

STRANGE PLASMA

NO. 3

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SPECULATIVE + IMAGINATIVE
FICTION



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Strange Plasma

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peri

carol emshwiller

Margaret's right. She always is. I don't argue with her. As she says, I ought to see a psychologist. I ought to have done it a long time ago, and not only because of wasting my talent. I ought to see one because I'm always holding back. I'm always waiting, who knows for what? I'm blending in, I wear nothing brighter than brown. In fact I wear nothing except brown. I shouldn't just stand there. I ought to go and *be* something. Mother spoiled me. Money spoiled me. I admit all that, but I tell Margaret I never took to drink or drugs or frittered money away on crazy schemes. I think she'd like me better if I had. She even says it. She says it drives her crazy that I don't have any bad habits... that I haven't any habits at all, though I don't see how that can be. She says, what's to love or hate about me? And she can't understand why I insist on keeping my ability hidden. She says I'm frightened. She says I'm scared to death to be *anything*.

Well, it isn't as if I could really fly. I never manage, even when in the best of spirits, to get more than about a foot off the ground. Mostly I'm hardly up six inches. Like she says, I haven't practiced. I feel silly. I feel dumb being only a few inches off the ground, and I know I look funny doing it: my toes point, my legs dangle... I have to lead with my left shoulder, and hold my right hand out in front, left hand back. And I bump into things along the way — anything that sticks up higher than I can lift myself — stones, front steps, bushes... Even flowers sometimes get in my way. The worst of it is, when I bump into them or get tangled, I lose my balance and fall, always down on my left elbow or shoulder. I lose my hat. I drop my cane. My suit gets mussed and the knees of my pants get scraped. Once I went down into a puddle. And then why do it, anyway, when I can't go along much faster than a brisk walk? Why bother?

Balance is the trick. Margaret doesn't realize how hard it is. But I know she's right — I could work at it. I could practice. I have a feeling, though, that she wants me to be more than I ever could be — that she wants people saying about me, "Look, look. He's walking on the water," or some such, and I can't even swim.

Instead of practicing, I do it less and less. I don't even walk briskly anymore. I slump along. Oh, I stand up straight enough when I go out with Margaret on weekends now and then, but when I'm by myself, which is most of the time, I let myself go. Sometimes I find I've buttoned up my overcoat or sweater all wrong,

and I don't even care. I don't wonder that she's disgusted with me.

Even our son... He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to. I know the look. I ought to, I see it every day on Margaret's face. But Isabel, our grandchild... Now she's the only one I never see looking like that. Perhaps she hasn't noticed me that much, or doesn't care, whichever. I don't get to see her as often as I'd like. I suppose I'm considered a bad influence. She's nine. Or is it seven? Naturally I can't keep track. I try, but birthdays come and go. You'd think I could at least remember Isabel's, but I don't, not even hers, and yet I care about her. I really do.

And now it turns out that Isabel is coming to stay with us for a whole month while her parents have a big second honeymoon down in Brazil — Ipanema. They have been fighting so much (They confessed it to Margaret. Needless to say no one confesses anything to me.) that they thought they needed a long, private time on some beach to clear things up.

Isabel comes on a Sunday morning, all dressed in blue, which makes her green eyes look blue, too. And she comes with a long list of things not to do and things to do and when to do them: Not stay up after eight, not watch TV, not too many movies, not be out after dark, and, most especially, NO CHOCOLATE! *Can* go to ballet and concerts. *Must* go to piano lessons and dance lessons and tennis...

As it turns out, I get to be the one to take her to all these last things. As it turns out, I get to take her everywhere. Also it turns out she's only six, going on seven.

I don't know where Isabel came from. She looks like none of us. You'd think she walked right out of the sea on a foggy day: pale skin, circles under her eyes (she always has them, sick or well), hair almost white, though I suppose it will darken with age. You'd think, with those looks, she'd be quiet once in a while, but she talks — and quite precociously, I think — talks and talks. After a half an hour of it, Margaret says to me, "For God's sake, do something. Get her out of here. Take her for a walk in the park for a few hours. Go to the movies." But on the list it said, not too many movies, so I thought we'd not do that so soon.

For my kind of person, who never knows what to say next, somebody like Isabel, even if only six years old, is a great relief — somebody who always knows just what to say and isn't a bit worried about changing the subject right in the middle of some other topic

So Isabel and I go out to the park and she skips along holding my hand. We do the zoo. We pet dogs. We return other people's balls. We look at the babies going by in strollers. We have popsicles with only a little bit of chocolate around the outside. Isabel also thinks it's not too much. She thinks we could each have a popsicle a day and it wouldn't be too much. She thinks popsicles are perfect for weather like this. She says you can get popsicles that don't have chocolate on them but that she likes these better. She says chocolate isn't good for children and it isn't good for old people like I am either because it does something bad... she says, to the calcium, which is why her mother doesn't want her to have it and that I shouldn't have too much either. And I say I won't have *any* at all after she's gone, and she says, good, because she won't either, so then we'll be even. "Mother can smell it on you," she says, "I wonder if Grandma can smell it on you, too?"

We have so much fun that, on the way home, Isabel cuts a kind of caper: kicks both feet up in front of her and falls down on her bottom, quite hard. She almost cries, but she holds it back. Mainly she worries because she tore some lace on her panties. I tell her we'll get some new ones (Margaret would say I'm spoiling her). I say we'll go right away and get another pair, but of course it's Sunday, which we both forgot. But then we do find a store that's open, except it only has things for grown-up women. Isabel says she wants to look there anyway. She finds a blue bikini-style panty with tan lace around the legs and along the top, more lace, actually, than blue nylon, and she wants that pair. I know Margaret would disapprove. I even disapprove myself. It's too much. It looks like Forty-Second Street, but I also find the panties extraordinarily beautiful. Baroque. No, rococo. I'm not going to say anything to Isabel that might make her feel bad about her choice. We get the smallest size they have, and I think, well, it doesn't matter because they're much too big and Isabel will never be able to wear them. I tell her to put them in her shiny little blue purse which she's been carrying all this time and didn't even forget when we stopped for hotdogs. I tell Isabel not to bother Grandma with any of this. "It's our secret," I say. I know how much Isabel loves secrets, so I know she'll not tell on purpose though I also know it may pop out by mistake.

By Monday, it's clear that Margaret can't abide Isabel for more than fifteen minutes at a time, so I'm the one to take her off to tennis that afternoon and afterwards we go to the Plaza for strawberries and ice cream, and Isabel tells me she hates tennis and piano. She doesn't mind dance so much, but she wishes the piano was an oboe instead.

"How in the world do you know about the oboe?" I ask.

"I go to concerts all the time, you know. It's good for

you. And there's nothing to do there but think or, if you're sitting in the first row of the balcony, which I like the best, you can see who's playing by who's getting the reddest face, so I found out what the oboe is and the sound of it and I like it so much I wouldn't even care if I got red and my cheeks puffed out while I played it." What she likes about the sound is that it's piercing and nose-ish and, she says, kind of like it comes from some other country... from the Arabs or some place that has tents and red and orange stripes on things. And she likes it because you don't have to have a piano around all the time. You could even take it outside and practice walking around. You could practice in the woods or on the top of a mountain, which would be the best of all. She had read up about it, too, and she knew all about shaping your own reeds and wetting them.

So then I wonder out loud, how can we work it so that she can take some oboe lessons while she's here. "Well, why not?" And she says, "Well, why not," too, so we decide that we won't do the piano anymore — that I'll call up and say she did something to her thumb. And she can do something to her thumb so we won't be lying because neither of us, Isabel, says, ever wants to lie, and she's right. "And why not, while we're at it," Isabel says, "change tennis to karate?"

All through this I can't believe she's six going on seven. On the list she came with, it said she should behave like a lady and she does behave like a lady. How could anyone doubt it? The waiters at the Plaza don't doubt it. The head waiter doesn't doubt it. The man who brings the water doesn't, the bellhops in the lobby don't, nor does the doorman as we leave. And I don't doubt it as I give Isabel my elbow and we go out and down the steps.

I find a teacher, same time as piano. I find two oboes. We take them out and practice in the park so Margaret won't suspect. Even in the rain, we always find some secluded place to get under, as the bridges where the traffic goes over. Nobody bothers there.

The next time we're at the Plaza, Isabel has just had karate and is quite flushed from all the exercise and, I suppose, happiness, for she really loves karate and she loves wearing the white suit. Oboe was harder than she had expected. She's glad to do the work, but karate is just pure joy and I can see it in her face. Isabel, I swear, looks thirteen and talks twenty-five.

"I really think, Grandpa, I should get you a new tie. I think you ought to have one with more color in it. Red, pink, and orange," she said, "to go with your oboe." And she begins to count out her change and her carefully folded bills. All of a sudden that little blue purse just seems out of the question for such a big girl as Isabel appears to be. "I only have eleven dollars and forty-two cents," she says, "but I want to get you a really nice tie and I don't think that will do it; do you?"

“We’ll see if we can find one on sale,” I say. “You’ll get me a tie and I’ll get you a new purse.”

I catch sight of myself in Altman’s windows later, as we’re on our way in, and I have my hat at quite a rakish angle and Isabel, on my arm, looks like a teenager. I wonder how I could have come to put on my hat like that.

In more ways than one, time seems to fly. Isabel is growing practically before my eyes. Last week she was thirteen, this week I turn around and she’s wearing lipstick and a wide brimmed — very dashing, in fact — black hat and is, I swear, twenty... eighteen, at the least. And look at me. My clothes hang. My belt buckles two notches thinner. We stop and look at ourselves in the mirror wall at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Sixth Street. I’m wearing my new “Arab” striped tie, my hat over one eye. I’m smiling. Isabel is smiling. Then she cuts another caper in sheer joy. This time she lifts a good five feet, kicking out in front of her and leaning forward into it, and then she comes drifting down as if my arm is the only thing keeping her from sailing right up to the top of the Empire State Building. We turn, then, and she’s so tall she’s looking at me, eye to eye and then we kiss. Not exactly a lover’s kiss, but not exactly *not* a lover’s kiss. A fun kiss. A happy kiss. “Marry me, Grandpa Peri,” she says. “Get a divorce and marry me.” Then she goes into a long tale about how it’s all right because she’s adopted and not my real grandchild, and I’m not believing a word she says because I remember when she was born and when she was one and two and three... I may walk around in a daze, as Margaret says, I may not see anything that’s going on, but I do notice a few things.

“I’ll never find any-one like you,” Isabel says. “I’ll never have this much fun with anybody. I’ll never, never, never.”

And I think that’s true. I’ve lived a long time, and I certainly never had so much fun as I’ve had with Isabel. But I remember I was too young to have fun with Margaret. I was even more cautious than I am now, and frightened. I still am. I wasn’t afraid of Isabel because I’d, in a way, grown up with her. “That’s not the point,” I say.

“Let’s run away. Let’s elope before they come to take me back. Look,” she says (we’re still looking at each other in the mirror), “we make a great couple.” (There’s no doubt about that. I’m standing up straight for once and my pot belly’s gone.) “I have to go home *next week!*”

I had forgotten. I had wiped it out on purpose, which is maybe why I forget *everything*.

But it turns out that doesn’t happen quite so soon. It turns out (Margaret tells me) Isabel’s mother and father are fighting so much down there in Ipanema that things are worse than ever, so they will come home, but they don’t feel they can cope with Isabel until things settle down a bit and, since they never fight in front of her

and don’t ever want to, could we keep her for another two weeks until they can get their lives straightened out. So, for one more of those two weeks, things are as they were before, and there is, I can see it, no doubt in the eyes of the Plaza doorman, nor in the eyes of the head waiter, nor in the eyes of the waiters, nor in the eyes of the man who brings the water, no doubt at all that Isabel is a desirable and nubile young lady.

And everyday Isabel begs me to marry her, and everyday I say, “Absolutely not.”

And I tell her that Margaret and I probably love each other more than we think we do, or might. I’m not sure. “And I made promises,” I say. “And I haven’t been the best husband. And every now and then I ought to have some courage to do or not do, and I’m your grandfather, for heaven’s sake!”

But then Margaret finds the panties, and then all the rest of it. “Where did these come from?” she says, and “What are you doing to this child? Old lecher. Filthy man. Lipstick and nail polish. Red nail polish. Perfumes. What will her mother and father think? And that purse. Did you think I’d never notice? Did you think I was blind? A hundred dollar lizard purse! How could you? And what about these clarinets? From now on,” she says, “I’m taking her to her lessons. And you,” she says to Isabel, “are not allowed to say a word... not one word from now on. Thank God there’s only four more days of it. I’ve a good mind to lock you both up in your rooms.”

But she doesn’t do that. She just locks me up... for a few afternoons. (She knows I like to get out and walk.) And Isabel goes home and I don’t even have a chance to say goodbye. In fact I’m forbidden to see her. I don’t know what happens to the karate suit and the oboes and the purse and panties.

Later on in mid-October, when Margaret and I have fallen back, more or less, into our old routine, we rent a car and go out on Long Island to see the fall leaves. I wear my tie. I still have that. It’s exactly the colors — I realize it on the trip — exactly the colors of the leaves. Margaret says it’s too bright, but I know that when I wore brown ties she didn’t like those either. I tell her I want to wear it anyway, and she doesn’t pursue it. It’s as if she thinks to let me have this one small pleasure, and I’m grateful.

After we do the trees, we go down to take a walk on the beach. Several people are out all bundled up in sweaters. There’s a man sitting on a piece of driftwood playing the flute. There’s a dog fetching sticks. There’s kids throwing things into the surf to watch them bob there and get washed back in. It all makes me think of Isabel even more than I already do think of her. I know I did the right thing. Everything right for a change, from popsicles, to oboes, to the Plaza... even those crazy panties, and saying No. For once I did a whole series of

right things. I feel sad, but I feel happy. Just thinking about those five and a half weeks, I feel my left shoulder hunch forward, hand back, then right hand up and out to steady me. I lift. About two inches so my toes still touch the sand. Nobody notices, least of all Margaret. Then I go up four... maybe five inches. It feels good even though I haven't practiced. I don't think I've tried it for three or four years. Then I lift about a foot without any effort at all, and I begin to drift lazily towards the water. I feel the spray, cold on my ankles. Suddenly

Margaret does notice. "What are you up to now?" she says. "What will I *do* with you?" And she reaches out to grab me, but I'm picking up speed. Then I hear another voice, "Look, look. He's walking on the water." I don't turn back to see who said it. Besides, I'm already much higher than to seem to walk in the waves. I hear shouting. Dogs bark. Then I do look back, but the fog is drifting in. I can hardly see the beach anymore at all. Margaret is just a gesticulating dark smudge against the luminous white.



the quiet redemption of andy the house

terry dowling

Now all desires — even unknown ones — I had
Stand stript before me with their names writ under.
And will this make me really sane, I wonder,
Or only more intelligently mad?

Ernest G. Moll

WELCOME TO NEFAU

The meeting was quite an occasion for both men. Each had the opportunity to marvel at the absurdity of someone else's name for once. Small, round Pixie Rushbairn Todd, white-coated and ageing stylishly (so his friends said), smiled and held out his hand.

"Doctor Balm. I am very pleased to meet you in person at last. Welcome to Nefau Clinic."

His guest, the tall, ascetic-looking, darkly dressed Frederick Balm bowed slightly, though his narrow bespectacled head was angled back too far: courtesy, but with no indication of enjoying this, one of life's little jokes.

"Doctor Pixie Todd. It is an honor."

Pixie Rushbairn Todd could almost hear the heels click.

They shook hands, then Balm introduce his Bantu colleague, a fine-looking black woman almost as tall as himself, though clearly half his age.

"This is Beris Abana, Doctor Todd. She helped me field-test the dream-gun."

"Of course. Welcome, Doctor Abana." Pixie shook hands again.

There was a bow from her as well (inherited, no doubt, from her days around the illustrious doctor of psychiatry), but at least her eyes twinkled. She was enjoying the circumstances far more than either psychotherapist could show. She smiled warmly, more from genuine pleasure, Pixie thought, than some need to keep his goodwill through this delicate business of testing their amazing new rehabilitation technique. The smile told him, as well, that she understood the authorities had given the Nefau trustees no choice in the matter. Nefau had Andy Bates, after all; the twenty-two year old patient who had spoken only fifty-thousand words in his lifetime, most of them unconnected, without apparent sense or purpose. Beris Abana's smile was both a thank-you and an apology. It did wonders for Pixie's peace of mind.

After Crafer had taken the bags and Gertrude had served tea in the front parlour of the old hospital, Pixie led them up to Andy's room on the first floor.

"You have seen our reports," he said as they mounted the stairs. "Andy does test out as schizoid. But with one exception, which I will show you presently, he is a wonderfully neutral personality — if I can use that term positively. He is a personable, passive man — social, or rather, far from anti-social in any clinical sense. He will give you his attention, sometimes momentarily but enough to make you feel he is watching what goes on; then it will slip away. He feeds and cleans himself with minimum supervision, watches television, reads the books brought to him but requests nothing. He will not interact on any terms but his own. How does that sound to you, Doctor Balm?"

"Perfect for our purposes, Doctor Pixie Todd," Balm said, and Beris' eyes twinkled again.

Pixie raised his eyebrows in a silent question to her. Was that humor from the unbending Doctor Balm, this use of his full name? Pixie doubted it.

"I'm glad to hear it, Doctor Frederick Balm," Pixie said, and Beris Abana turned her sudden laugh into a polite cough.

Andrew Linton Bates was sitting in the middle of the floor when the three psychiatrists came in. He was examining the color plates in a book on the Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist painters, and did not so much as look up. The room was clean and well lit, with posters on the walls and some picture books, puzzles, even several toys scattered about. A television set and a radio were both going but with the sound turned right down. Pixie switched these off, then got down on the floor next to the young man

"Hello, Andy. This is Doctor Balm and Doctor Abana. They have come here to talk to you."

Andy looked up, but his gaze went between his visitors to a point on the far wall. Then he looked away.

"Tomorrow," Pixie continued, "Doctor Balm and Doctor Abana are going to use a wonderful new machine to help you talk with us. What do you think of that, Andy?"

