare species of koala, and a pregnant two-humped camel. Can you imagine — killing a pregnant two-humped camel! That criminal would have got even worse if it hadn’t been for the extenuating circumstance that he’d committed the crime in a state of shattered nerves owing to unrequited love.

“I used to visit him in his cell until he was done in by a poisonous snake that slithered unnoticed into the prison yard and bit only him, among all the

prisoners, as he lay unsuspecting on the grass. Who says that culprits don’t get the justice they deserve? Even though they didn’t catch the snake, I’m sure it was a female.

“During one of my visits he told me a bizarre story from one of his jobs. He’d been working on a film directed by a young and talented man. It had been a real pleasure to work with him, even though great demands were made of the stuntmen. The director knew exactly what he wanted, he was effective and dealt with his associates skillfully. The shooting ran smoothly. Problems arose, however, when they watched the rushes.

“An interloper appeared in some of the key scenes. No one could explain how a bird had gotten into the footage that no one had seen at the shoot. Its large size and brightly colored, glistening feathers made it impossible to ignore, as did its rapturous song. Although disturbing, this mystery was less important for the director than the matter of what to do about the interloper.

“The bird, of course, couldn’t be left in the film because there was no reason for it to be there. It was like a foreign body. The simplest, but by no means most inexpensive, way to remove it was to re-shoot the scenes that it had spoiled. The director somehow managed to persuade the producers to increase the film’s budget so this could be done, but when the new rushes arrived from the laboratory, the hefty sum was proven to be wasted. By some

mysterious means, the bird had remained in the footage.

"The director flew into a rage. The once even-tempered, good-natured man became hysterical and hot-headed. He fired almost one-third of the crew, including the excellent cameraman, but this didn't solve the problem. He then tried to wangle more money out of the producers to get rid of the fiendish bird by computer processing, but they refused. It would be more expensive than re-shooting the scenes and the outcome was uncertain. The word had already gotten out that the film was cursed. It was wiser to abandon the project than continue throwing money into a bottomless pit.

"This decision was a heavy blow for the director. He tried everything he could to prevent work on the film from stopping, but the producers were inexorable. They didn't turn their backs on him, though. In spite of the failure, they offered him another film to direct. He refused. His desire to get the better of the pesky bird had already become an obsession.

"He gave almost all his savings to buy the film footage that could not be used anymore. Then he took out a loan to rent a computer imaging studio where he fanatically endeavored to get rid of the interloper. He worked alone, convinced that everyone had plotted against him. One night the studio caught fire. It burned to the ground.

"They combed through the ashes, but found no trace of the director. By some miracle, all that was spared from

the fire was the piece of film that the poor man was working on. The police looked at it, but could see nothing unusual in the sight of a young cineaste running after a bird, as costumed stuntmen did their reckless jumps all around them. People in the film world, after all, are well known for their strange behavior."

The judge seemed barely able to wait for the story to finish so he could do the same thing to his drink. The second half of the glass disappeared like the first, in one gulp.

"So?" he asked after wiping his mouth with a finger, still holding the glass.

"Edifying and entertaining," popped out, even though I was aware of the reaction it would cause.

He laughed uproariously, trembling all over with his guffaws. If his glass hadn't been empty he would certainly have spilled it. Liquid almost poured out of the bottle he was holding in his other hand, even though it was barely half full. Since his hands were occupied, he couldn't wipe the tears that streamed down his newly flushed cheeks. At last, still giggling, he put his feet on the floor and got up from the couch.

"Edifying and entertaining, eh?" It looked like he would burst out laughing again, but he restrained himself, putting a finger to his lips. "You're quite the scalawag. That's why I like to visit the cells on death row. It's never as cheerful anywhere else as it is here. If the doctor hadn't prohibited me from

excessive laughter, I would stay here longer. But it wouldn't really do for a judge to meet his maker in this place."

He turned this way and that, not knowing what to do with the bottle and glass. I thought he'd put them down on the coffee table, but he handed them to me instead. I took them both in one hand because I was still holding a full glass in the other.

