

VOLUME ONE NUMBER 1 AUTUMN 1994

# TRANSVERSIONS

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MICHAEL CONEY

SEAN STEWART

CHARLES DE LINT

*Karlson 9/94*







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# TRANSVERSIONS

**DALE L. SPROULE &  
Sally McBride: EDITORS**  
**Phyllis Gotlieb:**  
**POETRY EDITOR**

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All submissions should contain SASE. Poetry should be submitted directly to:  
Phyllis Gotlieb, 19 Lower Village Gate, #706, Toronto, ON, CANADA M5P 3L9.



## EDITORIAL - Sally McBride

**It struck me not long ago** that the stories I truly loved as a child all qualify as speculative fiction. Walter Farley's boy-meets-horse, horse-meets-alien adventures; Enid Blyton's wild romps among subterranean rivers and mad scientists; E.B. White's cheerily surreal fantasy tales. I've re-read many of those old favourites, and the sense of wonder is still there. What if animals could talk? What if the Earth is hollow and strange civilizations thrive there? What if we could step through the wardrobe into a magic realm? I loved the strangeness, the acceptance of all things wild and magical, and I never wanted to give it up.

I never have. I've read and thoroughly enjoyed Austen, the Brontes, Tolstoy and so on, but the books and stories I prefer are speculative fiction. Sure, all fiction is speculative. (What if a governess fell in love with the lord of the manor?) But you know what I mean; you wouldn't be reading this magazine if you didn't. We want more. Why be content with what could "really" happen in the here and now? Why not go as far as we can into the worlds our minds can envision?

To be human means to have imagination, to possess that combination of curiosity, daring and tenacity that results in an ever-increasing understanding of our universe. But the more we know, the more we want to know. If we can't immediately figure it out, why, we'll speculate. Imagine. And send our imaginations into space, into the past or the future, into the dark caverns of our own fears and desires... anywhere our questing human brains can go.

This first issue of TransVersions has a bit of everything. Our theme, I suppose, is that we haven't got a theme — Dale, Phyllis and I want to present stories, poems and illustrations that will entertain you; perhaps challenge, intrigue, or even shock you. We hope to keep it that way, and with each new issue step a little farther out, swim into waters a bit more turbulent. I hope you enjoy accompanying us.





# WELCOME TO ISSUE ONE - DALE L. SPROULE

**Transversions was created** to cross boundaries. Between all sorts of different realities; between literature and escapism, light and darkness; between genres, countries, realms and planetary federations.

It's intended to take you on a short trip through the Fantastique.

Part of the journey is in sunshine. You'll visit a romantic by daylight and share a pastoral with Charles de Lint. Be with Elizabeth Campbell in the romantic darkness of "By the Crater of Tycho". (That poem was accepted for publication by *F & SF* in 1957 or 58, but Bet doesn't believe it ever ran, lost in a change of editors perhaps. We're honoured to print it for the first time here.)

Where there's a Romantic movement, there's a gothic one as well. Nancy Bennett's "China Dolls" and John Grey's "A Death Postponed" perfectly capture a Victorian gothic sensibility. If Steve Sneyd's poem "Next Time Go Alone" is ever made into a movie it will star Tom Waits in an update of his role from *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.

Out of the marriage of the romantic and gothic movements springs the cult of the vampire and the rebirth of fairy tales. From those same dark, enchanted woods come poems like karen verba's "weeding the garden" and stories like Gordon Menzies' gentle urban fable, "The Man Who Gathered Birds at Dawn" and David Nickle's odd, dark-science-fiction-fairytale, "The Dummy Ward".

Where there are Fairy Tales, there are Sceptics. What do you get if you mix those two together? Read Mike Coney's thought provoking story, "The Bucca" and find out.