Again the gaze came up, and this time swung across the two new faces before him before settling on the point beyond. Frederick Balm turned to follow that

gaze, and when Beris and Pixie did the same, they found the focal point to be several books in the book-case against the wall.

"He reads avidly," Pixie said, looking to see if Crafer had brought in any new titles from the Clinic library. No, the favorites were there. "He was taught at an early age with two of his brothers by a governess who could never make him talk coherently. Interesting choices, don't you think? That new book on the raising of the *Mary Rose*, Roland Auguet's *The Roman Games*, and Sagan's *Cosmos*."

"He reads these, you say?" Frederick Balm sounded skeptical.

"Seems to. A pupilometer shows the proper progressions and timings. The usual random saccades on the photographs and illustrations, but regular patterns otherwise. We assume he reads. But come," Pixie said, and led his guests out of the room. As he closed the door, he held a single finger before his lips, urging them to listen.

"ABC," said Andy, beyond the door. "ABC."

Sitting in Pixie's cosy, wood-panelled office downstairs, Doctor Balm read *The Story of the House* for the third time. Beris Abana watched him as he did it; Pixie looked out through the French windows, watching as bands of sunlight and cloud-shadow marched across the well-kept grounds.

"Fascinating!" Balm said, and read it again.

Pixie glanced down at his own copy, though he did not need to. Every detail was pressed into his memory.

THE STORY OF THE HOUSE

by Andrew Linen Bates

(as dictated to Marjory Symon and Pixie Todd)

Once upon a time there was a house. The house hopped with people.

"I wonder if this is a New Year," said the man.

"This is an apple house, it skips along all the time — hop, hop, hop-a-hop."

"Hey, I don't know," said the Mummy. "Is it good or bad?"

"ABC, ABC," said the house.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo," said the rooster.

"Cock-a-doodle-dog," said the funny rooster.

The postman rang the doorbell. Ding dong.

The postman knocked at the door.

"Hello, I've got some mail," said the postman.

"What a noisy house."

The night couldn't wait but the morning came. But you watch the eyes.

That night the apple house was shattered with all kinds of colors. The colors were blue, green, light blue, brown, orange, pink, dark brown, and red.

But spirits came... pop pop. The spirits came along.

The spirits didn't know that the sky was dark. The sky was dark.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, the house will be surprised.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, the house will be surprised.

When the house comes home to eat his meal, he'll think we are not there. It will be easy to tear out his hair and spoil his meal.

Little Baby Jesus, cradled in the hay

Softly sang his mother, Lula lula lay

Lula lula lula lay, Baby born on Christmas Day

Little Baby Jesus, cradled in the hay.

The flowers were good. The people were in their beds. It was night-time. The sun had gone to bed. We had to go. If there was a poem I'll tell it to you.

"ABC, ABC," said the house very quietly.

"Nothing else like it?" Balm said when he had finished. Pixie swung his chair around.

"Nothing before or since. He's been here seven years. We get signature phrases: "ABC", sometimes "Cock-a-doodle-dog", "The spirits came along", and others — snatches of sentences related to the story. We've made key-word association tests, put direct questions to him, created visualizations. Specialists have visited us here at Nefau, tried hypnosis, drug therapies. Nothing. That story may be significant; it seems to be. But it may mean nothing at all. But tell me, Doctor Balm. I have read your published material, but this is so new, I find I am the layman again. What do you do with this gun of yours?"

Balm passed the photocopy to his assistant so she could add it to their files.

"Well now. The gun lets us raid Andy's unconscious, quickly, very quickly, while Andy is in sedated sleep. His condition is measured against 8,000 recorded precedents, most of them sharing fundamental similarities. We establish parameters as far as we can, follow recommendations computed for those cases, then apply them, the three of us working together."

"Carl Jung..."

"...said the individual psyche must be treated on its own unique terms, yes, I know. And I agree absolutely, Doctor Todd. We will be imposing a dream on Andy, a

control dream — a holding dream, we call it. Starting this afternoon, we will plant the first elements deep in his subconscious through our machine's own tracking-hypnosis method; elements of a thematic and causal template which will be repeated and reinforced. If you like, we are cramming his subconscious with orthodoxy, with relationships and responsibilities and extroversion — hundreds of psychic triggers and associations. It is done very quickly. In moments of maximum stress, he will return to the holding dream."

"Which will be what precisely?"

Doctor Balm smiled, but his head went back and spoilt any warmth his smile might have had. He looked indulgent.

"Simple things mostly. Nice things. I have chosen a seashore on a fine warm day. A small village full of people who know and love him. These are free elements, not exclusive. He can project on to these, tamper with them if he likes. Other factors will be more deep-seated, more impervious to interference."

"Like what?"

"Please, Doctor Todd. Observe the experiment for us. Be a true test-case observer. Let us have your objectivity a while longer. Just know that we will have placed a stasis-lock in Andy's world, a deeply subliminal construct to keep the holding dream in place while socialization, rehabilitation, can occur. It has worked five times already with splendid results. The patients appear to be fully socialized — and only after very short periods of treatment."

"This is exciting news, Doctor Balm. But what of the allowances made for Andy's individuality, his special self? Surely..."

"Allowances are made, naturally. Hence the room for improvisation. Trust us, Doctor Todd, please. Observe."

DAY 2 — ANDY UNDER THE GUN

At 9:30 the next morning, Andy was under the gun. He lay on a padded examination table in the dimly-lit observation room, with the big cowl covering his head and shoulders and all the contacts in place. The drugs and the tracking-hypnosis had taken effect, he was in a deep sleep already.

Pixie Todd and Beris Abana watched through the control room window while Doctor Balm made the final adjustments.

"Let us begin, Beris," he said into his coat-mike, then faced Pixie through the glass. "We all contain the Mythmaker, Doctor Todd, the Storyteller of the Soul. Now we coax it to do openly what it does best in secret

— tell us about this Self."

"We've got readings and we've got REM," Beris said in a quiet voice.

"Excellent," Frederick Balm turned back to his patient and opened the remote channel on the large cowl.

"Tell us about where you are, Andy. Tell us what is happening."

It was startling how Andy's voice came out of the wall speakers, relays from the throat mikes, the slurring and static eliminated.

"I am at the beach again," Andy said, his lips barely moving, but obeying the planted injunction to be the storyteller of dreams. "It's a hot fine day, and Hari and I are still allowed to mend the nets; such an honor. We are lucky. The villagers are down the beach, away from the huts, away from us. There's just Hari and me. And Ma Miller. Yes, Ma Miller's watching us. She smiles. We go on mending the nets."

"It's the holding dream," Balm said, nodding with approval.

"How do you know?" Pixie asked.

"The nets. One of our theme images. Our main one. Listen!"

"When she's gone to join the others. Hari and I watch her go. Then Hari says: 'I've been to see the fighters.'

'You haven't! You wouldn't' I cry, dropping my net, but I remember Ma Miller and pick it up again, glad she can't hear us any longer. The nets are important.

'I told you I would one day,' Hari says to me.

'I don't believe you.'

Hari comes closer. We hunch down before the veils of the drying nets and speak of forbidden things, of the small beach to the north and the stone amphitheater there.

'I did, Andy. My rope is there, hanging on the wall. I cut notches in the beam I found in Sam Night's store and leant it against the wall and climbed up it. I saw over the top. I did. I saw the fighters.'

'Were there any changes?' I ask, full of awe and wonder. No-one has ever climbed the Arena wall that I can remember, but there are the stories. People — Hoppy and Tuta — speak of it sometimes, in appropriate whispers, but never do anything about it.

'No,' Hari says, and I am relieved. 'Just the breeze off the desert and the waves falling. Nothing has changed, I know it. The fighters never knew I was there.'

'You're making this up,' I say, but know she isn't.

Hari grips my arm in a pinch. Such spitefulness is unlike her, but she is trying to make me believe.

'No!' she says again. 'Come and see. The rope's there. The beam's there. Climb up and see!'

So we do. We leave the nets and creep out of the village, up through the long grass; run crouching over the dunes to the low headland, to the dry empty — almost empty — area where the desert comes to the sea.

The Arena is there, a ring of stone close to the beach, its canted ashlar wall eight feet high..."

Beris: "These details are amazing. I would never have thought..."

Balm: "Listen!"

"I see the beam and the rope wedged in a crevice between two blocks at the top. I feel very afraid.

'Hari!' I cry.

'Come on, Andy,' she says. 'See the fighters!'

I go on with Hari, caught between fear of Ma Miller, Samuel Night and the other adults..."

Balm: "Note that! Adults."

"...and my desire to see the armored fighting men — this constant taboo motif of life on the shore."

Beris: "Whose language is this, Doctor Balm?"

Balm: "Listen!"

"At the base of the sloping wall, I listen for sounds. I imagine that I can hear the occasional distant ring of a single-edged sword against a heavy shield. I approach the rough-hewn notched beam and look up. The rope is swaying in the hot off-shore breeze.

'Go on!' Hari says. 'You first.'

I grip the rope and start climbing, positioning my feet and hauling myself up, determined now to do it. I reach the lip of the wall and reach over to hang on, then pull myself up and on to the wide ashlar rim. There is tension on the rope and presently Hari is beside me, hauling herself up next to me.

Together, we gaze down into the Arena. I feel good, somehow, when I do it.

The fighting men are there on the hot sand in the very middle of the stone circle, blindly hitting out at one another, but rarely connecting. Their sightless bronze helmets gleam dully in the hot sunlight.

Blind gladiators. Their brown, oiled and sweating bodies shine more than their broadbrimmed, full-visored helmets, those fearsome eyeless helmets. They wear short heavy leather skirts, each man with one arm protected by a manica and a galerus, and the left leg covered by an ocrea. They carry heavy bronze swords with a single edge. As we watch, they move about one another in aimless circling movements, their shields in close, their sword-arms forever searching..."

Pixie: "He's got this from Auguet's book on the gladiatorial games."

Balm: "Doctor Todd, please!"

"...pity them at first, these hopeless blind warriors. They are like automatons. But I watch, fascinated, and become more and more afraid. Something is going to happen. Hari doesn't realize how dangerous this is. No-one can really tell me why this Arena is here, who built it and when. But it is very important. I am so afraid, so terribly afraid..."

"Bring him out of it, Beris," said Balm.

"Yes, Doctor Balm." Beris adjusted the subliminals, imposed new lead images and slowly returned Andy to the beach and the nets. Presently, the holding dream was phased out altogether. Andy rested, calm now, left to free-form, to wake when he was ready.

Crafer served a late breakfast in the front parlour. Frederick Balm could scarcely conceal his excitement.

"A wonderful beginning. Just marvelous. I am so encouraged."

Pixie sipped his tea. "I take it the Arena and the gladiators is stasis-lock for your controlled dream?"

Balm set down his cup.

"But no. Not at all. That's exactly the point, Doctor Todd. I used the mending of the nets for the stasis-lock, something far more simple. Andy should have returned to mending the nets the moment stress began, but he didn't. He has invented this Arena, focused all his anxieties on to it. It is the bugbear, the shadow, in this paradise. He chose to stay with it instead. I never thought he would show it to us so soon. That book, *The Roman Games*, must have had a powerful impact on his subconscious."

"What would have happened if Andy had been left on the wall?" Pixie asked.

"I cannot say, Doctor Todd. That is why I brought him back. This has not happened before and we can't risk too much. We don't have a full enough picture of his world. But the presence of mind, you agree, is startling."

"And our next step?"

Beris answered him. "Will be to take Andy back to the beach this afternoon. Frederick will strengthen the stasis-lock."

DAY 2 — ANDY UNDER THE GUN

"Hari comes to me while I am fixing nets and says the Elders want to see us. We go to Sam Night's store and there are many villagers there — Ma Miller, Sam, Tuta, Mary and Rose, the Arius brothers, Lucky and Hoppy, even our best fisherman, Thrice Ian. We are worried but soon find it is routine business.

They tell us we must take more care with the nets, but their words lack conviction somehow, as if that is not what they meant to talk about at all. All the same, we spend the rest of the morning making our best knots. It is a hot fine day so we swim for a while at noon, then go back to the mending refreshed.

No-one will tell me any more about the Arena on the beach or about the fighters who spend their days endlessly circling on another, delivering their sudden expected-but-always-unexpected blows. I have only asked Bish and Carl; there's no-one else I can trust — only Hoppy and Tuta, but they have to be drunk before they can mention it.

I watch Hari's brown back as she works. Beautiful Hari. I believe she thinks as I do — that the circular fighting ground inside the wall and the blind fighters are the stasis-lock for our world..."

Balm: "What!"

Pixie: "My God!"

"...liberation from the cycle of the nets..."

Balm: "What is this? Where did this knowledge come from?"

Beris: "Our coat-mikes were open during the setting-up. He listened..."

Pixie: "A reversal."

"...and sure of it. It is inherited knowledge, a certainty, a fact like the wind, the sand, the waves falling, the gulls, the hot sun. Hari has this secret knowledge too because as I watch the small fine hairs on her arms, she turns to look at me and smiles..."

Beris: "Bring him out of it, Frederick!"

Balm: "We're losing it again!"

Pixie: "What is wrong?"

TABLE TALK

After dinner that evening, Pixie and Frederick Balm finally argued.

It began naturally enough at the dinner table when Crafer had brought Andy down for a fifteen minute "socialization check" or, as Pixie preferred to call it, his "meeting with the inquisitors".

Gertrude had just cleared the plates away, more wine had been served, and Pixie had just finished telling Ramone and Michael, his two assistants at the Clinic, about Andy's unexpected resistance to the day's dream-therapy. Andy sat opposite Pixie at the far end of the table, with Beris, then Frederick Balm, on his right, and Ramone and Michael to his left. Crafer stood near the door, close by Andy.

The young patient was dressed in a loose shirt and jeans, and sipped at a glass of diluted chablis, looking alert and intelligent and for all the world like a junior colleague rather than an inmate.

It had been agreed that Balm would lead the discussion.

"I enjoyed your **Story of the House**, Andy," he said. "Very much."

Andy watched him, fleetingly, his eyes glancing at the other faces in front of him.

"It's a most interesting house," Balm continued, and sipped his wine. "A very remarkable place."

"ABC," Andy murmured, very softly, his lips close to the edge of his glass.

Balm nodded, as if Andy's reply made sense. He took another sip of wine, then tried again.

"Yes, indeed. ABC. A fine house. Does Hari live there too, Andy? Where does Hari live?"

There was no visible reaction to the name. Andy was watching the candles halfway down the table, using his wine as a lens.

Balm was not discouraged. "Tell me about the fighters, Andy. The gladiators in the Arena who cannot see."

"It skips along all the time," Andy said, and a frown narrowed his forehead. He stared at the wine.

"They trouble you, these gladiators, do they, Andy? They keep you from the nets. Distract you."

The frown remained. Andy set his glass down carefully on the white table cloth so the candles shone through it.

Frederick Balm exchanged looks with Pixie and Beris, then spoke again.

"These fighters, Andy. The blind fighters. You watch the eyes."

Andy looked straight down the table at Balm.

"ABC," he said again, very quietly, then pushed back his chair, got up, and left the room. Michael and Crafer went after him. Through the door they heard another "ABC", much fainter, then there was silence.

"Extraordinary," Balm said. "Most remarkable."

"There's tremendous power of the Self there, Doctor," Pixie said. "I cannot see how you will stop him reverting."

"Be patient, Doctor Todd. All his sleeping will be done under the gun now. We will reinforce the holding dream by the hour if necessary. It will balance out the conflict, minimize it. With proper diet and medication and stabilizing treatments under the gun, Andy should not regress. We are aiming at homeostasis, nothing less. Eventually the whole thing will be completely self-regulating."

"Forgive me, Doctor Balm. I seem to be more the Jungian about Andy than I expected to be. We have here a unique Self, a unique madness, an apparently integrated, if elusive, perception-consciousness. I cannot easily accept these tactics you have devised."

"I understand such reservations, Doctor Todd. And you are being wonderfully patient with us..."

"Effectively coerced, shall we say?" And Pixie laughed.

Balm laughed also. "We will continue to monitor dream activity under the gun. Andy will speak to us more and more. The storyteller/mythmaker motif is well-planted now. We should get a much higher order of presentation than he was capable of in his **Story of the House**. We will make sure his dreams contain the stasis-lock. We will strengthen that until he is stable. He will keep returning to the image of the nets, depending on how much he needs it. The Arena, the fighters, will go."

Pixie sighed. "This is what worries me. You make it sound as if Andy must fight to be free of your subliminal embeddings. That sounds wrong, against free will. Is it possible he might prefer psychosis?"

Doctor Balm looked at his assistant. Beris was carefully neutral.

"A curious notion, Doctor Todd."

"But a possibility, Doctor Balm, though you don't like my saying it."

"No, I certainly don't."

"Please. Let me say the obvious then. With schizophrenia, we may not be faced with just the notion of the divided personality. We know, by our conventional standards, that Andy is psychotic; he tests as schizoid. We ultimately do not know if his personality is integrated in that condition rather than divided and disturbed. Each case must be judged on its own merits."

Balm shook his head. "The **Story of the House** shows anxiety, stress, paranoia, morbid fascination..."

"The story does, agreed, but Andy doesn't. He is peaceful, without anxiety. His metabolism is in harmony; he has homeostasis! We call him mad because of his social conduct, his refusal to communicate apart from those House construct writings."

Doctor Balm stood. "No. We must try more. We are here..."

"Perhaps you should be here, Doctor Balm, to explore what madness is. I discover, all these years later, that I am here to work a cure only in terms of the patient — not of our pre-conceptions about what constitutes sanity."

"No! No! No!" Balm said, striking the table with each word. "That will not do. You cannot have such...non-participatory individuals judged subjectively sane. It is solipsism; you cannot justify it! And you cannot let such people operate in society. How could they operate?"

"Free Andy Bates and see. Observe him. Does he feed himself? Does he defecate without dirtying his clothes? Does he generally observe social customs?"

"I imagine he does, Doctor Todd."

"You know he does. That is the problem. Andy is not sociopathic, not misanthropic. He does fend for himself. In a forest, in a jungle, he would no doubt survive. As a solitary..."

"But only as a solitary! What is viable, Doctor Todd?"

"What is intrinsically wrong with his madness, Doctor Balm? Tell me."