"Keep it," he said, nodding at the bottle. "I can see you're not much of a drinker, but you never know when you might need it."

I thought about protesting, but kept silent, not wanting to give him a reason for convulsive laughter.

"Thank you," I replied.

"Well, then, that's about it." He came up and gave me a hug. The bottle and glasses rattled between us.

He stepped back, keeping his hands on my biceps. "Take some advice from a man of experience. Always look at the bright side of things. Laughter can surmount any obstacle."

I nodded. He patted me lightly on the cheek, then headed for the door.

He'd already raised a hand to knock on it, when he turned around. "Edifying and entertaining, you say? Excellent! I can't remember the last time someone made me laugh so much."

The door didn't close behind the judge. The guard appeared in the rectangle of light. He just looked at me without saying a word.

"Another visitor?" I asked, setting the bottle and glasses on the coffee table.

"No," replied the guard, sounding ill at ease. "I was just thinking . . . If you have a little time, perhaps . . . I won't bore you for very long . . ."

"Come in, come in," I said, indicating the armchair that wasn't broken.

The guard came in, took off his cap and closed the door behind him. He sat in the armchair, his eyes downcast. I waited for him to start, but all he did was twist his cap in his lap.

"Would you like something to drink?" I said, breaking the silence. "I don't have any more clean glasses, unfortunately, but I barely touched that one." I indicated the full glass on the coffee table.

"Oh, that's all right, thanks a lot. It's an honor to drink from your glass."

He picked it up and drank a little. This seemed to give him a bit of confidence.

"I have to tell you . . . You might not know it, although you might easily take it for granted . . . This is a prison, after all . . . Such things are to be expected . . ."

He stopped, lowering his eyes to his cap once more. I waited a little for him to continue, but since he didn't, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"The room is bugged. I've been eavesdropping," he said in a soft, apologetic voice.

"Oh, that," I said. "I didn't know, but as you said, I should have taken it for granted."

"I'm only carrying out orders. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course."

“Right now the microphones are turned off, naturally. I took care of it personally. This conversation is not being taped. No one actually knows I’m here. I hope that this visit remains our little secret.”

“Of course, of course,” I hastened to set his mind at rest.

The guard sighed audibly, then took another drink from the glass.

“You see, eavesdropping has its good sides too.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. If the microphones hadn’t been turned on during your last three visits, I wouldn’t know what you talked about with the lawyer, the prosecutor and the judge, and thus wouldn’t be able to warn you about the kind of people you’re dealing with.”

“What kind?”

The guard didn’t continue right away. He looked around the cell, as though someone else might be there listening in, then bent forward in the armchair, drawing close to me.

“This is for your ears only,” he said in a whisper. “I’d lose my job instantly if anyone found out I was talking like this about court officials. But I have to. In the name of truth and honor.”

He fell silent, waiting to see what impression his words had had on me.

I nodded. “Truth and honor above all.”

“They lied to you. Every single one.”

“How can that be?”

“Yes, they did. Shamelessly. I listened to them and couldn’t believe my

own ears. Men in such high positions, twisting the truth so blatantly. To the detriment of us, ordinary guards.”

“I’m not sure I quite understand you.”

“Did you really believe,” said the guard, his voice returning to normal, “that any of them deserves the slightest credit for the fact that this cell looks like a hotel room?”

“That’s what they claimed. Indeed, they took issue with each other, so in the end I wasn’t exactly sure who deserves my gratitude.”

“I’ll tell you who. Only us. The guards’ union.”

“Really?”

“Why, of course. It’s not at all difficult to guess why. In the best of cases those gentlemen drop by death row just once to pay a visit. If they’re moved at all by what they see here, they quickly forget it. They don’t really care about human suffering, regardless of how much they try to convince you otherwise. We’re in the best position to know. You should just hear what they say when they come out of this cell. Such two-faced insensitivity is truly rare.”

“Who would have thought?”

“Yes. Unlike them, however, the nature of our work puts us in constant contact with the condemned. Do you think it’s easy to watch them spend their last days in inhuman conditions?”

“I thought guards had to be hardened to that.”