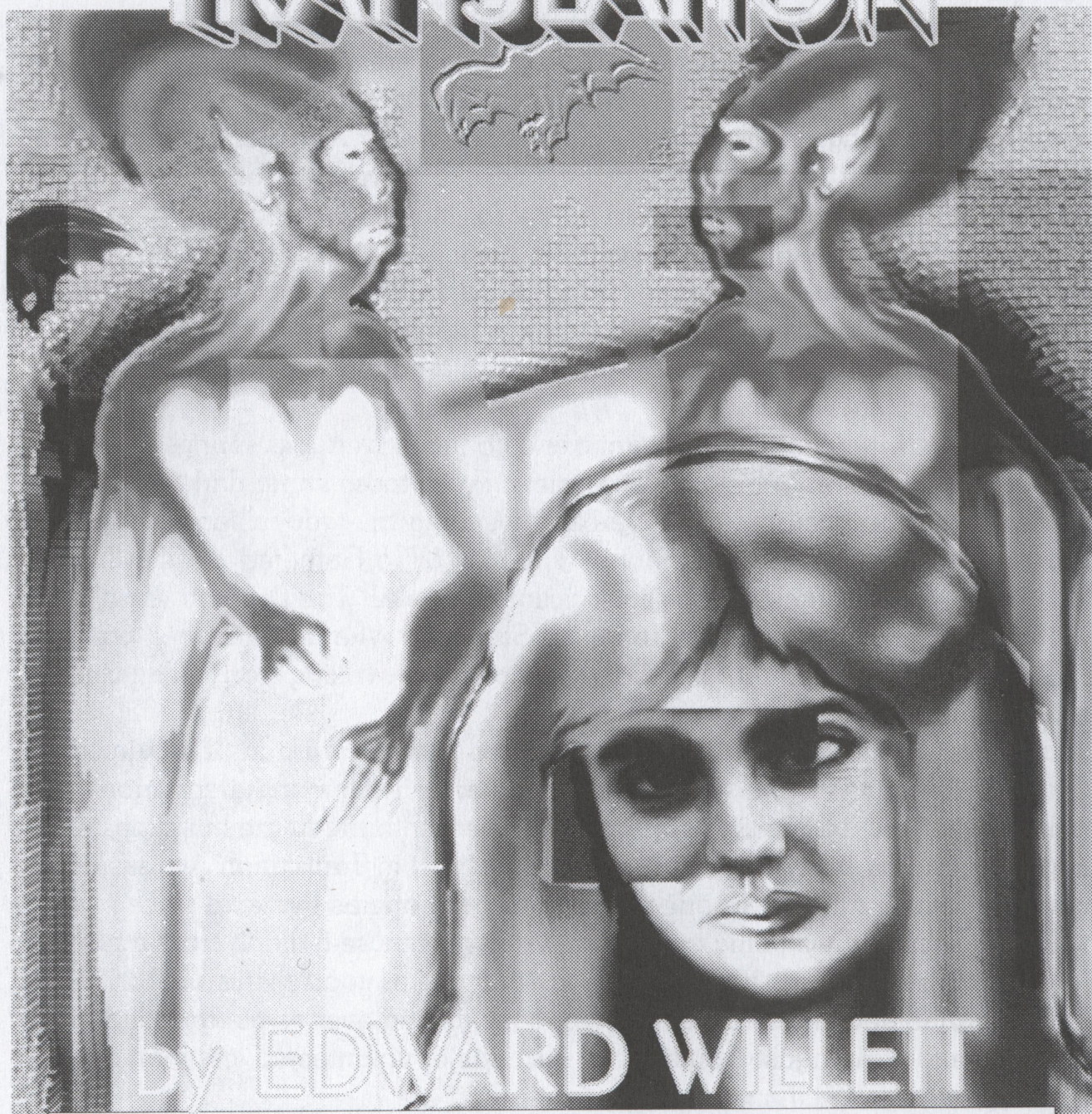
Dennis Valdrón gives ancient evil a wicked new-age twist in "The Viruses of Quiet Desperation". The spirit of Dorothy Parker is alive in karen verba's "no make-up". Barry Hammond's "Lazy Child" sees into the future but clings tenaciously to the present. And Edward Willett's "Lost in Translation" whisks us far into that future. He sent us one of the best space operas I've read since I was a teenager, what are we going to do, turn it down because it didn't cross a boundary? Not this story! And if he sends us another one as good as this, we buy it too.