"It is non-contiguous? It lacks any sense of a cause and effect we can relate to. It is..."

"Inaccessible! I said it before — Andy is a solitary. In any society, he could be left alone; a different proposition entirely to the village imbecile. He might even be acclaimed as a holy man, a mystic..."

"Hopelessly out of touch!"

"It would seem, though I question the word 'hopelessly'. That is what you should be exploring here, Doctor, with your wonderful machine. Will Andy accept our sanity or struggle to return to his? What does the Andrew Linen Bates' personality want most? Socialization — this exoteric re-alignment we are trying

for — or subjective integration? We will observe the way he behaves with this holding dream of yours, the way he accepts or resists the stasis-lock."

"Yes," Doctor Balm said. "We will observe. But now I am very tired. I am up at 2 am to make adjustments to the gun. Goodnight."

Pixie and Beris watched him go, then sat looking into the fire Crafer had set to warm the room.

"It was difficult for you to tell Frederick how concerned you are, Doctor."

"You must call me Pixie, please. Yes, it was. And I should probably have waited. But it would be unfair not to express the balancing view at the outset. Our age suffers from too much literalism, from this pro-rational bias that lets reason account for everything so neatly. Frederick is a good man, Beris, but..."

"He gets results."

"He does, yes. And so seems to justify one approach over any other, changing unknown, totally subjective quantities, perceptions, value systems, into fixed quantities. I worry about that on principle. Are we restoring sanity, social viability — or conventionalizing the subject? The 'or' is what concerns me, Beris. Not a belief, but a possibility of an alternative. Though I wonder how we are to explore such things. If I had your wonderful gun, I would set up situations, yes, plant key images, yes, but only so far. It seems important now, after such initial success, that Andy can choose the path he takes — our sanity or his. What irony if ethics and accepted norms should keep us from what might be true."

"Schizophrenia, psychopathology, and you suggest choices?"

"They are words, labels, handles, Beris. We really don't know enough."

Beris studied the flames curling up over the logs in the grate. "You feel Andy can choose? That he might turn the dream?"

"I suspect it is essential now, Beris, that he be allowed to; that it is built into his therapy somewhere. I believe he is already turning the dream anyway — as if his subconscious is indicating the need for a choice situation. It's a possibility.

Beris watched the flames a while longer, then yawned and stretched. "It's not going as easily as we'd expected," she said.

"It means a lot to hear you say so, Beris. What do you do next?"

"Tonight I start reading Auguet, if I can stay awake. Learning about gladiators."

During the night, Frederick Balm intensified the stasis-lock element of the holding dream, and all the next day Andy responded well to the patterns. When he became the storyteller at mid-morning, he spoke of sitting among the nets under a fine blue sky, working away with great care and skill. Ma Miller, he told his audience, was very pleased, and twice Sam and Ian came to admire his handling of the nets. Some of the other village children even helped for a time.

"I think we have him at last," Balm said when Pixie came in at the end of his afternoon rounds.

"Yes?" Pixie said, then smiled at Beris who sat reading Auguet's book in the technician's chair, her long legs drawn up under her. He looked at the transcripts of the morning's dream-story.

"The images have firmed up and stabilized," Balm continued. "No mention of the Arena."

Pixie nodded, finished scanning the print-outs, then peered through the glass at the dimly-lit observation room where Andy was asleep.

"So what do you think is happening now, Doctor?"

Frederick Balm seemed pleased by the question as if it showed that Pixie Todd had finally reconsidered his position.

"The gladiatorial material was possibly residual, a last-ditch and unusually strong resistance by the psyche, using anything Andy had assimilated. We've not encountered its like before. The psyche usually yields to the superimposed, reinforced templates. Beris has found correlatives for some of it."

"Oh?"

Beris uncurled her legs and sat up.

"Gladiator classifications," she said. "Samnite? Sam Night. Myrmillo? Ma Miller. Thracian? Thrice Ian. Different kinds of gladiators who fought in the arena. I haven't finished it yet."

Balm continued. "Andy is fighting us, which we expect. He has used residues to build his own stasis-lock..."

"To protect his madness?" Pixie asked. "Is that possible?"

Balm's mouth tightened; he drew in a deep breath.

"Yes. Yes, of course. It is natural that he do so. The sort of reasonable defence you would expect. We are the intruders, after all. His mind is sharp enough to know what we are doing. Heavens above, Doctor Todd! Crafer tells me Andy's even read books on psychology. This is not the usual situation. The Self is working with subliminal elements, symbols — important personal material enriched by association; it is formidable. We are opposing that, regularizing that, imposing a system, a new steady mold into which the personality can flow."

"Yes, I see that," Pixie said, more to calm the other

psychotherapist than because he agreed. Too much was new here, too much was suspect, resembled tampering, brainwashing, aversion conditioning. Pixie said nothing about such things, and felt glad when Balm went out to get some fresh air.

"One point," Pixie said, scanning the transcripts again. Beris looked up. "Yes, Pixie?"

"There is no mention of Hari here. He hasn't spoken of her today. Andy is alone on the beach."

DAY 3 — TABLE TALK

"You see it as a major issue?" Frederick Balm asked at dinner. There were only four of them this night; Michael and Crafer were out exercising Andy and some other patients. "Is this something especially Jungian, Doctor Todd? Hari as the female part of Andy's psyche?"

"It's highly possible, Doctor. He accepts her completely; she is certainly no threat. Why not his anima?"

"I can accept that. But does she have to be there?"

"No," Pixie said. "Not there necessarily. But to give her initial and vital presence, I would think she has to be somewhere relevant to our point-of-view storyteller. It is a related system, in some key areas a closed system, I should think, in spite of the gun's insertions. Why has Andy not reflected on where Hari is? If she absent, she must be somewhere important. There may be a reason why the Andy-psyche does not disclose her whereabouts even to itself."

Balm turned to Beris Abana. "Is there a correlative in August?"

"Not yet," Beris replied. "I haven't had time to finish it and monitor the transcripts as well."

"Show me where you are up to, Beris," Pixie said. "I don't sleep a great deal these days. Meanwhile, Doctor Balm, I would ask you to remember Hari's role in this scheme of things, her intimacy with Andy. It may just be a fantasy persona, an incidental dream-figure. But it may be his female self, working as comforter, a support, a mother figure or final protection."

"Her going may be a good sign," Beris said, diplomatically, as if to fend off another confrontation. "Like the phasing out of the Arena and the fighters."

"Yes," agreed Pixie, recognizing what Beris was doing but unable to stop himself. "Or it may be a blind for what's really taking place. I must keep saying this."

Balm smiled. "Of course. So let's have Andy brought in. We may note some preliminary changes, and I want to improvise again."

Ramone got up and opened the door. Andy was waiting out in the fall, freshly cleaned and dressed. Crafer and Ramone led him in.

"Good evening, Andy," Balm said.

"ABC," Andy replied, meeting Frederick Balm's eyes directly with his own. "The man with nets. Retiarius. Habet! Hoc habet!"

"I see," Balm said, and gave a significant look to Pixie and Beris. "You recognize me. The netman, I believe; the gladiator with the net and trident. I know that much. Tell us about the Arena, Andy."

Andy did not answer. He took his glass of wine and peered through it as he had before, watching the different lights in the room.

Balm lighted his own glass and looked through it the same way. "So, where is Hari? She was not with you today."

"Habet! Hoc habet!" Andy said, but not forcefully this time.

"It's a gladiatorial cry," Beris explained. "It translates as — 'He's had it!'"

Balm nodded. "I suspected I was Andy's opponent. He is resisting this — how did you say it — retiarius? — with the confounded nets.

Pixie repeated Balm's earlier question.

"Where is Hari today, Andy?"

"The postman knocks at the door. Knock! Knock! The house will be surprised. Habet! Hoc habet!" He finished his glass of wine and stood up.

Pixie also stood and led Andy to the door. "Thank you, Crafer. Andy is becoming excited!"

As the door closed, Pixie held up his hand, bidding the others to listen. But no words came from the other side, and Pixie was left standing there with one hand raised and a frown on his face.

DAY 5 — ANDY UNDER THE GUN

Balm: "He's talking about her at last."

"...for three days now. No-one has asked after her either, not yet. Most of the villagers are down on the beach at Sam's store, or building Lucky his new cottage back on one of the low sheltered hollows above the beach.

I mend nets, hoping, hoping, hoping that Hari will not be found out. If Ma Miller or Thrice Ian catch her, something terrible will happen.

Yes. I realize that is true. Something awful, terrible, will be done. I know it's silly, but as I work, I pretend to be talking with Hari, looking up and nodding sometimes in case Ma or Ian or Sam should glance back from the store and catch sight of me in the spaces between the cabins.

It's all I can think of."

Beris: "There's deep stress."

Balm: "Continue. See if the lock holds."

"Then Hari appears from behind, jumps down in the sand beside me. She has been running and is very excited."

Balm: "Damn!"

"Hari! Where have you been?" I cry.

'Watching the fighters,' she says. 'Andy, the front of the helmets are pitted. Eyeslits are forming.'

'What?' I jump up, dropping the net I've been mending."

Beris: "Doctor Balm?"

Balm: "Continue, Beris! Continue! We must have this!"

"...and Hari nods. 'Come look! Soon they will be able to see.'

We run from the village, scurrying across the dunes down to the forbidden beach. This time we don't pause to look for Sam and Ian or the others. We scramble up to the stone wall and the beam, and haul on the rope.

As I climb, I already sense something is wrong. There are no sounds coming from inside the Arena. We get on to the rim of the wall and lay there panting. Below us, the gladiators are no longer fighting. They stand several meters apart, their heads lifted slightly, their smooth curving full-visored faces watching the sun.

Almost smooth faces.

Where the eyes would be, the dully gleaming metal is scoured and pitted. Hari is right. Eyeslits are forming. The fighters stand, waiting for it to happen.

I feel a thrill of terror, but of excitement too. Change has come to the beach. The stasis-lock is about to be broken, is breaking even as we watch — as soon as the eyeslits are done, as soon as the fighters can see.

'Quickly!' Hari cries. 'Let's get down there before it happens.'

Such a suggestion would normally be absurd, totally unthinkable. But now there is an urgency, a recklessness, a logic to the suggestion.

We have to go down to the fighters. If we can bear to do it, we have to touch those nascent eyes; if possible, see what the fighters will see as their world becomes sighted at last."

Pixie: "Nascent? This vocabulary..."

Balm: "Sshhh!"

"Hari pulls up on the rope and throws it down inside the wall. She lowers herself to the floor of the Arena, and I follow, hand over hand.

The perspective is altered dramatically. We are no longer in the world of the seashore. We can barely hear the waves falling or even feel the wind. Now we are in a strange world — of hot sand, a blazing blue sky, a relentless sun. Now there is only the wall, endless and enclosing, a rim to the world — and the fighters.

I am terrified but fascinated. The gladiators have never ceased fighting, swinging and lunging in their blindness. I know they haven't. Now it seems that they watch us as surely as they do the sun, considering what to do.

We can make out distinct slits now, becoming more deeply etched and perforated, making a grid really rather than a slit. Soon they will see us.

Hari and I cross the hot sand. We watch the unmoving figures, the idle swords which have never been idle; note the fierce angles of their helmets and shields, their ocrea and dull manica, their sweat-stained skirts, and we find we are no longer afraid.

We approach those still figures, powerful-looking and almost twice our height, each of us going to a different gladiator. We reach up to touch the growing eye-openings. I feel hot metal, first the smoothness, then the uneven pitting in a definite groove. I feel a tingling sensation along my arm, through my whole being.

Hari and I tear our hands away almost at the same instant, and look around us. We try to see what the figures will see when their eyes have come.

It no longer seems to be just a ring of stone. It is as if we are in the center of a colossal amphitheater with tiers of seats stretching up into the bright sky, filled with row upon row of spectators staring down at us, watching the transformation, watching to see what we will do.

Blinking, shading our eyes against the glare, we see the double image; one moment the hot empty sky above the wall, and then, almost simultaneously, the rising sea of faces waiting there.

'Who are they?' I ask Hari. My voice sounds as a harsh whisper in the silence.

Hari shakes her head.

'What do they want?' I ask.

'We will know soon, Andy.'

'What will we do?'

'We watch the eyes! We watch them forming. We wait now.' "

Balm: "Too much stress! Bring him out! We'll take him back to the nets. I'll implant a Hari cipher. We'll control it!"

Pixie: "No, Doctor Balm! Please!"

Beris: "No, Frederick! Pixie is right. This is a resolution."

Pixie: "Taking him back will only delay the process. He'll do it again. This is crucial for him. His solution."

Balm: "Listen then!"

"...to continue watching. It's almost done.
The pitting is deep..."

Pixie: "There's something more, Doctor Balm. In August. Blind gladiators are called andabates. You understand? Andy Bates! Those fighters may be Andy, gaining sight."

Balm: "Then we're coming to the end of it. He is helping us, providing his own more powerful stasis-lock. Our nets reminded him of a gladiator's nets. What did he call them? the retiarius' nets? He did the rest."

Pixie: "Or he's coming to a choice."

Balm: "We shall see, Doctor Todd. But I suggest he's doing the job for us, accelerating the process, using elements stronger than we could ever devise. The gladiators will see; you will get your Andy and Hari integrated at last — a pleasingly Jungian touch, I think. We need only take him back to the Arena in the final treatments, reinforce that part of the amended holding dream."

Beris: "What about the name Hari?"

Balm: "Doctor Todd? Anything in August or the other books?"

Pixie: "Nothing gladiatorial. Possibly it's a form of 'hara' — the Japanese for 'belly'; the center of the Self. He's read Zen texts."

Balm: "Good. Let us listen."

"...with the slits. They seem to be done. Hari and I move towards the men again. I think I can see eyes glinting through the openings, watching us now. On all sides, the tiers rise into the sky; the silent faces peer down, still waiting to see what the fighters will do, what Hari and I will do.

We stand between the fighters and are suddenly afraid — of their silence, of their lack of movement. Then the swords go up, a threatening action or a salute, with the half-hidden eyes, the faces on the tiers, all watching. Hari and I

cling to each other and shut our eyes. We accept. We trust.

The blows never come. When we open our eyes again, the fighters, the tiers, the Arena, are gone. There is only the quiet windswept beach, the waves falling, the hot sun, the dunes leading back into the desert.

Hari and I do not speak. We do not need to speak. We go back to the nets; we go back to the mending.

DAY 15 — FAREWELL TO NEFAU

While Crafer loaded the luggage and equipment into the car, Pixie entertained Frederick Balm and Beris Abana in the main dining room. It was a special occasion. Michael and Ramone were there for a time before going off to do their rounds, and Andy had been given pride of place at the head of the table, where he still sat quietly finishing his lunch. He did not speak often, just a few encouraging words now and then, but over the past week his eyeline had stabilized. He made eye-contact much more frequently, and he seemed to be listening more attentively as well. As Frederick Balm had remarked several times during the meal, it was an auspicious beginning.

"When we come back next month, Andy, we will have many things to talk about, do you think?"

"Yes," Andy said, and looked directly at Doctor Balm.

"Good man. I'm very pleased. Now Doctor Abana and I must be going. We must make our flight. So, it's goodbye."

"Goodbye," Andy said.

They got up, all but Andy. Frederick Balm and Beris shook Andy's hand and headed for the front hall. As Pixie went to close the door, he stopped and looked in at the young man.

"Andy?"

The young man looked up. "Yes?"

"I'm very pleased too," Pixie said. "You have done very well." And as he closed the door, he remembered to lean in close and listen.

Frederick Balm and Beris watched him from the front door. They saw him smile.

"Anything, Doctor Pixie Todd?" Balm asked.

"Not a thing, Doctor Frederick Balm. Not a thing," Pixie said, and all the way to the car he prayed that Beris would understand what his smile meant.

With thanks to Kohan Ikin



old noon's tale

cherry wilder

The two children, Valdin and Thanar, lived in their father's villa, which stood alone between the sea and the salt-marsh. More than a year had passed since their mother died in the Air Race. They had outgrown their red mourning cloaks and they could look at the sky again. Only a few grey birds wheeled over the blue-green spaces of the marsh. Down the cliff path their boat was always waiting; they filled their lives with sailing.

Thanar was shy and fierce, like a wild creature, but Valdin felt himself growing more cold. He reached out his cold hands to comfort his sister when she woke, screaming a bird cry, in the light of the sun.

"Get dressed. We'll go down to the boat!"

And they would be far down the narrow bay before the Great Sun turned the sea to gold.

The old steward Goll believed the world was coming to an end. The winds had taken Highness Jebbal; fire-metal magic was abroad; devils had flown from the sky. Now the shrieks and the uneasy silences of these two neglected children seemed like a rent in the fabric of clan life. Why, the children of the bush-weavers who lived on the islands in the marsh were better cared for than these two. He tackled their father.

"Highness, they run wild. They set too much store by that boat..."

"It is a comfort to them," said Faldo Galtroy. "They have called their boat *Zon-Dul*, the Sea Sunner"

Goll could only smile and shake his head.

"A proud name for a fisher boat!"

The common sunners were small lizard-like creatures that ran about on the rocks but the sea sunner was of a different species. The huge sea beasts were no more than a dream to the children. Once or twice when they sailed out of the bay and along the coastline they saw vast spouting that could have been a sunner or a toben, a great fish.

Faldo, who was an eccentric grandee, kept no vassals and few house-servants. He came and went in all weathers over the road to Galvan, the Salthaven, busy with his schemes for improving the salt yield. He tried to interest the children in his latest invention, a small machine called a land-glider. He perched on a wooden frame, took hold of the grips and let the wooden runners carry him down the slippery, salty surface of the road. At the first hillock he put down his long legs, ran and pushed a few steps, then at the top of the rise he

was off again, gliding over the land. Valdin and Thanar pretended to be bored with this contraption; they cared only for their boat.

In winter when they could not sail Valdin sulked and Thanar was noisy and willful. One day Goll lost his temper.

"School!" he shouted, "that's where you'll land. No more so-called tutors...you drove the last one demented."

"It was a bad sailor," said Valdin coolly. "We will not go to school." What school is there for us?"

"You know very well what school," said Goll, "and a hard school it is, full of rods and prods and singing the skeins aloud. The Galtroy Clan School in your Great-Aunts's town house."