“That’s a typical prejudice,” he said, spreading his arms as he shrugged.

“The most god-awful stories are told about guards, we’re supposed to be hardhearted, brutal, even sadistic, but please believe me that isn’t at all true. Well, fair enough, I won’t say there aren’t some psychos among us, that’s inevitable, but what profession doesn’t have its share? You’ll even find them working in a nursery school. Among us guards, however, their number is inconsequential. In any case, they can’t become members of the union. We make real sure of that. We only let family men into our membership, who are compassionate, with a gentle disposition. If they like animals or enjoy gardening that’s all in their favor. In spite of these strict criteria for joining the union, the great majority of the guards are members.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Few people do, unfortunately. That’s why there are so many misconceptions about us. The best way to fight such stereotypes is through actions, not words. What do you think, where did the money come from for all this comfort surrounding you?”

He made a sweeping gesture about the cell. I shrugged in ignorance.

“Donations from union members.”

“I never would have thought.”

“Our generosity will seem even greater if you bear our modest salaries in mind. You might well say that we take the food out of our own mouths in order to make things as comfortable as possible for death row inmates. And we intend to keep on doing it. For example, plans already exist to remodel the

bathroom completely. We’ll put in a big Jacuzzi. Nothing can soothe the understandable anxiety of the condemned like a whirlpool massage.”

“Excellent. I love whirlpool massages in a Jacuzzi.”

“Unfortunately, you won’t live to see it, but those who come here after you will truly enjoy themselves.”

“How lucky they are. I envy them.”

We sank into silence. The guard looked at the glass in his hand. When he finally spoke, his voice had softened again almost to a whisper.

“There is one more thing . . .” he started, then stopped.

“Yes?”

“Those stories they told you . . .”

“What about them?”

“I’d like to tell you a story myself. If you don’t object, of course.”

“On the contrary. Please go ahead.”

“I might not be as adept as they were with words . . .”

“It makes no difference. What’s important is that the story is edifying and entertaining.”

The guard’s face brightened. “Oh, I believe it is. It’s quite out of the ordinary in any case.” He raised the glass and this time took a good swig.

“We had a colleague who suddenly decided to become a stone-carver. It shouldn’t come as a surprise. The life of a guard is not at all easy. Many men can’t put up with the hardship it brings and so they change professions. Former prison guards have ended up in all sorts of places. They can be found among circus clowns, whale hunters,

wigmakers, herbalists, stuntmen, and polar explorers.

“The members of the stone-carvers’ guild always met the last Saturday of the month at a tavern in the suburbs. There they would let themselves go, enjoying the good food and drink, singing, making music, playing cards and dominos. Fascinating stories were told to general amusement. I stayed in touch with my former colleague even after he changed jobs and he would tell me these stories from time to time. One of them made a particularly strong impression on me.

“An old sculptor received an unusual commission. He was to carve the bust of a young boy. There were two special circumstances, however. He had to finish the job in just five days and the boy, who suffered from some mysterious disease, could only be seen once, very briefly. The sculptor refused at first to work under these conditions, but the fee he was offered made him think twice. The sum would provide him with a trouble-free retirement.

“He visited the boy, who was lying in the darkened room of a castle. During the several minutes he was allowed to spend at the sickbed, the young boy did not open his eyes. Although visibility was poor, the sculptor was dazzled by the beauty of the pale young face. He seemed in the presence of a sleeping angel. He could barely tear his eyes away from the boy. As he was leaving the room, the gentle song of a bird came from one of the dark corners.

“Returning to his studio, he first

made several charcoal sketches while his memory was still fresh, then set to work. He took his hammer and chisel and began to carve the best piece of marble he had. He made surprisingly rapid progress and felt almost no fatigue. The hours stretched out, one after the other, and he watched with rapture as his hands slowly transformed shapeless stone into the boy’s enchanting likeness.

“During the five days he had available he slept very little and ate even less. Strangely enough, he had no trouble coping with the tremendous effort in spite of his advanced age. An eagerness suffused him that he hadn’t felt since his youth. Everything whirled around him as the stubborn material yielded submissively. The money he was to receive ceased to be of any importance. This was no longer a commission he was fulfilling for the money. He was creating the work of his lifetime.