Phyllis Gotlieb found us some fine poems, taking over as poetry editor after we'd already chosen a few ourselves. Alice Major volunteered less than a week later and we want to thank her too.

We don't have any non-fiction this issue but hope to include some in future issues. See you then.



# LOST IN TRANSLATION



by EDWARD WILLETT

Edward is a full-time freelance writer. His science column appears in several weekly papers, a weekly science spot can be heard on CBC Saskatchewan's Afternoon Edition, and he has completed a novel version of "Lost in Translation." All this, and opera singing and acting too... we hope Edward can find the time to produce more sf as fine as this tense tale of oaths denied and war risked...



**Katy held onto Mama with one hand** and clutched a chocolate ice cream cone with the other. Mama and Daddy talked and laughed and Katy smiled, feeling their laughter tickling her inside, with none of the ache she felt when they were unhappy. And around the laughter-tickle was the warm glow of love—lots and lots of love. That she could always feel.

Behind her waddled a fat little synthibear, piping, “Wait for me, Katy!”, and Katy kept turning around and saying, “Hurry up, bear!”, and laughing as its chubby stuffed legs churned away, though it never got any closer. Katy had won it at the fair, in a shooting gallery. Even though she hadn’t hit a single hologram the woman had called her a winner and given it to her, and that had made the whole day perfect, because the one thing she had really, really wanted for her sixth birthday was a synthibear, and now she had it! And she had ridden all the rides and eaten cotton candy and popcorn and zipmud, and the stars were shining overhead and Hardluck IV’s three moons were bright and full, and Katy knew she was the happiest girl in the galaxy.

But just as they left the fairground, the sky went all ripply and was suddenly full of big silvery things. Katy’s father said a bad word and scooped her up and grabbed her mother’s hand and started running, and Katy felt that her parents were scared and that scared her, too, and she started to cry, and behind her the synthibear kept squeaking, “Come back, Katy, come back, Katy, come back...” until she couldn’t hear it any more, and that made her cry even harder.

All around people shouted and screamed and ran every which way, and a siren wailed from Government House, and Katy heard her father praying, almost sobbing, and she got so scared she couldn’t even cry any more.

They ran down their own street, toward their own house, but now other things filled the sky, black, with wings, and one came right over their heads, high up, except suddenly it wasn’t, it got really big really fast, and it had red glittering eyes and big white teeth and it carried something long and thin in its claws, and now they were on their porch and Katy’s father shoved her through the front door so hard she tumbled over and over and hit her head and started crying again, and she scrambled up to run back to her parents, only something flashed really bright just outside the door and her parents fell down funny and *she couldn’t feel their love anymore—*

Kathryn jerked upright, gasping, and slapped on the lamp, and the winged shapes crowding around her vanished into the pale blue walls of her cabin on the Geneva. Still half caught in sleep, she staggered to her feet. How could



she face a S'sinn? How could she Translate? Karak would have to see reason, find somebody else. She'd—

Halfway to her comp terminal, she remembered. She'd already made that call. She sank back onto the mattress. No other suitable Translator was close enough, Karak had said, and Commonwealth Central insisted negotiations must proceed now. He knew how she felt about the S'sinn, but this was an emergency. He was sorry, but nothing could be done.

Kathryn pulled her knees up to her chest. Of course, the Fairholm/Kisradik situation was critical. Several bloody incidents had left the humans, the S'sinn, and their respective allies angry and nervous. Commonwealth Central had worked a miracle just getting the two sides to talk. "You must do your best, for the Guild, and for the Commonwealth," Karak had said, his beaked, tentacle-encircled face unreadable to her and the light years between them precluding the empathic link they would normally have shared. Then he had broken the connection.

There's no choice, she thought bleakly. No choice but another war. Remember what the last one cost. Remember what it cost you.

Katy sat, every day, in exactly the same place in the big upstairs playroom of the orphanage. She ate, and went to the bathroom, and dressed herself; but she never spoke, never played, never cried, even after the bad dreams. She just stared out the window at Earth's strange blue sky.

She saw the black van pull up to the curb and settle to the ground. She saw the alien emerge in its blue suit and shiny silver backpack and helmet. Any other child would have run to tell the others. But Katy didn't move, even when the stairs to the playroom creaked and Mrs. Spencer said, "Katy? There's some—someone here to see you."