"We will not go!" said Thanar.

"Then behave yourself. Even your poor highness father has had enough of your moods. He will summon a great Galtroy flying machine to take you away!"

Then Thanar's pretty face grew pale and Valdin drew his cloak around him. Goll was immediately sorry for what he had said. The poor sprigs had had enough of flying machines to last them a lifetime. Their mother's glider had come twisting down like an autumn leaf; he had heard it all from eye-witnesses, from Highness Jebbal's escort. All the children had now was Faldo, working off his own grief, and each other and the blue boat in the cove, their Sea Sunner.

"Go along to your bead game," he said. "Perhaps you can sail tomorrow. Spring is coming."

But as spring came the notion of school came closer however much they tried to push it away. They were expert sailors, they hid from Faldo and the servants in the echoing, salty caves of the long bay. Faldo came down to the beach alone with his land-glider and practised speed-runs on the sand with a little sail perched behind him. The machine dragged him in a rock pool and the children sailed out of hiding and came to land.

"I think I'm getting the hang of it," he said, dripping.

"Oh Father!" said Thanar.

Her exasperation made them all laugh. Faldo sat down in the sunlight and made the formal gesture 'Please join me'. He was thin, muscular for a Moruian and with a heavy reddish tan like a farmer or a weaver. He screwed up his large eyes against the light and said at last:

"It will have to be the school, I think."

The children did not move or speak, the Valdin said:

"Is the Galtroy school the only one?"

Faldo blinked an affirmative. "I don't know why this should be," he remarked. "Clan Galtroy was never much for scholars. But the school for clan children, the good old Skein Circle, is at Old Leeth's sky-house in the capital."

"How long?" asked Thanar.

"A year, two years..."

She stole a glance at the boat drawn up behind them on the sands.

"There *is* our grandmother," said Valdin carefully. "I mean...we are of two clans."

"I have sent a skein to your Luntroy grandmother," said Faldo, "and I expect she may come."

"How?" Thanar's voice was a whisper.

"Old Noon does not fly a personal machine any more," he said, not looking at the children or the sky.

He got up and collected his land-glider and carried it up the path to the cliff-top without looking back.

"Perhaps Old Noon will save us," said Valdin.

"We must run away!" said Thanar in a shrill childish voice. "We must sail where they will never find us."

"We can't."

"It will be *two years!* The boat will rot, its ropes will fall apart. It will forget us!"

Valdin bent down and chipped with his shell knife at a small sea creature that had fastened on their boat's hull. They hauled the boat into its pen and did not sail again that day. Next morning they came down early and sailed a slow round, east to west, through the caves and across the mouth of the bay. They were tacking back to the shore when Thanar gave a strange whimpering cry. Valdin looked up as the boat grated in the shallows. The balloon was a long way off but closing fast in a stiff current of air; it was near enough for them to pick out the striped blue and white. Luntroy colors. The colors acted like camouflage; the balloon seemed to hide between sky and cloud, then come out again. They saw it fly to the landing field before the villa, the field that might never have been used again. There was a good deal of coming and going on the ground as the balloon was made fast and they watched a small figure detach itself briskly from the crowd. Still the children watched and the figure came up, lightly down the cliff path.

The children began to run, then stopped, trembling, for there was an awful moment of likeness. This was a flyer, thin and straight and jaunty, in a flying suit of purplish blue hardcloth; a white helm dangled from one long hand. But Old Noon came on, strutting down the beach, and the moment passed: there was a stiffness

in her joints, her hair was white under the strip of dark cloth. Thanar launched herself across the sand and gripped her fiercely about the middle, nuzzling pouch-high like a child six years shown.

"Grandmother!"

Valdin came and added himself to the heap and they all embraced.

When they drew back at last the children saw and were able to bear a very real likeness. Noon was her child Jebbal grown old? her face was handsome, fine dark. She was brisk as Jebbal too and her voice was the same. they walked about in the cove and examined the boat.

"Will you come sailing?" asked Valdin.

"Great Wind, no!" said Old Noon. "I am not one for boats. I cannot swim to save my life. Or perhaps, for that only."

"You have come to send us to the Galtroy Skein Circle," declared Thanar.

"I see your boat is called the Sea Sunner..."

"Grandmother, we will die in that school. Our boat will die if it is left alone for two years."

"I have come to lead you back to civilization," said Noon. "Rintoul is a great city... the golden net of the world. Torin is full of excitement."

"We have seen Rintoul," said Thanar.

"The new age begins. Four strangers are upon Torin. They come from the void," said Noon.

"We have seen one of these Man-Humans," said Valdin, "last spring... at the Air Race."

"Do you know they have a silver ship the size of half your villa?"

"Have you seen it?" asked Thanar.

"Not yet, though it is set down on the west coast for all to see, but I have seen something else. The great ship had a pouch child, a small silver thing. It is hidden at the Eastern Retreat."

"What? Has Nantgeeb... has the Great Diviner got it then?" asked Valdin, interested in spite of himself.

"Oh Grandmother," said Thanar, "let us go there if we must. Let us study with your friend the Magician."

"You have no special powers," said Noon, "and besides that my friend is an outlaw."

"Perhaps we are outlaws too," said Valdin.

Old Noon sighed as she looked into his set face.

"Sit down," she said. "No — on the dry rock, Thanar. Give me some room. I am reminded of one of my best tales. I have never told it to you."

"Is it true?" asked Valdin.

"Every word, as near as I can remember."

Old Noon cast a glance over the still blue water of the bay to the narrow mouth of the inlet; she began to speak in her story-telling voice.

It was the year that I might have won the Bird Clan Air Race. I won't say how long ago. I was a favorite, I knew that and I practiced with two machines, one old, one new. It was long before the time of the new designs but I have a step wing glider and primitive pedal fan. I might have trained near Rintoul or even here on the salt marsh, but I was proud and secretive. I made myself a training camp in the west, up the Datse river. I have a tower built there for take-offs and a set of blocks and the wind knows what refinements. I spent a great deal too many credits. One morning, in early spring, just before the race was to be flown, I went off on a simple round and never returned.

I flew west, as part of a great circle that would take me over the suburbs of Tsagul, the fire town, then back to my camp. I was caught in a wild current of air and carried into the heart of a storm. I fought with the poor pedal fan and we were whirled around in a sea of dark mist and hail and icy rain. Then, when I was at the end of my strength, I glided down out of the cloud and found I was over the ocean. I had been carried far, far to the west. The pedal fan was literally falling apart around me; I went down and ditched in the sea and thought my soul-bird was loosened from my body. The wonder is that I did not drown. I seized a portion of the wing and kicked as hard as I could. I pushed this piece of wreckage through the water until the light began to fail and in the short spring darkness I grounded on some sort of island.

Well, I lay there on the sand and vomited sea water and then I slept. When I woke in the light of Esfer I saw that I was in a marvellous queer place; it seemed to be little more than one huge rock worn into holes rather like the caves you have over yonder. There was a strip of sand where I lay and a scurf of grass on the landward side. There were one or two strange humps of stone around the main outcrop. I crawled up to one and found that it was the stone marking a grave; there were old offerings nearby in flax wrapping. I had come so far to the west that this was a burial ground of the flax people.

So I lay down in the shadow of the tall rock and slept again until the cries of sea-birds woke me. Then I examined the island again more closely. It have been chosen as a burial place because it had food and water — the flax people believe in setting provisions out for the dead. The graves were oddly-shaped as if those within

slept curled up, like a child in the pouch, and the stones were all very old. No-one had been buried on the island for a long time. There was a small, brackish spring of water in the lee of the rock and on either side of the spring grew two flax bushes. I took this for a good omen... our own crest is two flax flowers and Clan Luntroy has ever claimed a sort of ancient kinship with the Lanoia, the flax people. A few bushes grew by the spring with edible berries just ripening and the whole outer surface of the rock was alive with sea-birds, their nests and their eggs and their young. They had no fear of me, poor creatures, and I could have taken them all by hand. Inside the rock I found a roomy cavern with a pool where the sea came in. There were high rock ledges covered with clay pots and dead flax flowers — offerings to the spirits in that place.

I was mad with impatience at first. I looked to the sky and the sea, I looked to the distant line of the shore. I shouted and called, I sent out thought messages, I tried to light a fire. I stole birds' eggs, rapped shellfish open and drank from the spring. I believed that rescue would come soon. But the days came and went and I saw no sail on the sea, no machine in the sky. I fell into a stupor of loneliness; I slept for half the day and sat about for the other half.

One morning I saw the birds shrieking and crowding around some large object at the sea's edge. I ran and beat them off, expecting a large fish or a bunch of the green weed that makes good eating. Instead it was an egg, an unbroken egg larger than my head and of a cool, pearly luster. The colors of the sea and sky reflected in the shell and deep within there seemed to be a little glow of light.

I picked it up in arms and carried it to the cave. I settled it into a warm rock pool, safe from the running sea as it washed in. I lay and watched my egg; it seemed to give off a faint light of its own. As the days went by I fancied there were shadows visible as the creature grew larger. I had become more active. I took leaves from the flax plants, beat them with a stone and scraped them with shells until only the white fibre remained. I made fishing lines and I made several long skeins on which I recorded the days as they went by and my like on the island. When a spring storm came I lay awake in case the waves became too high and threatened the sunner's egg.

On a warm day, as spring wore into summer, I came back from climbing on the rock among the bird families. I heard a sound in the cave, a kind of scratching or creaking. There was a rent in the egg. Slowly, slowly the shell was torn and broken from within by one small, silver claw. When the time was right I reached into the pool and helped a little. The sunner hatched out and lay in the pool like a large, naked ugly bird. Its head was enormous compared with the rest of its body. It stirred very feebly and opened one eyelid, then a second eyelid on its right eye. We looked at each other; the sunner uttered a faint whistling sound and tried to move its limbs in the warm pool.

I fetched green weed that I kept fresh in another part of the cave and I fetched birds' eggs, mixed up in a votive pot. I was the mothering nurse of a voracious, ungainly child. Day and night I shoved food into the gaping silvery snout. I longed for a silk-beam apparatus or even a pen and paper to make a likeness of the sunner as it grew. For it grew before my eyes. The ridges of the brow become hard and green, the muscles of those jaws became faintly pink and bulged beneath the skin; the nostrils flared and spouted water. The sunner's body uncoiled and its belly grew fat. Its four sturdy legs gripped the walls of the pool. Beautiful fins, opalescent and tipped with sharp spines, opened up on its back and flanks. It was the very model of a sea sunner, covered from end to end with silver scales and with a long, snaking tail that reached right around the large pool in the cave.

Most marvellous of all was the way it grew in understanding; it was a most intelligent beast. I talked to it like a mother to its child and it answered me in whistles and grunts and whuffling noises. I looked into its eyes, green as the sea; we loved each other; it nuzzled my hand. It was playful too and could catch a stone or try to hide from me. It was already too big to hide.

I would cry "Zon-Dul! Zon-Dul!" from the cave's mouth and when I came inside it would be hiding its head, thinking it could not be seen, because it could not see me. In forty days, as the summer wore on, it was coming to the very edge of the cave where the sea washed in and looking out over the waves. I deepened the shallow wash that led to the ocean so that there was a channel and the sunner swam out. It rode

free upon the waves, rippling its silver coils. This was one of the proudest moments of my life. Others might win the Air Race but I, Noon Luntroy, had raised a sea sunner, the wonder of the Great Ocean Sea.

The sunner foraged for itself now but it did not want to leave the island. Now it brought me heaps of green weed. It would struggle back up the channel and thrust its huge head into the cavern and hoot its version of my name: "Uh-Noo-oo". The weather was clear and hot; I would stand on the beach and raise my arms like one summoning the winds and cry out "Zon-Dul! Zon-Dul!" There would be a disturbance of the sea some way from the shore, a turbulence that grew and grew until the sunner reared up with a mighty shout. Then it would churn along towards the beach in the way that sunners are pictured on old tapestries, the loops of its body visible above the surface of the sea. It would rear up again on the beach, high above my head, tall as a tree, and turn the light of its green eyes upon me. The bond between us was a family bond; it was my true sib. And the bond was tied forever — I knew that if I met that sunner, full grown as it must be by now and larger than the largest ship, I could cry out its name and it would know me. But that I can do only in dreams. We were of different elements; I knew and perhaps the sunner knew that we must part.

The summer days drew out. I was a different person from the ambitious young flyer who had come to that place. I had laid aside my clothes out of the way of the salt and the spray and I went about pouch naked except for my flying visor to shield my eyes. I was brown as a bush-weaver and hardy as the flax plants. I still paid some heed to being rescued but in all the time I was on the island I was never able to light a fire. I had no burning glass or flint and all my efforts with driftwood and rubbing sticks produced no result. I left a pile of dry brush on top of the rock in the hope of a lightning bolt but the fire spirits did not oblige me. I thought I saw boats of the flax people near the distant shore but if this was so they gave the island a wide berth.

When all my skeins were knotted to the very end the winds already had a hint of ice in their breath. One day I saw... we both saw... a pair of sunners about to pass out to sea, heading southeast to the warmer water around the fire islands. I knew it would not be long now; the sea was growing cold. There was a fierce autumn

storm and I thought the sunner might have been carried away but it came again. By this time we had seen lumps of blue ice floating by. At last we saw a company of sunners spouting and churning up the sea as they made their migration. My own sunner whimpered and called and came to the beach and plunged into the sea again. Its instinct told it to follow these creatures but it was unwilling to leave me.

I picked up a stone and hurled it into the sea. "Go on, Zon-Dul," I shouted, "Follow them! Go on!" So the sunner reared up once more with a mournful cry, echoing my own sadness, and swam away. "Go well, Zon-Dul!" I cried after it. I watched it out of sight until I could not tell its flashing coils from the silver of the waves. I never saw it again.

I tried not to pine for my lost companion; my own situation was perilous. The winds blew hard and cold, the sea-birds flew away in their hundreds, food was scarce. I decided I would make the best raft I could from the driftwood scraps and the fragment of wind that had carried me to the island. Then, in a lull between the storms, I would try for the shore. But before I came to this pass I was rescued and this is a part of the tale every bit as strange and wonderful as my adventure with the sea sunner.

One night as I lay between sleeping and waking on my shelf in the cavern I found myself called, as if by a Witness. It is an extraordinary sensation. A voice spoke inside my head.

"Who are you?"

The voice persisted and when I was sure it was not the voice of my own thoughts I answered.

"I am Noon Dallroyan Luntroy, a flyer cast away on this island."

"It is an An-Gver, the Isle of Bones."

"You must be a Witness. Tell your people I am here, I pray."

"Are you a spirit?"

"No! I am flesh and blood. Help me. I am of Clan Luntroy... you will be rewarded — I swear it. I will freeze to death or starve if I winter in this place."

"I am forbidden to speak..." said the voice.

"What are you? What is your name?" I asked.

There was a silence, then the voice came again, shrill and proud.

"I am Enan-Gbir!"

Suddenly a light filled the cave; the votive

pots rattled on the rocky shelves and some crashed to the ground. I was astonished and afraid. This was some tribal Diviner, a person of great mind-power.

"I believe you," said the voice.

"Enan-Gbir, you have great powers. Surely your people will obey you."

"No one knows how much power I have."

"Enan-Gbir," I said? "please help me!"

There was a silence so long that I thought I had been abandoned, then the voice came again.

"I will break the silence. They will come for you."

Then the link was broken; I was alone in the darkness. I managed to sleep a little but rose up in the light of the far sun, collected my record skeins and went on to the beach. I sat looking towards the shore. The sea was low and grey; my island was shrouded in mist long after the Great Sun rose. I sat and waited for nearly the whole of the day. Then as the curtains of mist drew back I saw a boat quite close, coming directly to the island. It was a long-boat of the flax people, rowed by two sturdy males. They ran the craft up on to the beach and I hurried towards them with thanks and greetings. They were fierce-looking creatures — skin-sewn on the forehead but perfectly polite; they indicated that they could not speak to me. They bowed and gave me pots of food to arrange on the old graves. Then I was allowed to step into the long-boat and they rowed away swiftly without uttering a word. We towed on in silence long after the sun had set and came to the mouth of a small river and a jetty on the eastern bank.

The village was very strange. The Lanoia, the flax people, live in round houses made of dried flax stems lashed into bundles; they burn black-turf from the swamps and there is a reek of its smoke throughout their houses. I was prepared to speak at once to the leaders, whoever they might be, and I had no difficulty in spotting them. All the people of the village, a good hundred of them, were drawn up at the landing stage with blazing torches and the five village elders, all very old, awaited my coming on a ceremonial platform.

I had thought that I might cut a poor figure in my flying suit, though it was not much worn, but I need not have worried. There was not one person wearing better cloth. Even the elders dressed in the kilts of teased and plaited flax; by

comparison our bush-weavers look like city-folk. I looked and felt almost uncomfortably civilized among these turf-cutters and flax-farmers.

Their speech was heavily accented and full of words I did not understand but we could communicate. They were especially skilled in the language of signs and gestures, which must be the oldest and most wide-spread language on Torin. I stood before the elders and greeted them formally; I learned their names and told my story. They sat me down to a banquet of hot food... a kind of scrub deer roasted on hot stones... and I had never tasted anything so delicious. But all the names I had heard were strange to me.

"Have you a Diviner in the village?" I asked.

One of the elders replied:

"Our Diviner has lately died. We are expecting a replacement from our sister village up stream."

"Then I asked:

"Is there one among you called Enan-Gbir?"

Then they nodded to each other, these old creatures, as if they had been expecting the question. They bade me follow and by the light of Esder, newly risen, they led me to a hut by itself away from the village round. There were green branches and still more of those clay pots outside, signs of mourning, and as we approached the flax curtain at the door of the hut was drawn aside. A child came out, a female about ten years shown, with ugly welts skin-sewn on its high forehead. I looked into this child's burning dark eyes and I knew that this was Enan-Gbir. This was the Diviner's child mourning its dead father and therefore bound to silence for many days. She had broken the silence in order to tell that there was a castaway on the Isle of Bones.