“At the close of the fifth day, he raised the hammer and chisel for the last time, and then stepped back a bit from the finished bust. It was perfect. The angelic face seemed to come to life in the stone, radiating diaphanously. He stared at it fixedly for a long time, making up for the short-lived pleasure in the boy’s room. Before he finally went to bed, he covered the bust with a flannel cloth so that its beauty would not be squandered with no one to look at it.

“Those who had placed the commission arrived at the appointed hour the

next morning. As the sculptor removed the cloth, he looked not at the boy's bust, but at his visitors' faces, expecting to see their admiration. Instead he saw expressions of disbelief. Not understanding, he slowly turned towards his masterpiece. Then his eyes grew as big as saucers. On the pedestal was something that had no cause to be there. The boy's head had been replaced with a large bird.

"The sculptor screamed in horror. Quickly veiling the sculpture again, he hurried the visitors out of his atelier and locked himself inside. No one knows what happened there. As they stood in front of the door, strange sounds reached the bewildered visitors' ears: the sculptor's angry shouts and curses, the blows of metal on stone, the noises of smashing and crashing. The oddest sound of all was the birdcalls, shrill and delightful by turns.

"This noise and commotion lasted a good two hours and then suddenly everything quieted down. The visitors exchanged worried glances, not knowing how to interpret the unexpected silence or what to do. Finally they knocked on the door of the atelier. There was no answer. They consulted with each other briefly, and then decided to break down the door.

"When the heavy door finally yielded to their blows and they rushed into the atelier, there was no trace of the sculptor. They looked around the large room in disbelief. There was no other exit and the three large windows were shut. They even searched the only

two places that were not immediately visible: in a small closet and under the bed, but just as they suspected, there was no one there either.

"Finally, shrugging their shoulders in resignation, they turned their attention to the pedestal holding the sculptor's veiled work. They hesitated slightly before one of them finally mustered the courage to take off the flannel cloth. What they saw under it made them draw back. Instead of the bird they'd expected was the stone head of the sculptor. There was no sign of the distress from two hours before when he'd escorted them out of the atelier. Now his face radiated serenity."

Finishing his story, the guard brought to his lips the glass he'd been holding as he talked, then changed his mind at the last moment and placed it on the coaster on the coffee table.

"I mustn't have any more. I'm on duty. It's a lovely drink, though."

I took the bottle that the judge had left and handed it to him. "Keep it. I won't be needing it."

He shook his head. "That's very kind of you, but it is strictly against regulations."

"No one will know. Didn't you turn off the microphone?"

"Yes, I did, but . . ."

"Take it as a gift in return for the story you told me."

"Did you like it?"

"Edifying and entertaining, just as I hoped."

A smile spread over the guard's face. He took the bottle, looked left and

right, then quickly shoved it under the jacket of his uniform. He nodded briefly and stood up.

“I won’t take up any more of your time. It was a real pleasure talking to you. I will always have fond memories of this conversation.”

I got up and put out my hand. “I will too.”

We shook hands and he held onto mine a moment longer. He stopped at the door and turned around. It seemed he wanted to say something else, but instead he just shrugged his shoulders as though apologizing for something. He hastened out and the door closed behind him without a sound.

I went to the dresser and picked up the violin. I placed it on my left shoulder, and then raised the bow. I was unable to continue playing, however, because everything around me was suddenly plunged into darkness. In the pitch black enveloping

me I felt as though I were floating, that nothing supported me from underneath. Or that I had become disembodied.

Then the light on the desk once again filled the cell with a subdued green glow. I turned around slowly. Everything looked exactly the same as before. I raised the bow, but it did not reach the strings this time either. A knock was heard at the door.

“Come in,” I said.

No one entered.

Placing the bow under my arm, I got up, went to the door and opened it.

Standing in front of me on the white floor was a large bird akin to a bright, blazing fire.

“Hi,” I said.