This was nearly the end of my story. The flax people had no way of conveying me back to civilization, the winter was coming on and though they were a kind folk they would be burdened with another mouth to feed. I had only one thing of value about me and it was a Luntroy jewel, the two flax flowers on a silver plaque with blue stones. I gave this to the Chief Elder.

"Give me provisions for a journey," I said, "and by Clan Luntroy, which has ever had a bond with the flax people, I will repay you. Let me take a servant to help me on my way."

They agreed eagerly and of course the servant I took was that same child, Enan-Gbir. How

did I return to the world? I walked, we walked together, every step of the way, the child and I. I think the elders were glad to have her gone; they guessed at her marvellous powers but were afraid of them in one so young. I lost a jewel and so did they. And as we walked, through wind and weather, I told Enan-Gbir the tale of the sea sunner I had raised on the Isle of Bones.

Then in our dismal camps she could lay her hand in mine and work her magic so the whole scene rose up before us. We saw together how the sunner grew and rode upon the waves. We made a fair journey of it with her powers and the power of our friendship to help us. Eventually we dragged ourselves in to villa of my Dohstroy kin on the outskirts of Tsagul and it was known that Noon Luntroy had returned from the dead. It cleared up some ugly rumors I can tell you, because some had said that I had been made away with. After all I had been a favorite for the Air Race the previous spring. But here I was, safe and sound.

No one paid much attention to my young servant. I tried to give her a little education. Enan-Gbir was still in my household when I stood forth and founded a family. She left my service in time but has remained my friend ever since. And that is all my tale.

Valdin and Thanar sat silent regarding their grandmother with wide eyes.

"We are supposed to learn from it," said Valdin. "What are you saying, Grandmother? That we should have patience? That two years of our lives is nothing?"

"I am saying that we never know what the winds have in store for us. That desert island yielded treasures that are with me to this hour."

Thanar reached for a handful of sand which ran glittering between her fingers. "Let us read the sands for a new venture."

"For our time at the Galtroy school," said Valdin, spelling our for his grandmother.

Old Noon sighed with relief.

"Do children still read the sands?" she asked.

"Sailors do it too!" said Thanar.

"Come under the cliff then. It would be better with four persons."

"You can cast a double handful of sand," said Valdin, "and we will each have a wind. I will be east and Thanar the west."

"I am honored to be both north and south," said Old Noon.

They sat under the curve of the tall cliff and took up their handfuls of sand.

"Now we must look carefully about," said Valdin, "then we shut our eyes and call upon the winds and cast the sands. Then we look for a sign."

"A sign in the sea is a good sign," said Thanar.

"I still search for good signs in the sky," said Old Noon. "I wish you had not turned against the sky."

"Look about!" said Valdin sternly.

They glanced at the quiet bay, the boat drawn up on the sands, the light glancing upon the waves, the cloudless sky overhead. As they turned back from their observations Noon suddenly stiffened and sat upright. Something had been added to the scene; a thread of sound, a vibration.

"Children," said Old Noon, "sit still and do not be afraid..."

A beam of sunlight had caught the metal clasp of her flying helmet as it lay between them on a rock. Now the light grew and dazzled and beyond the light in the shadow of the cliff the children saw a dark figure. They made out the black robe, edged with green, the fall of dark brown hair, held across the high forehead with a band of green brilliants.

"Are you here, then?" asked Old Noon, without turning her head.

"You need a fourth person," said Nantgeeb. "You are reading the sands."

The voice was strong but Valdin could not tell if it was in or out of his head.

"You know who this is," said Old Noon to the children.

Thanar looked up, clutching her handful of sand.

"It is your friend!" she burst out. "And now I understand all the tale."

"What do you know, Thanar?" asked the Diviner in that strange inward voice which they could all hear.

"You were that child," said Thanar softly, "you were Enan-Gbir..."

"Hush..." said Old Noon. "These secrets belong to others."

"I was that child," said Nantgeeb. It seemed to the children, watching, that the Diviner raised one hand to touch the jeweled band that was bound across her forehead. "Why, Noon, for one season... do you remember... I went to the Galtroy Skein Circle as escort for your good sib, Marl Udorn, Blind Marl."

"The pair of you sang the skeins like two birds!" said Old Noon, smiling.

"You went to the Skein Circle?" said Valdin, deeply impressed.

"Let us cast the sands for your new venture," said Nantgeeb. "Shut your eyes, children. I shall be north wind."

So they bent their heads, concentrating, and presently Thanar threw out her sands, crying to the west wind, then Old Noon threw for the south and Valdin for the east. At the last the shadowy figure of the Diviner stretched out a hand crying for the north wind and far down the beach the sand flew up in a glittering cloud. The children peered through their long lashes until the sands had settled then looked about eagerly, scanning earth and sea and sky.

"Grandmother!" cried Valdin, "look there!"

Old Noon stared where they pointed; beyond the mouth of the bay there arose a tall three-plumed cloud of spray. The waters were shaken and the spout arose again and no one who saw it doubted that a sea sunner was passing.

"Is this your doing?" asked Old Noon.

"No, I swear it," said Nantgeeb. "I do not command sea sunners."

"Oh could it be..." said Thanar, "could it be *your* sunner, Grandmother?"

"Come out in the boat" said Valdin. "Grandmother, you could call to it, cry out 'Zon-Dul!' as you did before!"

The spout arose again and Noon had taken a few steps down the beach. Now she drew back again.

"No," she said, "I cannot do it. I doubt very much if it is my sunner and besides that time on the island long ago serves me better as a memory."

"Some have the power to weave tales," said Nantgeeb, "and some the power to pluck from memory a few scenes and pictures. But we cannot bring back the past or those we loved. We can only remember."

The children gave no sign that they had understood her words. They ran off to their boat, as if to point out its namesake, the sea sunner, which spouted again before it swam away.

"Thank you for coming here today," said Old Noon.

"I was testing a new telescope," said Nantgeeb, "and saw the Luntroy balloon heading out into the marsh. So I cast about in my mind and heard you telling our story."

"I cannot heal those two with all my tales," said Old Noon.

"They will be healed," said Nantgeeb. "They are brave as Jebbal and clever as Faldo."

"Do you know," said Old Noon, "I had never thought of Faldo Galtroy as clever..."

"Believe me," said Nantgeeb, "the face of Torin will soon be covered with land-gliders."

And with this scrap of prophesy she was gone. Her image was withdrawn and the light dazzling from Noon's helmet clasp faded. The children, racing back up the beach, found their grandmother standing alone and laughing to herself.



the sins of the fathers

christopher evans

Mina Reynolds sat with her husband Norman in their compartment, watching a 3Ved version of the original *Gone with the Wind*. The movie had just reached Norman's favorite part – where Rhett carries a struggling Scarlett up the big stairway to the bedroom – when the picture in the cube froze.

"What now?" Norman said wearily. "Not another vote."

It was rather tiresome, Mina agreed. Since the advent of the electronic democracy, citizens were constantly being interrupted to give their verdicts on every issue under the sun.

"Not this time," said the urbane voice of Housecomp from the cube. "I think you'd better see this."

The picture vanished and was replaced by Channel 21's Newsflash logo. This dissolved into the scene of a reporter standing outside a shopping mall.

"A security guard was shot dead this morning," he announced, "when a lone intruder robbed the Foodfast Multimart in London's Knightsbridge. Two packing androids were also damaged as the criminal made his escape down the Brompton Road. Police apprehended him shortly afterwards, and he was taken to Knightsbridge Police Station for questioning. There he confessed to his crime and received a provisional sentence of personality reconstruction, subject to ratification by the Psychological Rehabilitation Board. Police have issued a hologram identifying the murderer as fifteen year-old Kevin Reynolds."

A picture of a blonde teenager filled the holocube. The reporter continued talking, but Mina wasn't listening.

"Switch off," she told Housecomp.

"That's our son, Norman said.

"Pack a bag," Mina told him.

"Where are we going?"

"Luna City. Mars. Anywhere. Just get moving."

"I'm afraid you're too late," Housecomp announced.

"The police are at the door."

The cell in Notting Hill Police Station was spartan but clean. Because their credit-rating and socioeconomic status were low, Mina and Norman weren't able to afford their own lawyer, so the police had sent for a public defender. He was in his mid-thirties, with bushy dark hair and bulbous eyes. He wore a rather threadbare black seersucker suit.

"My name is Mr. Willoughby," he announced, and then he bared his teeth at them.

"You're an android," Norman said immediately. "A Raleigh-Sakamoto Series Two, Model Four."

"I am indeed," Mr. Willoughby replied, giving a short nod which betrayed the oriental influences in his design.

"This particular model was in production during the years 2031 to 2042," Norman told Mina. "The andro-engineers had persistent problems with facial expressions and other minor malfunctions. The line originated as a –"

"All right, Norman," Mina said firmly.

Her husband had that hazy-eyed look which always told her he was quoting from a hypno-tape. He worked as a servo-organism in a lawnmower assembly plant, and for the past twenty years had spent fifty hours a week with his brain plugged into educational tapes on a vast range of subjects while his body worked on the production line. He was fluent in forty-eight languages and could give you a three-hour lecture on medieval Korean art at the drop of a hat. Mina had sat through it once, just to watch his face. There had been no trace of expression whatsoever.

Mina thought that Mr. Willoughby looked a little callow and diffident.

"How many cases have you conducted?" she asked him.

"Three," he told her with the endearing frankness that was found only in automatons.

"Murder cases?"

Mr. Willoughby shook his head. "Two thefts and one kidnapping. But have no fear – I've been fully programmed and you can count on me working devotedly for your acquittal."

Again he favored her with one of his bizarre smiles. "Do you understand why you've been arrested?"

Norman said instantly: "Under the provisions of the Parental Culpability Act of 2052. This was introduced by an Act of Referendum as a consequence of developments in psychochemical therapy which –"

"Yes, Yes, Norman," Mina said hastily, knowing they were in danger of another factual fugue. Norman was a walking encyclopedia, but he had no sense of proportion. In truth – she had to admit it – he was highly educated but stupid. She herself had only minimal schooling, but she knew about the Act, having voted against it.

"We understand," she told Mr. Willoughby. "We're facing a murder charge."

"The precise charge is murder in the first genealogical degree. I understand that both your own parents are officially dead."

"Yes."

"That makes matters simpler, at least. They would have been on trial, too, as accessories."

Norman's parents had been killed in a volcanic eruption while holidaying on Io. Her own father had died of a heart attack in a Venusian massage parlor under murky circumstances, while her mother had had herself put on ice in her fiftieth year to await the mass availability of rejuvenation therapy: she had always been rather vain. Kevin was only five at the time, a cheeky, fresh-faced boy with blue eyes and golden hair.

A tear came to her eye. Kevin had run away from home two years before, and she had spent many sleepless nights wondering what had happened to him.

Mr. Willoughby suddenly started winking at her with both eyes. It took Mina a moment to realize that he was receiving a message from one of the information networks.

"Bad news, I'm afraid," he said. "The Crown Prosecutor for the case has just been appointed. It's Sir Jasper Percival, DC."

Mina was pleased to see that Norman looked blank at this.

"Why is that bad?" she asked tentatively.

"He's the most famous prosecuting council in British legal history. He specializes in homicide, and since his death he hasn't lost a case. Good programming, you see. His construct's been crammed with every legal precedent in the memory-banks, and he knows all the tricks. I'm afraid we're going to be up against it."

Mina's spirits sank. "What's the worst that can happen if we're found guilty?"

"Well, as you know, the penalties are constantly changing. The citizenry take great interest in legal matters."

This was true. Only yesterday she had had to work hard to persuade Norman against voting for a bill which would have made spitting and nose-picking criminal offenses.

"The present sentence is ten years as an Object in a Public Vilification Center," Norman announced. "We would help people vent unhealthy emotions and so perform a useful service. Complete medical coverage is guaranteed in the case of physical abuse."

"Thank you, Norman."

At this point, Mr. Willoughby literally brightened, his nose and cheeks turning a cheery red.

"Good news," he said. "Channel 7 have offered us a major sponsorship deal."

Even Mina knew that Channel 7 was the biggest network in the British Advocacy. It was owned by Maximilian Maximilian, who was in turn the publisher of *Fax Digest*, the country's best-selling newspaper.

"I'm not sure I want to be sponsored by them," she said.

"Why not?" said Norman. "They're big. And they're partly British- owned, which is more than you can say for most of the networks."

Norman was something of a patriot, but Mina wasn't convinced. "Maximilian Maximilian isn't British. Hasn't he got Yugoslavian ancestry or something?"

"Yugoslavia no longer exists," Mr. Willoughby said. "Maximilian has been living in this country for over fifty years. He's as British as you or I."

"Androids can't claim nationality," Norman informed him.

"Just a manner of speaking," Mr. Willoughby said, sounding a little hurt.

"What are our chances without his backing?" Mina asked him.

"Slim," he said candidly.

Within the hour, Mina and Norman were moved from the police station to the maximum-luxury prison in Pall Mall. Their new cell had contour armchairs and a coffee table which dispensed a variety of non-alcoholic drinks. There was even a 3V cube, though Mina quickly discovered it would not broadcast any news items about the impending trial: a censor rerouter immediately switched channels.

A sullen guard brought them cucumber sandwiches and cream cakes with strawberry jam. Soon afterwards no less a person than Maximilian Maximilian himself called up on the cube.

He was a tall, large-boned man, his black hair slicked back from a prominent widow's peak. Rumor had it that he was at least one hundred and twenty years old, having benefited from secret rejuvenation therapy, which was available only to the very rich.

"I'm so pleased you're allowing us to help you," he said in a whispery voice. His smile was no better than Mr. Willoughby's.

The cell door opened, and in walked a stunning platinum blonde android of the most sensuous and advanced design. In fact, Mina wouldn't have known she was an android at all had it not been for the red warning signs on her midriff and back which informed the unwary that she was equipped with a variety of anti-personnel devices.

"This is one of my assistants, Miss Winter," Maximilian announced from the cube.

"Pleased to meet you," Miss Winter said in a bright but indifferent voice.

"It's a nice cell," Norman said.

"I'm pleased you like it," Maximilian replied. "The network will, of course, do everything it can to make your conditions as comfortable as possible during the trial."

"Mr. Maximilian —" Mina began.

"Please call me Max. After all, we're partners in crime now, so to speak, aren't we?"

He smiled. Norman gave a hearty laugh. Miss Winter did nothing except look utterly gorgeous.

"I contacted you personally," Maximilian went on, "to let you know that the network is right behind you, supportwise, and we'll do all we can to help — within the strict limitations of the law, of course. I'll be taking a personal interest in your case, and you can count on my undivided assistance if you need it. Miss Winter will liaise with me."

With his holovid and publishing interests, Maximilian was a powerful molder of public opinion; in addition, he was reputed to be a close confidant of the royal family, in particular the old King. Mina found it hard to believe that he cared a jot for her and Norman.

"What's happening to Kevin?" she asked.

"Your son is fine, I assure you. The Board has confirmed his sentence, and he has already gone to the clinic to begin his course of treatment. It will be several days before he's fully decriminalized."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. It's quite painless, and he'll be well looked after, comfortwise. We'll see to that."

"Can we see him?"

"I'm afraid not. That will have to wait until he's rehabilitated. But the network will make sure he gets the best treatment, I promise you."

"That's very reassuring," Norman said. "We appreciate it."

"Is there anything else you wish to ask me?"

"I was wondering," Mina said. "about Mr. Willoughby."

Their lawyer was not present at the meeting. A defective transmission in his kneecap had caused one leg to lock in a right-angled bend, and he had had to hop off earlier for urgent repairs.

"Yes?" said Maximilian.

"Well," said Mina, feeling disloyal, "I don't want to seem unkind, but I haven't got much confidence in him. Would it be possible for us to have another defense lawyer appointed?"

"Not advisable. Not advisable at all, imagewise. The audience will have considerable sympathy with the fact that you've had to have a public defender, and to fire

him now would risk losing their goodwill."

"His facial expressions are rather offputting. And he hasn't got any experience of this sort of trial."

Maximilian shook his head soothingly. "Have no fear. I will personally see to it that he receives the fullest possible briefing. The important thing is to get the public on your side — after all, they're the ones who matter, aren't they, verdictwise? We must cultivate their good graces."

"The personnel designers have arrived," Miss Winter announced.

"Ah, good," said Maximilian. "Well, I must leave you to their tender mercies. Try not to worry — the network is behind you all the way. Let the guard know what you want for dinner. Everything's on offer, but I'd advise you to avoid ostentatious foods such as caviar and meat. By the way, the trial starts at one o'clock tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" said an incredulous Mina.

Maximilian nodded. "We'll be doing hour-long session broadcast live to the entire nation. That's what everyone wanted. We have to strike while the iron's hot, public-interestwise."

She and Norman had soya rissoles in peanut butter sauce for dinner. The guard obviously resented their newly privileged status, and the food was lukewarm. He showed Mina the latest edition of the *Fax Digest*.

The editorial in the paper used quotes from fellow residents in their compartment block to present a very positive picture of their characters. It was followed by a plea for clemency argued with the utmost pathos and conviction.

The guard was grinning unpleasantly at her. He produced another paper.

"This was the edition they planned to publish if someone else got the sponsorship. A programmer friend of mine fished it out of the junk-files."

Mina read it through and discovered a series of savage quotes from people in the block which led the newspaper to conclude that she and Norman were rude, anti-social and entirely to blame for their son's criminality. They deserved the maximum punishment.

"Just thought you'd like to know," said the guard.

On the fifth day of the trial, Mina and Norman were escorted as usual from the cell to the bubble-topped Rolls-Reinhardt glidecar which carried them the few kilometers to the New Old Bailey. A motor swooper police escort accompanied them, but for once the crowds which lined The Strand and Fleet Street, waving

placards of support or hurling rotten vegetables, were much thinner.

"You're yesterday's news," the driver informed them bluntly. "King Jason's been deposed by referendum and his sister Sharon's being crowned today."

This news did not entirely surprise Mina. King Jason, who was only eleven, had become unpopular after dumping two of the royal Corgis down the Buckingham Palace disposal during a fit of pique; but she wondered if his sister, two years his junior, would prove any more suitable as the country's figurehead.

"Sabrina would be a nice name for a queen," Norman said from out of the blue. He began to pick at the buttons on his jacket.