The bird fluttered up and landed on my right shoulder. I went out of the cell, turned around, closed the door after me, and then headed down the corridor. ☒

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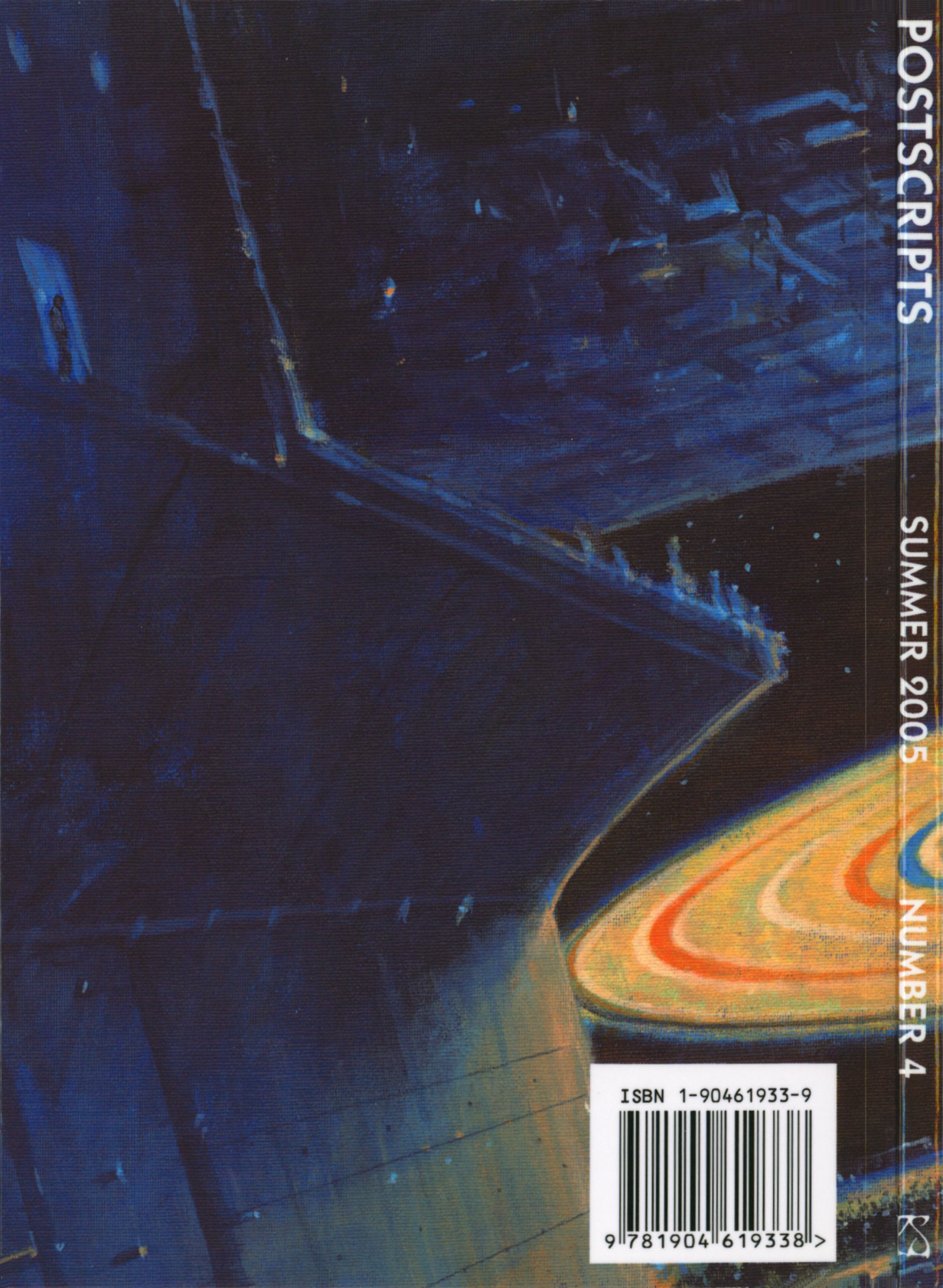
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