Mina popped a mintranq into his mouth. Audience feedback on the first day of the trial had indicated that the public disapproved of Norman's implanted store of legal knowledge, academic though it was; they felt that it might enable him to manipulate the proper judicial process. And so that same day he had been subjected to a series of topical brain erasures covering not only legal matters but also such associated subjects as interview techniques and transpersonal psychology. The treatment had left him mentally shipwrecked, only intermittently aware of what was going on around him. Mina took his hand and squeezed it helplessly.

Once installed in the new Byzantine safety of the court buildings, she and Norman were attended to by the make-up and costume people so that they would look their best for the occasion. This was an art in itself. Doughtiness would not have gone down well with the public, but too much ostentation would have been equally disastrous. So the personnel design team had settled for subtle cosmetics and a series of elegant yet simply-cut costumes in colors which tended to the monochromatic. This suggested an acceptance of the gravity of the situation combined with a firm yet understated refusal to accept the degradation of guilt. Sober elegance, and apparently — to judge from the audience response — just what the public wanted. Ten minutes before they were due to appear in court, Mr. Willoughby arrived, his cheeks puckering alarmingly.

"There's going to be a verdict today," he announced.

"Today?" Mina was astounded. "But we've hardly started."

The previous four days had been taken up with an in-depth personality analysis of herself and Norman. Friends, relatives and even Housecomp had been called upon to give details of their lives and behavior so that their adequacy as parents could be assessed. Mina and Norman had not yet had a chance to speak for themselves, but they had not so far emerged as monsters or

incompetents. In addition, their family backgrounds had been investigated back to the legal requirement of the third generation. This had actually been rather fascinating, though not without its embarrassments. A definite streak of aggressiveness had been noted in Norman's family, though Mina could not believe he had inherited any of it; and his grandfather had been revealed as a rubber fetishist who did uncomfortable things with anti-splash attachments from water-taps. Her own family was chiefly noted for a streak of whimsicality, her great-grandmother amassing a huge collection of pencil-stubs, one of her uncles having an entry in **The Guinness Databank of Records** for pogo-sticking around the coast of Britain.

"They can't give a verdict yet," she said to Mr. Willoughby. "No one's bothered to ask us anything."

Mr. Willoughby stuck out his tongue and pulled on it. His cheeks stopped puckering.

"There's nothing I can do," he said. "Queen-Elect Sharon's been following the trial, and she said she wanted a verdict today so that she can personally attend the punishment of the guilty parties. The public agreed."

"It sounds like they've already decided we're guilty."

Mr. Willoughby put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Don't lose heart," he said, leering at her.

Sir Jasper Percival drew himself up to his full height. His wig was of a fluffy variety which blended well with his snowy beard and his avuncular face. He wore red robes lined with ermine, thus emphasizing his resemblance to Father Christmas.

"We now turn to the terrible details of the crime itself," he said in his rich voice which made you want to sit on his knee and be given presents. "Let the pictures tell their own story."

Sir Jasper stepped aside so that the viewing audience of one hundred million could see the cube behind the judge's bench — itself a mahogany — console with a central screen which would ultimately deliver the people's verdict.

The cube flickered into life. Mina sat back on the white chesterfield, clasping Norman's hand between her own. Two camerandroids wandered silently around the courtroom like upright stick-insects, and one of them closed in on Norman as he began to drool. Hurriedly Mina swabbed his lips with a handkerchief.

The security cameras in the multimart had recorded everything. Mina watched Kevin burst into the place and blast a guard with a Blennerhassett PVC Anti-Riot pistol. The man went down under a cloud of white plastic foam, suffocating within minutes. Next Kevin used a

magnetic disrupter on the packing androids, sending one somersaulting down the aisle while the other began wrestling with an automated shopping trolley. Meanwhile Kevin was stuffing credit chips from the cash registers into a big brown paper bag. When it was full, he walked calmly out.

It was terrible, heart-breaking. He had always been a lovely child, but was never the same after a playground accident at the age of eleven when Norman dropped him on his head while reciting an alphabetical list of all the cricketers who had kept wicket for England. Perhaps she should have mentioned the incident to Mr. Willoughby.

Tears were running down her face. She tried to hide them from the camerandroids as Sir Jasper delivered a surprisingly brief summing-up, the thrust of which was that both she and Norman had been criminally inadequate as parents and were wholly responsible for their son's anti-social behavior. He asked for the maximum penalty.

Then it was Mr. Willoughby's turn. A static charge had puffed up his hair so that his wig was perched on it like a monstrous butterfly. His impassioned defense of their qualities as human beings was given added farcical overtones when oil began to drool from both his nostrils.

Finally it was over. Mina could scarcely believe it. She felt more like an observer than one of the central characters in the trial. None of it seemed real. Before they had entered the courtroom, Mr. Willoughby had advised against her and Norman making any sort of statement in their own defense for fear that Norman might say something detrimental. Now she began to wonder whether her husband's shambolic state might have had the opposite effect of generating sympathy in the viewing audience. But it was too late now.

Scant seconds after Mr. Willoughby finished speaking, blood-red capitals flashed up on the screen:

VERDICT:
GUILTY

Mina looked at Norman, who was trying to perform origami on a paper tissue he had taken from a box on the table. He was utterly engrossed in the task.

The screen went blank for an instant, then flashed a new message:

SENTENCE:
DEATH BY BEHEADING
NO APPEAL

On the final morning Mina said a tearful farewell to Mr. Willoughby, who had taken the defeat badly and was too upset to attend the execution. The solemnity of the occasion was defused by a short-circuit between his speech centers and his lower back compressors which caused him to expel air noisily every time he said words with sibilants in them.

When he was gone, she and Norman were given benediction by the prison psychologist, who told them that the sins of the fathers were not only descended on the sons but also on the daughters and the grandchildren. Mina wanted to ask if she could see Kevin one last time, but she did not like the thought of what this might do to Norman, who was rapidly deteriorating.

Apparently Queen Sharon had moved the referendum asking for the restoration of the death penalty, a line supported by several networks and newspapers, some of which were owned by Maximilian Maximilian. The Queen's popularity as a new sovereign was sufficient to win the day and also carry through her suggestion of a public beheading.

The Rolls-Reinhardt took them to the place of execution in the middle of Hyde Park. In addition to a huge crowd, cameras from over fifty networks, home and overseas, were present to broadcast the event. A big stage hung with black drapes had been set up in front of a stand of trees, and beefeaters and household cavalry lined both sides of a long red carpet which led up to it.

Queen Sharon sat in the royal box with her brother and old King William, their grandfather. All wore crowns and ceremonial robes. Max Maximilian was with them. Norman bowed as they were presented to the box, but Mina could not bring herself to curtsy.

Queen Sharon was eating a choc-ice, and a ring of brown surrounded her mouth.

"You're going to die," she told them, struggling to free herself from the restraining hand of her grandfather.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

This was Norman. He looked delighted — meeting royalty was a dream come true for him. Mina found some consolation in that.

"You were wonderful," the old king told her. "Truly wonderful. I'm dreadfully sorry the verdict went against you."

Max Maximilian emerged from the box and put his arms around their shoulders, leading them to the center of the stage. A Channel 7 camerandroid stalked them like a praying mantis.

"You did us proud," Maximilian said to them. "No one could have asked for more, commitmentwise. I can honestly say I was deeply moved. You must believe me when I tell you that I personally feel you should have

been acquitted. But alas one cannot deny the will of the people."

Norman had begun to cry. He also looked as if he didn't know why.

Maximilian made a show of shaking their hands in front of the camerandroid. His smile was suave and seamless, and his dark eyes looked somehow opaque, as if saturated and dulled by a lifetime's sights.

"Have courage," he whispered. And then he was gone.

Miss Winter appeared, dressed in a gold lamé leotard. She led them forward to the double beheading block, which had been hewn from oak, varnished and inlaid with the gold logo of Channel 7. The weather was perfect for the execution, the sun shining in a sky dotted with drifting white clouds.

The executioner appeared from the wing. He was dressed in black leather and he wore a masked helmet. The blade of his huge axe gleamed in the sunlight. He was young.

The restive crowd began to roar, a chant swelling in volume: "Blood! Blood! We want blood!" Mina could tell there was no personal hostility in it: the crowd was simply eager for the spectacle to begin.

Miss Winter produced two lengths of gold rope and expertly tied their hands behind their backs. Tears streamed down Norman's cheeks as they faced the executioner across the block.

"Kevin?" said Mina.

The executioner pulled off his hood.

"Hello, mother," he said. "Hello, dad."

His face was deeply tanned, emphasizing the blueness of his eyes, the goldenness of his hair, the whiteness of his smile. He'd always had perfect teeth.

"I volunteered," he said. "I hope you don't mind. It seemed the honorable thing to do under the circumstances."

"Is that you, Kevin?" asked Norman.

"Your father isn't well," Mina explained.

"Yes, it's me, dad. I'm the executioner. Keeping it in the family, eh?"

His smile was as brittle as it was bright, and yet Mina had no doubt he was pleased to see them.

"You look well," she said.

This was a lie — his eyes were terrible, so shiny and filled with the pure gleam of his rehabilitation. Evangelical in their glory.

"I am well, mother," he told her. "Things are much clearer. I understand my responsibilities to society now. I know what I have to do."

"Have you missed us at all?"

"I've thought of you often. I'll always feel a deep guilt for what's happened. They don't take that away from us, you know. It's part of the penance."

She didn't know what to say. "What will you do when — when this is all over?"

"I have a five-year community service contract. I'm going to offer myself for non-lethal medical experimentation. Subjects are always hard to come by."

"That sounds interesting."

"It's necessary. I have a debt to repay."

"What's that noise?" Norman asked. "Are the birds singing?"

He had lost his tenuous grasp on the situation. The crowd's chanting grew louder, and Queen Sharon was beginning to look impatient.

"We'd better get on with it," Kevin said matter-of-factly. "Heads up or down on the block?"

"Oh," said Mina, looking at it. "Up, I think."

"Down is more comfortable."

She stared at him for a moment, then said, "I'd rather see the sky. But I think your father would be better off head-down."

With Miss Winter's help, their heads were positioned across the block. Mina had to stretch out her legs for comfort. Norman had stopped crying and seemed to be at peace. For him, ignorance really would be bliss.

Miss Winter walked off stage. The crowd grew muted. Mina stared up at the sky, at the clouds which would continue to unfold across the blue after she was gone. Kevin's head was haloed by the sun as he leaned across her.

"Who do you want me to do first?" he asked.

"Me," she said immediately, having thought it over long before. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I've been practicing. It'll be swift and clean."

"That's something anyway."

"Goodbye, dad."

"Goodbye, Queen Sharon," Norman said without looking up.

Kevin raised the axe above his head. The crowd fell silent as a dramatic amplified drum-roll burst from hidden speakers.

"I'm sorry about everything," Kevin said to Mina.

"Well," she replied, "it can't be helped. Look after yourself, won't you?"

"Of course. I'm a responsible citizen now."

The axebled flashed in the sunlight as he brought it down.



qualitative science

gwyneth jones

Confessions of an Ideologue Part Two: The lady and the scientists

I was coming out of Sainsbury's and a young man stopped me with one of those clipboards... I'm usually very short with these people, but browsing the supermarket shelves is so soothing. It's like picking berries. Instead of standing in front of a counter and begging, like a suppliant at a shrine, You feel as if you've *found* all this lovely stuff... Anyway, I was feeling benign so I answered his questions about the product... came to the end. Are you married? Yes. Children? One, little toddler. Occupation? Writer. Do you work outside the home? Not often. Would you consider yourself to be in full time or part time employment? Full-time, says I, not having much doubt on the subject. The young man doesn't fill in his box. He says: oh. And then, are you sure? I'm sure, I repeat, firmly: and he looks very doubtful. I can tell he's going to chuck that sheet away as a spoile ballot.

Then again, here's a quote from a recent survey the Writer's Guild did on the position of women writers. It actually comes from an interview in what we call over here a 'quality daily' with a successful male playwright. who is describing how he manages to work at home with a young family around:

"I am quite capable of walking over a pile of washing on the kitchen floor, and registering mentally that it's there but feeling no obligation whatsoever to do anything about it..."

I'm not like that, I don't even

want to be like that. This playwright is a selfish infantile jerk and I despise him. We run an equal opportunity house here, and it kills us both (two careers and a baby, you know the one) but I wouldn't have it any different. Still, I admit I do sometimes fantasize about what life would be like for me as an artist, if I had a nice wife to look after the house and bring up my baby for me. He'd have to be prepared to starve a little. Or, more likely, take a dead-end part-time job to keep me in fanfold paper and so forth. But then, that's what wives of artists are for... The exasperating thing is, with this albatross of feminist ideology around my neck, I'm not permitted even to hope for that particular future. Because rationally, the argument goes like this: (to paraphrase Octavia Butler) no rational person who's known what its like to be a nigger could possibly want to own a slave. What I have to hope for is some mechanism, some change in the rules, whereby there are no more human sacrifices at all. But am I allowed, do I dare to hope for this possible world, in print, in 1990, and call it science fiction? Opinions differ.

Modern practitioners of science fiction are, overall, a pretty articulate and thoughtful group of people (yes, what I said about them last issue was a wicked slander). Everyone of them, down to the most despised millionaire 'genre hack' seems to be well aware of the logical contradictions involved in writing about the future. Everybody's happy to tell you that science fiction is 'really about' the present day world - distorted mirror of current affairs, vat-grown monsters

from the germ plasm of today's hopes and fears. However, and this applies. curiously enough, just as much to the liberal, 'radical' baby boomer generation, these same writers are oddly shy of making connections between what they write (and predict) and their own lives. Baby boomers do not write of changes in their own culture, or at their own level of society. They prefer exoic slums to suburbia. They prefer tragic or dramatic change in a global context, not on the domestic front. The future is what happens to other people. SF is the report of the disinterested observer: rarely, if ever, a personal expression of the hopes or fears of SF writer X.

I don't feel that this, reticence, shall we call it, is entirely the result of novelty or cowardice. I'm sure it is partly an aesthetic reaction against the excesses of the past. To have opinions rather than just cool ideas about gadgets: to think in terms of 'what kind of life would I like (or hate)?' This is dangerous ground. It comes close to the line between writing SF and walking up and down Oxford St with a sandwich board that says REPENT FOR THE END IS NIGH. The notion of having a message, and trying to put it across, is indeed sort of disgusting: I feel it so myself. And I am seriously embarrassed to find myself, a self confessed ideologue, far more in sympathy with the ancient maniacs of the past. truffle-hunting for Utopia in the dirt of lies, damned lies and sugared political indoctrination. than with the majority of my contemporaries. Even less happy in the company of my fellow-ideologues of the present day, the SDI appreciation society. It's a sad fact

that while liberals flee from connection and commitment as one would from virus-infected PD software, those SF writers who are proud to use their stories to promulgate right-thinking and good attitudes are almost without exception those who think and write as if Eisenhower was still president of the USA and the Holy Word of unlimited capitalist expansion was coming to them straight from the lips of the Angel Gabriel.

This is the burden that all extremists have to bear. Eventually you have to come to terms with the fact that You're much more like extremists of other denominations than you are like any sane, normal person. And thus the Darwinian model of nil inter-species aggression is preserved: we only compete directly with those who are like ourselves. The only consolation I can offer myself is the reassurance that ideology isn't really a rare disease. Everybody has a filtration system, several layers deep, of assumptions and expectations whereby they perceive the world and distinguish funny from depressing, right from wrong, desirable from undesirable, nice from nasty, outrage from normality. Ideology is what makes you laugh at a sitcom – or not, as the case may be. Some people acknowledge this filtration system. Some people lie about it: some people laugh, or cry, or get affronted like reflex-conditioned animals, never even wondering why. But the case of the conscious and functional human being 'without an ideology' does not exist.

Allowing that social comment is okay in principle (cf. Wells, Stapledon), and that feminism is a futuristic fiction, same as any other utopian scheme, the next obstacle between my ideology and the genre (now as much as ever) would seem to be the science. Women don't do science. They don't like it and it

doesn't like them. No doubt there are exceptions that prove this rule: but as that rather curious expression demonstrates, anomalies worry no one. And anyway I'm not interested in preaching to the converted. Max Delbruck says intuition is nothing more or less than fully assimilated learning: like being able to walk or talk or read without conscious effort. We say we know something *intuitively* when we no longer need to run the steps involved in that knowledge past ourselves in order to get to the point. People know, intuitively. what 'science' means. It means a team of young men in beards and fair isle jumpers with the elbows out. grinning shyly around their Nobel prize. It means a middle-aged bloke in a white coat selling washing powder. It means (possibly) Sigourney Weaver in a very sexy white coat talking to a dolphin... But that's okay because talking to dolphins is only fantasy. It's not real science, nor yet (especially not) real science fiction.

I had to give a paper a little while ago, at an event organized around the award ceremony for the Arthur C. Clarke, that prestigious new British prize for 'serious and relevant' science fiction. (Well, I didn't *have* to. I was invited, and I find the writing of pseudo-intellectual essays obscurely amusing) This was the occasion when George Turner won the prize with **The Sea and Summer**, and John Gribbin gave his famous 'serious SF doesn't make sense' thus managing to trash not only the book in question but the whole rationale of the award. A splendid achievement that received applause as thunderous as the thirteen or so of us could manage. We Brits are squeamish about prizes. But we adore irony.

The Institute of Contemporary Arts, where this thing was held, is a rather highbrow mixed media arts venue. deep in the heart of

London's leafy palace quarter. We clashed with an archaic ritual called the Trooping of the Colour (don't ask me to explain. It involves a flag and a lot of horses in fancy dress), for which the road had been shut down and pumped full of tourists and police. Perhaps that's why British SF-dom stayed away in droves... but the yawning abyss of mutual incomprehension between 'serious' science fiction writers and the reading public belongs to another story.

To get back to my paper. We were all supposed to be illustrating different vital connections between 'science' and 'science fiction': a kind of dry and dusty offering whose incense we hoped might waft across the oceans to the legendary old divinity in Sri Lanka. Luckily (or unluckily maybe) John's part didn't come till the end. When it came to my turn I produced, with very little inner fervor, believe me, a story about the links between the rules of science/fiction and more or less recent developments in the realm of literary criticism, the science of fiction as it were. I found parallels between Saussure and Einstein, structuralism and quantum mechanics, deconstruction and Star Trek. At the end a lady in the audience got up and said "But that's cheating. Literary science isn't science at all. Science is when you do precise experiments and learn something measurable about the real world from the results." I opened and shut my mouth a bit, feeling somewhat outraged. When there's only thirteen people in the house and they've remained decently comatose through 'Brunner's computer worms: prediction and the facts'; and 'Ballard seen as an behavioral psychologist'... well, it seems rotten luck to have to deal with the heckler. But I didn't have to. The scientists (the lady was not a scientist, but her husband was, she said) leapt up as one

man, and cried "Not where I come from!" They said all the things that I wanted them to say, about fuzzy logic, fudged results, disorder and nonlinearity. The much vaunted 'scientific method' is an ideological fiction: it's successful fiction, an enduring bestseller even, but it isn't *true*... Holistic science is no longer a crank book craze, its time has come. Big Daddy Science is entering a new era of honesty and openness...

Well, this was all very nice, and certainly saved me some discomfort. But my lady heckler was not convinced, and though as an SF writer I'm all for the new era (I love new eras), as an ideologue I'm not sure if the men in the metaphorical white coats can be trusted. They say "die wauer ist teg" – that science is now art and human. But after all, what do they know about the real world? Nothing. (they just admitted as much). I fear that my heckler may have been speaking with greater authority. And when I look at the historical relationship between science fiction and feminism, I think I see much the same situation. There's the romantic version, which says that everything has changed, that all the demands have been accepted (accepted, not met, mind, an important distinction) and there's nothing to fight about anymore. Then there's the common sense version – the consensual majority that hasn't really shifted at all.

John Gribbin is a writer of some terrific popular science and some rather stolidly traditional (in my opinion) 'old fashioned hard SF'. When he ridicules the notion of scientifically plausible SF and asks for warm, human stories, what he is asking for is warm, human rocketship fantasies. And this demand deserves some attention, because I believe he speaks for the majority consensus notion of what science fiction is supposed be like 'even now' – so many years after the revo-

lution. Dear reader, perhaps you yourself don't care for space opera. But I am talking about sales figures. And even discounting sales figures, a silent ranking that determines, as 'literary novels' are identified in the mainstream, the certified, genuine, pedigree animal.

In the sixties and seventies various writers who either didn't have a degree (or equivalent experience) in physics and gadgetry, or else didn't want to mix business and pleasure, tried very hard to broaden the meaning of this nineteenth century neologism 'science'. It means 'knowledge' doesn't it? Therefore we can write about absolutely anything! This applied especially to women writers who, though not necessarily consciously feminist, were trying to claw their way up to 'real' SF status and out of the underclass sink of those psychic dragon stories. Their claim was that stories about creche management or housework or genetics, or sociology or philosophy or linguistics or the fall of patriarchy, could all be classed as 'real science fiction'. There's an operation that we call 'moving the goalposts' over here, which involves the blatant ad hoc introduction of restrictive practices to deal with unexpected success on the part of your (generally less powerful) opponents. The broad church ploy would be equivalent to the underdogs moving the goalposts a lot further apart.

And it worked. But in the areas that interest me, it only worked for a while.

When I encountered the SF world a while ago (as other than a passive library book reader that is), I wasn't at all surprised to find that feminism seemed to be taking over. And it wasn't just a hot core of politically fashionable rhetoric. It wasn't just Joanna Russ and Suzy Charnas announcing the fall of patriarchy; it seemed like a shift in values right through the genre. The

engendered starship captain who turns out to be a girl on page 230 was as tired an old cliché as the Heinlein original of this trick, by the time I came in. But that she could be a cliché was a cause for rejoicing. SF and feminism, gender roles in flux, characters with human feelings, life sciences awarded parity of esteem with engineering, satyaghaha awarded parity of esteem with planet destroyers... I loved it. I loved **The Female Man**. I loved those brave-but-brittle male sidekicks C.J. Cherryh sneaked into classic space-opera, fitting exactly where the Cutsy-but-fragile girlfriend used to go. And though I don't usually like hard science stories, I savored Pamela Zoline's "Heat Death Of The Universe". The isolated young housewife plods through the suburban domestic grind, gradually going berserk. Some protective filter has stopped operating, she can see the inexorable process of entropy going on all around her — cosmic death by disorder in the washing machine's cycle, in the kids' spilled food. Is this story about gadgets? Certainly it is about machines, meat and metal. Better, it is about the nature of the machine itself. "Heat Death" is wonderful because it demands parity of esteem for 'women's business' simply by taking it, and backs up the coup with impeccable technical detail. The young man with the clipboard thinks he is 'working' as he asks his silly questions, and I'm not 'working' as I run around after my toddler. In order to be normal like him, Mr. Average, I have to get out of the kitchen, dump the shopping, find myself a real job in the real world. But Pamela Zoline has announced that she and I don't have to change at all to be speculative and profound observers of way cosmic laws and human lives interact. We can pick up that pile of dirty washing from the kitchen floor, and turn it into a piece of pure science/fiction.

(Ah. I have to go now. The baby's nap is over...)

Later that same week...

Now that the dust has cleared, this seminal material... I'm sorry, I'll read that again...much of this ovular material looks a little dubious. Leaving aside the wilder excesses of childbirth-envy among male SF writers (mainly John Varley, but he had his imitators), some of the most sacred texts of the movement are suspect. Even a fairly casual study of Ursula LeGuin's books reveals a distinct lack of female characters, and such as there are they're either good mothers or bad whores, same as always. I think it is no accident that in her novel about the problem of gender the sole female character is a voice off who washes her hands of the whole affair... No blame to her. Quite a lot of women who are drawn to writing or reading genre adventure stories (of whatever caliber) are originally attracted because they don't actually *like* girls or girlish things. Raised consciousness comes later. (p.s. I'm still waiting, Mrs. LeGuin). None of this detracts from the quality of her writing or her stature in the genre. But as the founding mother of feminist SF, her real achievement seems to have been to give a generation of male writers a terrific (and sorely needed) leg up in literary technique. Statistics prove that coeducation is good for boys, bad for girls. It makes the boys more like human beings, but the girls even more like doormats.

The anti-liberal backlash of the eighties seems to be slackening off, and there's a fresh generation of idealistic young readers, poking their little green heads over the battlements of the nineteen nineties. They're not fooled by the higher tomboyism, but they are no better pleased with the direct and conscious political writing of the old avant garde. The rhetoric is tainted — not so much by failure, the kids

of today are not so crass, but by 1966 and all that. There's a whiff of discredited Marxism and Maoism about it all. When the dashing Future veteran of the revolution (in Marge Piercy's **Woman On The Edge**) gets up in her fighter plane, blood and powder stained red bandanna around her brow, and proceeds to strafe the shit (even if its only in a dream sequence) out of patriarchy. The mind's eye of 1990 sees Tiananmen square. And its not only the violence they object to. The kids (as always) are much more demanding than they used to be. They want a live solution, other than genocide, for the problem of masculinity. They're not satisfied with simple role-reversal; they've started whining that Vonda MacIntyre's male characters are cut out of cardboard. They even want believable characterization for their sex interest! (At this, personally, I feel I have to draw the line. Good grief. Just because you're a feminist doesn't mean you have to betray everything that SF stands for.)

To paraphrase someone else, 99% of anything you care to mention is rubbish. It shouldn't be a cause for concern if the feminist stories that seemed wonderful twenty years ago are dust and ashes now. Most of science fiction's golden age was made of the same disintegrating metal. It doesn't matter: what matters is that people try to emulate the stories that they think they read — the effect, the verve, the fierce ideation — not the loopy science, brutal politics and wooden dialogue. There should be no need for gloom. All of the women I've mentioned are still writing. And there are many others. Surely the great debate between 'feminist' or 'nonviolent' values and the hard hitting norm still rages in the pages of novels, stories and zines of every description... Well, in the August issue of The New York Review of Science Fiction they

published the results of a bookshop survey on this very subject. It was a very small sample, a single shop in Philadelphia. The head count was 134 men to 3 women on the SF racks, but numbers like that don't prove anything. What struck me was the bookseller's reported comment. "I think you'll find," he says. "that not many women write science fiction. There's James Tiptree of course, and Octavia Butler and Ursula K Le Guin, but other than those three that's about it." With a little prodding he was persuaded to add C.J. Cherryh to the list. Three and a half women! Wow!

I like this bookseller. He's the man on the Clapham omnibus in science fiction terms, the Mr. Ordinary who has no hidden agenda (except the one that he doesn't know about); who only sees the obvious, who cuts through my highly informed state of the art pretensions and tells me what is really going on. These things take time. If you asked Mr. Ordinary Bookseller today, I'm sure hold tell you anything Green is good for business, but we'll wait till the parade's gone by and ask him again... Twenty years, however, is long enough. By now, Mr. Ordinary must be saying "Well, you know, the women are beginning to come through." He must be saying that, at least. He isn't. I am not surprised to hear that the survey also found an alarming proliferation of future war stories, and a remarkable amount of shelf space devoted to John Norman. The invisibility of women, even in the microcosm of science fiction, has this kind of effect. I don't like to say this, it doesn't suit my argument (as you will see). Where there are veiled women (*Not* powerless, mind, for we may safely assume that Mr. Ordinary's denial has not made many published and several highly successful SF writers snuff out like candles or suddenly change sex)...

Where there are veiled women, there torture, death and destruction will be highly visible activities, and individual human lives will not count for much.

Even so, does it matter? The broad church remains. Nobody's trying to pretend that feminist science fiction doesn't exist. It has its niche. Just alongside the psychic dragons (and picking up meager crumbs from that successful subgenre's readership). The women who want it look for it and find it; anyone else who happens to pick up a Suzette Elgin or a Joanna Russ gets warned immediately by the cover and the blurb, and quickly puts it down again...

Anyone who thinks this situation is satisfactory to feminists who read or write science fiction probably thinks Jesus Christ came to earth to found a new religion.

So what went wrong? Why didn't the world change? Of course the Big World changed, very much and rather fast. We had the great anti-liberal backlash, the greed-is-good and words-mean-what-I say-they-mean eighties. You tell someone you're a feminist in Thatcher's Britain, and you don't even get the satisfaction of social martyrdom. She nods sincerely and assures you she's one too, but not the grubby old *strident* kind. Oh yes, I'm a feminist. I want my filofax to be just as fat and shiny as my boyfriend's. And we both have a wonderful relationship with our nanny, and the lovely working class woman who comes in to do the cleaning. Or if it's a man he'll say oh yes, same here. Absolutely. And so is my wife who would be here tonight except that she's made a choice, which I totally respect, to give up her dead end job and become a full-time wife and mother... Oh yes, we're all feminists now.

There's been plenty of this 'post-feminist' gibberish in the genre. Mr. Ordinary may not be able to see

them, but the racks are bursting with gorgeous tomboys fighting their way to the top in the man's world of starfighter command. Aall of them real, human women who still care about getting the furniture folded correctly, copying new recipes to please the family onto the servots memory, and keeping up with the latest, most feminine cosmetic surgery. There's plenty of real human fiction for Moon City housewives who hurry home from the weapons lab sincerely grateful to their husbands for allowing them to plug into work, and wouldn't dream of expecting a man to lift a finger around the living module... And they are all feminists. The characters are feminists, the writers are feminists, the editors are feminists, the marketing execs are feminists too. Naturally! There's no community on earth more stubbornly resistant to change, and none more brass-nerved and devious in denying their obdurate, innate and militant conservatism — than the writers of futuristic fiction. And that's only the women. Whose hypocrisy knows no bounds. We should pause here for a sincere vote of thanks to Marion Zimmer Bradley for being bone-headed enough to be honest about the way she feels.

Thank you Mrs. Bradley.

But all this is just end-point consumerism, and there's not much harm in it. I can glean some comfort from the thought that those who are content to write and read Moon City Housewife would be just as happy with *my* platitudes, if times should ever change. No, the disaster for feminism in SF has been in its greatest apparent success.

We might call this success the rise of the dark-female-womb-good vs. light-male-phallus-bad story. Essentially it is a simple reversal of prefeminist SF ideology, except that the old boys' own adventures never dreamed of explaining why shiny

rockets are Good Things and shadowy abysses are Bad Things. They didn't have to. Everybody knew, and it wasn't the kind of thing nice people said out loud. The new story has no such reticence. Its sole purpose in life is to juxtapose the home-loving warmly sexy dark females (we'll call them the 'df's for short) who are good with children, are biotechnicians and recycle everything, with the paranoid rapist lms who live in steel packing cases, have no children, and throw hamburger cartons about wherever they go... At least one of the nastiest of the lms is a woman, to show that all this is not actually the criminal incitement to genocide that it seems. There's nothing else but a plot line that throws its hands out innocently through some transparent yarn of the conflict between violence and non-violence (I love that line), to say — Make up your own mind, dear reader...

Joan Slonczewski positions her disclaimers carefully. Even so, you'd have thought that the approval of Gregory Benford might have aroused her suspicions. Michaela Roessner's *Walkabout Woman*, because it isn't so skillfully written, puts the moral idiocy of the dfs vs. lms story on open display. This not very original idea that simple biological determinancy rules the world and divides without appeal, on an axis of skin color and gender, Good from Evil, the saved from the damned. Now where have I heard that before?

I suppose this kind of posturing is a stage we have to go through. The Female Principle has to be celebrated. With the best will in the world it is impossible to demote the Male Principle to parity of esteem without doing some pretty trenchant hacking at that overgrown beanstalk. But to celebrate the mythic female by rubbishing the mythic male is cathartic rather than

constructive. Besides, the orgiastic birching of masculinity can safely be left to the experts. Any woman who enjoys seeing male sexuality dragged through shit backwards has only to read **Life During Wartime**. And the men love it. All those sensitive baby boomer SF fans adore the new man of radical hard SF (Augh! my soul in torment, I just raped another little old lady...)

So much for the popular front. But the dazzling intellectual rhetoric has its own troubles. Sarah Lefanu (in **The Chinks of the World Machine**) does an excellent job of cutting through the cant and distinguishing the true, astringent medicine from daydreams, revenge fantasies and fifth columnist disinformation. She also identifies a deep and central difficulty — the story without an ending. That classic fall-of-patriarchy scenario, without which feminist SF would not exist, has nowhere to go. The worm turns, the villains are unmasked, the male dominated structures topple; end here, it sounds hopeful... It's not failure of nerve or talent that makes **The Female Man** barely fiction, or gave Atwood's **Handmaid's Tale** its bewilderingly equivocal conclusion, or caused Suzy Charnasts rigorously intelligent fall-of-patriarchy trilogy to run to two volumes, and Monique Wittig's **Les Guerillieres** to explode in lyrical chaos. They're only telling the truth. Because of this either/or, light/dark, order/chaos dichotomy, anyone who takes the battle between the df's and the lms really really seriously comes up against the walls of the world. Further than the brink of that victory, story cannot go.

SF novelists of all persuasions are frequently so strapped for a way out of the book that they have to wheel on the end of the universe. In fact this is alluring stuff. Here we are, feminists SF writers, re-evaluating — for our own selfish reasons — the great metaphor of light (the

Light of male reason and aspiration: the Dark of female 'instinct' and inertia) that's so integral to human thought. Right alongside, there's a cosmological shift going on that has sudden thoughts about the enormous preponderance of dark matter in a universe that has always been described solely in terms of light. What a weird coincidence! What is happening here? Is some vast someone/ something trying to communicate with us through our own political reasoning? Already I seem to see before me the last thirty pages, *written in italics of course*, of a blockbusting radical-feminist end of the universe epic, like Greg Bear only more cosmic.

But even if that epic could be written, without the whole thing dissolving, by its own logic, into too-smart-by-half Lacanoiserie, it wouldn't get us any further. What all the variants of this story, intellectual and dopey both, have in common is that they do not quarrel with the tenets of patriarchy. The celebration of the Female Principle leaves the roles exactly as we know them so well. And it says to the men yes, we agree. Our place is in the home, the nursery, the kitchen. We own the dark places, the deeps, the parts consciousness doesn't see. And we're proud of it.

No, the conflict between the wise, gentle mothers and their brutal idiot sons doesn't interest me much whatever form it takes. I already know how that fight ends; how it keeps on ending, over and over again. Anyway, win or lose, I don't want to get back to my womanly roots. Give me the future, any day. You can keep your Californian recycled bronze age matriarchy. If I have to go and sit on a puddle in the outhouse for four days a month, I don't see what difference it makes if this is called 'being unclean' or 'fully experiencing my cosmic rhythms'. Cosmic, my mother in

law. As my old friend Jacques Derrida always says — "deconstruction is a great game but it's a sin to ignore the obvious."

I have a game which involves dividing science fiction writers into two... (pause for embarrassed grin here) The members of my first group come in all shapes and sizes. Some of them are very big indeed. All of them know that no matter what happens there will always war and romance, and ordinary men and women with the same dreams and the same feelings as we have ourselves. Human nature can never change, they say. I call them the Dinosaurs. I call my second group the Birds. Becoming a Bird isn't cheap (sorry). It could cost you your arms, your hands, your teeth, and a small mountain of awe-inspiring meat; but when it's a question of change or die, the Birds are an unsentimental lot. Racial pride is not their strong suit, and they claim that they do not know what 'bird nature' is, or ever was...

The division is rhetorical of course, and couldn't be applied without rather gruesome effect. It describes a tension within the genre, within almost any interesting SF novel you care to name. But feminist SF has somehow ended up, broadly speaking, with the Dinosaurs, wallowing in eternal verities when it should soaring, however improbably, with the Birds.

My heckler at the Arthur C. Clarke ceremony was at least half right when she said science is about linear and objective experiments, and the scientists were at least half wrong when they pronounced all that business dead. The new science of chaos, they tell me, is about order within disorder. And from what they tell me, its riotous forms are discovered by number crunching methodical iteration of simple mathematical formulae. Old fashioned scientific method may be a

con trick when viewed *sub specie aeternitas*. But here, where we live, it has been a highly successful form of conjuring, and its successes will probably continue however the philosophical underpinnings are swapped around.

Feminist science fiction has to abandon its GUTS, and its either/or stance, if it is to find a way out of the ghetto. It has to find some way to combine that famous relentless insistence on a certain program, with stories that are diverse, recognizable, and fun. Be needed by the consumers — that's always been the best propaganda. If the establishment won't listen to your blistering new insights on the nature of reality, there's nothing much you can do but stomp away in a sulk, muttering *eppur si mouve*. But the smart navigational tables, though they may not look so grand, will take over the world.

There are signs, in spite of the femme-fatale cliches of 21st century *noir*, that the cyberpunk generation has absorbed a tinge of feminism — if only for the sake of the exotic sex and the gadgets. But these fellow travelers can't be expected to carry the whole campaign, or even to know how the gadgets are supposed to work. In Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net*, papa is left holding the baby while Our Heroine goes off to save the world. So far so good, but when mama is posted seriously missing, new-age papa swiftly hands

his daughter over to his mother-in-law. Of course he does! A man can't actually bring up a child on his own! Now if that had happened in the tech part of the story, a book about the global information network would have ended with the people reverting to tin cans on either end of a piece of string...

And where are all the women? Well, there's always C.J. Cherryh... But I'm afraid a lot of people (outside that highly honorable ghetto) seem to be trying to 'take feminism for granted'. In other words, pretend there isn't a problem. Look, we're allowed to have strong female characters, but don't start nagging about social change. Or the need for it. Don't rock the boat! Which doesn't work. It never will. Remember, Mr. Ordinary doesn't need the slightest encouragement to assume that the Pat in Cadigan is short for Patrick. That's his default position. It takes effort — overt, straightforward statement of intent, to make yourself visible as a feminist SF writer. And it takes a lot of devious skill to stay visible; to be a woman who isn't one of the boys, or a Moon City housewife, or an Organically Grown Cosmic Vegetable.

People can't go on writing savage polemical tracts on the same subject forever; or reading them. You get burn-out, you get compassion fatigue even in self-pity. Ho hum, not more sewer-feminists living on rat-turds, not more captive breeders

with their arms and legs cut off for spare parts and wombs pumping out alternate fanged boy-babies and batches of bioplastic assault rifles... When some friend who reads no science fiction starts to tell you how reading *The Handmaid's Tale* changed her life you feel your eyes glaze over. It is so easy for a privileged woman of the white west to forget that 'this sort of stuff' is not actually fiction at all. The planet really is suffering and dying. That pumping womb is real. She lives in what's left of Beirut, in Afghanistan, in Mozambique. Churning out sons to fuel the war, churning out children who will die of starvation before they can walk... and if the living world itself dies — not where we live, of course, and not in our time, but soon, quite soon — it certainly looks as if the cause of death will have been a massive overdose of human testosterone.

In these grim circumstances, if seems a crying shame if the best feminism can offer is wise passivity, or a vision of the glorious abyss. It must be possible to propose a world, or better, many diverse worlds, where testosterone drives to Have A Bigger One and Go Off With A Bang, and so forth, have been substantially demoted (I said *demoted*, mind. Not denigrated or denied. Cut down to size, maybe. Not cut off. Many men have difficulty in hearing this proposal clearly). And to find a story to tell there.



hard autumn

bruce holland rogers

Kate only half listens to the television news as she smokes and gazes at the dots painted on the wall by a previous tenant. She connects the dots in her mind, forming constellations. Dennis, meanwhile, reads his tattered copy of *Being and Nothingness*.

"I wonder what he means by that?" Kate says.

Dennis looks up. "What who means?"

"What the weatherman means. I think he just said it's going to be a hard autumn. What does that mean?"

"A cold autumn," Dennis says, returning to his book.

"But if he meant that, wouldn't he say it was going to be an early winter?"

Dennis shrugs.

The next day, as Kate leaves for work, she opens the door, takes one step outside, and stops. Overnight, the leaves have changed. The day before, all the trees were green, but the street is now an explosion of yellow, red, and orange.

Kate wakes Dennis.

"Look at the trees," she says as she hands him his glasses.

Dennis rubs his beard. He scratches. He looks outside.

Kate says, "Is this what they mean by a hard autumn?"

Dennis says, "I don't know," and he goes back to bed.

Overnight the wind blows all the leaves from the trees. Kate says, "This must be what they mean by a hard autumn."

The next night, the wind blows every last shingle from the roof, and from every other roof in town. She shows Dennis a crack in the paint-dot wall. He is unimpressed.

The night after that, the rest of the roof blows off, and when Dennis wakes up he sees sunlight through cracks in the bedroom ceiling. He tries to read *Being and Nothingness* in bed, but pages keep falling out of the book. All day long, Kate notices that things feel, well, a little shaky. Hubcaps fall off of cars. Bricks and siding fall from the walls of buildings, and then the exterior walls fall away altogether. When she comes home from work, Kate discovers that the dots on the living room wall have fallen to the floor.

In bed, Kate and Dennis are cold as the wind curls easily through the house. "Dennis," Kate says, "I think this is definitely a very hard autumn." But Dennis is asleep.

Dennis wakes up to find that, as usual, Kate has already left for work. There is a lot of her hair on her pillow. In fact, Dennis notices that there is a lot of hair on his own pillow. The interior walls have begun to crumble, and Dennis can look through two rooms into the street.

The bathroom mirror hangs crookedly from one corner.

When Dennis washes his face, most of his beard rinses off.

Squinting into the mirror, he notices that his ears wave back and forth on his head as though they were only tenuously attached. He touches one ear, his left ear, and it falls.

"I wonder," Dennis says, "if this is what they mean by a hard autumn?"



past waves

lawrence m. schoen

On a typically gloomy October Tuesday I was sitting in the park tossing popcorn to the few pigeons around and feeling generally sorry for myself. Not surprisingly the park was, but for myself, deserted. As I sat there wondering just how much popcorn a pigeon had to eat before it fulfilled its minimum daily requirement of eight essential vitamins I heard a faint and far off squeak. It was the merman.

The squeak repeated itself, louder this time, and began to occur in a regular pattern, drawing closer all the while. I quickly began to distribute the rest of the popcorn to my audience in an attempt to leave before the merman appeared; I was in no condition to see him, to share my recent news with him. I wasn't fast enough. From around a bend in the path a rickety, squeaking wheel chair rolled into view. The merman was seated in it.

When I say a merman I don't mean a barrel-chested, fish-tailed gentleman with a long flowing white beard and a trident. The merman in the wheelchair was old, very old. Accordingly he did have a long white beard, but any muscled torso he might once have known had long since faded with time. I suppose he could have had a fish tail, what little I ever saw of his legs was kept wrapped in a heavy woolen blanket; you can't really ask a cripple to show you his legs, it just isn't done. And instead of a jeweled trident my merman always carried an ancient leather bound book and a portable chess set. The reason I call him a merman at all was due simply to his insistence that he was the last survivor of legendary Atlantis.

We had met a few years earlier in that very same park. I had just lost my job, my lover, and my driver's license. It hadn't been a good day. I had been sitting on a bench at the other end of the park when the merman had squeaked his chair up to me.

"Rain." He said to me, "Not as good as an ocean's breast, but the body takes what it can get."

Not having heard him approach, and not really hearing him when he spoke I looked up in confusion.

"Huhh? There's no rain. What are you talking about?"

"Give it time, the water comes to those who yearn."

As I looked at him in still greater confusion I was about to reply when I felt the first drops. Having already had a miserable day I didn't feel a need to be rained on as well and so I leapt off the bench and dashed for the

nearest tree. When I looked back the old man was still there. He had taken out an old cardboard chessboard and was arranging the pieces on it on his lap. The rain began to come down much harder but he remained there, shaking his head back and forth over the board seemingly oblivious to the-rain.

"Do you need help? Have the sense to come out of the rain, it's dry under this tree!" I called to him, feeling perhaps a bit guilty for having left him out there.

"Help? You're the one what wants for help hiding in the dry as you are" he replied. "You've a glow about you as weak as I've seen. Come out in the water, it'll ease your spirit. Come on now."

I still don't know quite what happened next; one minute I was safe and dry under the tree listening to the crazy old man, and the next I was standing next to him soaked to the skin watching him shake his head over the soggy chessboard moving the pieces here and there with both hands. All at once though I did begin to feel better, almost like the rain had washed away my despair. What was a job? What was another lover more or less? What possible use could I have had for a driver's license?

"Aye, much better indeed," he said. "Now give me your hands a moment and we'll see if you've reason to have been so gloomy."

So saying he reached out taking my hands in his, turning them palms upward, and looked first at one and then the other and back and forth again.

"Aye you've time enough yet, fullness is not measured in days. No indeed, you've no cause for such an outlook. Cultivate music, you've a gift you've been neglecting. See to it."

He let go of my hands then and began rolling his chair away from me through the park and through the rain. I just stood there, watching it all in a dream, and then looking down at my hands after he rolled around another bend and out of sight. That was how I'd met the merman.

He'd been right of course, but in a round about way. After he had left I walked back to my dark apartment in the rain, puzzling over and eventually forgetting what he had said. Despite drying off, changing into fresh clothes, starting a warm fire, and brewing myself some tea I had caught a definite case of sniffles by the time I went to bed. When I awoke in the morning it had miraculously changed into that year's variety of influenza.

The next several days whirled by in a continuing dream, made up of weakness, herb teas, and inordinate amounts of sleep. At some point amidst the haze I'd found an old alto recorder my ex had left behind. To my fevered head the light shrills sounded soothing and I'd played and played, waking and sleeping. The music made me forget how miserable I truly felt, and it seemed I had a true gift for the thing. That's when I remembered the merman.

A week later when I was feeling better I went again to the park. I had to find the old man. I searched and searched, but never saw him. In despair I sat down upon a bench and pulled out the recorder, I'd taken to carrying it everywhere, and began to play a low mournful song.

From down the walkway there came a slow squeaking sound. I looked up and there he was again, the same rickety chair, with the chess pieces spilling (but not quite falling) all across his lap.

"What a sad melody you've chosen to greet me with," said the merman, "I've not heard the like since the continent fell and I played such a one myself."

"What continent?" I replied, both startled by his sudden presence and again confused by his words.

"My home of course. I am, sorry to say, the last survivor of long lost Atlantis. Surely you've heard of it?"

I dropped my recorder. Non sequiturs can do that to me. I hadn't really evaluated what he'd said, but I answered him casually, like you might talk about the weather.

"Yes, of course. But wasn't that quite a long time ago?"

"To be sure." He smiled, "But then, I like to think I wear it well."

He gave out a great sigh then, and his eyes seemed to cover over with a wistful mist. Then just as suddenly he recovered himself, moved a chess piece with his left hand and looked at me again.

"I was a chronicler," he said to me. "For more than seven centuries before its fall I researched and recorded all the citizenry of my home. The great and small alike, for all of us have our stories to tell."

"I see," I replied. I began to feel more than a little uncomfortable talking with this obviously confused (if not deranged) man. And yet he was not in the least bit threatening, he spoke with the calm surety one used to explain tying shoelaces to a child, not the intense seriousness of a fanatic. He was I decided at the very worst a touch senile. He had found a better world to live in than this one, and who was I to deny such a thing of an old man. Better to humor him I thought.

"And what became of all your chronicles? Were they lost as well?"

He smiled then, as if I had asked just the right question, and reached beneath the worn blanket which enveloped him from the waist down.

"No, not all" he said, pulling forth a large leather bound book. "I managed to take some of them with me. I began this volume less than a month before I left. I made it myself. The pages are as thin as gossamer and as strong as silk, more than you could count in a week's time."

I was hooked now. Even sitting across from him I could see that it was like no book I had ever seen. It was large, like a renaissance folio, and the lettering along the spine was tiny but immaculate and in no language I had ever seen.

"What exactly is in it?" I asked.

"Ah, many many things. It is a collection of biographies mostly. I had originally begun to write down the lives of the members of the court, but in more recent years I have added accounts of the people I have met in my own travels through life. I have been fortunate enough to have known a good many persons, and those that have been closest to me I have kept alive in this book that I might have them with me forever."

We chatted like that for a while, nonsense really, both of us going along with his ramblings. I felt like a conspirator, an accomplice he had taken into his confidence. He was telling me his darkest secrets in such matter of fact tones. Throughout it all he played with his chess pieces, carrying out several games, one hand against the other, shaking his head to and fro over the board all the time he spoke to me.

After a long while he sighed and packed his set away. Taking my hands into his he again studied them, first palms up and then down, head to one side and then the other.

"There is a time for all things. This is not so profound. But for you there is fuller time than for most. Few are those who have stopped to talk with me, and fewer still those who listen. I do not mind, I have my game, and I keep my own company as few can. Even so it is good to hear another voice. Will you come to talk to me again?"

I gathered my hands back to myself and looked at this queer old man. There was something so compelling about him, and yet I could not say just what it was.

"Of course," I told him. "I'll look for you here in the park, all right?"

"Splendid!" He said. "I will find you by your music. Till then."

He rolled away then, creaking down the paths of the park while I retrieved my recorder from where it had fallen earlier.

As time went on the merman and I met many

times. I told him of the changes in my life, the mundane trivialities of a new job, new relationships. He in turn told me of his past, the humble role of a chronicler, always on the edge of the events he recorded but never took part in. He described the towers of Atlantis, the history of a glorious race, the culture and art which were forever lost. He spoke of the people he had known, the people he had written into his book, making their stories come alive with the telling, his words creating light and color, sensation and insight. Now and then, ever so briefly, he brushed over a reference to the destruction of his homeland, the desire of a few for powers which proved uncontrollable by ordinary mortals. Eventually he spoke of his illness, epilepsy, and how it had changed his life.

"Like all of my people I have been very long-lived," he said, "but still the body weakens and changes with time. One morning years ago I awoke and began thrashing about violently, a sight to behold I'm told. The doctors then said there was little they could do, not like it is now. They wanted to operate they said, separate the sides of my head. They told me it would stop the seizures. When they were done it was like half of me didn't know the other half."

"What do you mean?" I'd asked.

"Why, one hand might be buttoning a shirt, and the other unbuttoning it at the same time. But I learned to talk to the other side of me, and in a way I've learned to hear him too. Now we're the best of friends, and we both enjoy a good game of chess now and then."

I'd stared at him in astonishment!

"You mean you've really been playing chess all those times? You against yourself."

"Aye. Since the operation I've never lacked for company. But both of me enjoy visiting with you. You bring me back to the now when I might lose myself in the then."

He looked up at me then, taking his eyes off the game on his lap, and gave me a slow wink, first one eye and then the other.

And so it went. I visited my merman in the park every weekend for the better part of two years. Each time he repeated his ritual examination of my hands. We talked and shared ourselves and it never seemed strange to hear the things he said. Somehow in the way

he said them they made obvious sense. Sometimes it seemed that he actually spoke little, that all the talking was my own; the merman listened, and in his listening communicated a kind of peace and understanding

But today, today I was not really looking forward to seeing him. It wasn't even our regular day. I had come to the park fresh from my doctor. What he'd told me was hardly cheerful. I guess I had associated the park with feeling good, and I desperately needed to feel that way now, but not with the merman. I couldn't bear to share this news with him.

The merman rolled his chair up to me and looked through me. He pulled out the ancient leather book I'd always seen him carry with him but never open. He opened it then, slowly, carefully. The page was filled top to bottom, right to left with the same minute and curious characters that stretched along the book's spine. They had been written in a silvery ink that all but glowed back the light from the cloudy sky.

"This is you, see. I've written here all the things you mean. All the things you've said, and all you've meant to say. These are the things you like, and the things you don't like, and the things you've always wanted but have never had. Here is a list of all you've done, and here one of all you never quite got to do. I've written it all here."

"Wh-why?" I stammered. The merman was confusing me, just like he had done when we first had met.

"To show you, to show you that when you're gone a part of you will be left behind. And I'll share this part with the others who stop a moment to be with me as you have done. You'll touch them too. That's immortality."

"When I'm gone? How do you know?"

He took my hands again, like he had done so many times. He pointed to different folds and lines.

"Here," he said, "and here. It's soon, isn't it?"

"Yes," I murmured, "it is. They told me it would be sudden, and any time. I'm scared. I never expected to die that way."

"Which of us really expects to die? Look, it's starting to rain. Would you like to play a game of chess?"

The merman closed his leather book, tucking it under his blanket away from the rain. He began setting up pieces on the board on his lap. I looked at the lines on my hands, at the chess set, and finally at the merman. I took out my recorder and began to play.



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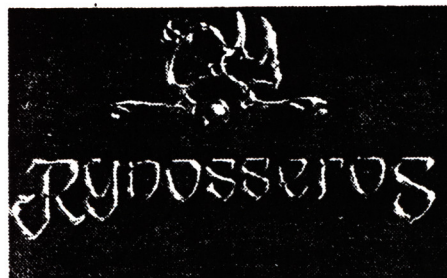
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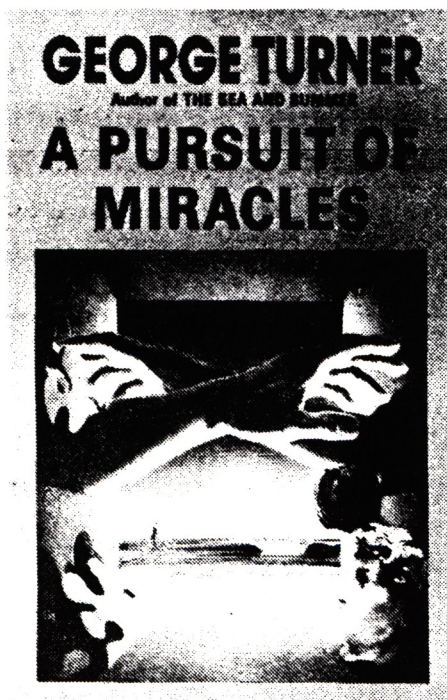
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Dan Knight of United Mythologies Press is updating the bibliography published by Chris Drumm.
Inquiries and information should be sent to him at the above address.
"Grey Ghost" appeared in Strange Plasma number 1 (\$3.00 from Box 264, Cambridge MA 02238). "The Story of Little Briar Rose" is scheduled for issue 2, and a previously unpublished Captain Roadstrum story will appear in a future issue.