Katy looked back at the sky. Mrs. Spencer had said once she was waiting for her parents, but Katy knew they would never come back, because there was a hole in her heart where their love had been, a hole that could never be filled, a hole into which her mind kept swirling aimlessly, like water going down a black drain. She stared out the window because nothing mattered any more.

The floorboards groaned, and a heavy hand touched her head. "Mrs. Spencer," said a thick, bubbly voice, "this child is suffering bondcut."

"Nonsense! She's perfectly healthy."

"Bondcut is not a disease; it is the trauma empaths suffer when someone with whom they were closely linked dies abruptly."

"Empaths? Katy's not—"

"This child must come with me. You have seen my authorization."



"But she's not well! She needs—"

"What she needs, Mrs. Spencer, is the company of fellow empaths, in the Guild of Translators. The Commonwealth Treaty allows us to draft any—"

"You mean kidnap!"

"—any individual who shows possibility as a Translator. If you will be so good as to pack her things—"

As they left, Mrs. Spencer remarked loudly to Mr. Piwarski that if Katy hadn't been happy in the orphanage with other children, she certainly wouldn't be happy God-knew-where with only monsters for company...

But Katy went quietly with the alien. She wasn't brave; she just didn't care. About anything.

The Guild of Translators changed that. It healed the wound left by her parents' death. It became her family. And it gave her a purpose: to serve the Commonwealth, a bizarre association of disparate races held together only by a love of profitable trade. Those races had ended the Earth-S'sinn war when it began to disrupt commerce, and brought Earth into the Commonwealth; but in time-honored human fashion, one war had sown the seeds of another. The reptilian Hasshingu-Issk and the fiery, bird-like "elves" of Orris had themselves suffered at the claws of the S'sinn in ages past, and sided with Earth in the current dispute over who had first claim to newly discovered (and resource-rich) Fairholm/Kisradik. The Aza—or at least two of their principal Swarms—sided with the S'sinn, as did the water-breathers of Ithkar, Karak's homeworld. Only the slow-moving, slug-like dwellers of the planet humans called Swampworld remained neutral; no doubt they were merely waiting to see how things fell out before choosing sides.

No outside force would end this war, if war came; the Commonwealth would die, and with dimspace leaps allowing surprise attacks on any planet at any time, all seven civilizations might die with it.

Fear of such an unwinnable war, historians held, was all that made the Commonwealth possible. Yet still the Seven Races drifted toward conflict—or maybe, in the case of humans and S'sinn, sought it. These negotiations would decide the future. Full Translation was essential.

If Kathryn could bring herself to provide it.

She went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. She might as well start what would be a very long day, the day she arrived at the place she least wanted to be in all the galaxy: the home of the race that had killed her parents.



The humans' footsteps on the polished marble echoed back from walls so far away they could only be dimly guessed at. Spidery silver columns soared from the floor to the haze-hidden roof, and S'sinn were everywhere—hanging from struts, perched on platforms, gliding from balcony to balcony on black leathery wings. A thousand gleaming red eyes watched the humans approach the dais at the vast hall's center. And it was cold. Kathryn, arms bare in her blue Translator's uniform, shivered as goosebumps raced over her body. She clutched the small metal case in her right hand a little tighter, remembering the last time the S'sinn had darkened her sky.

"These negotiations were to be private!" Ambassador Matthews complained.

"They are," Kathryn said. The vast weight of hostility she sensed from the gathered S'sinn made her head ache, and the dais seemed no closer. "A white-noise curtain will ensure no one overhears."

"But all these—people—will be watching." Matthews gestured distastefully at the hall. "I don't call that private."

"The S'sinn have no concept of visual privacy." Kathryn had only met the Ambassador three hours before, when her shuttle landed, and she detested him already. Slim, fiftyish, with carefully combed steel-gray hair, he was the very model of a modern elder statesman—and apparently a complete fool. Hadn't he done any homework? Surely the man sent by Earth to prevent a war could have spent a few hours QuickLearning!

Unless Earth wanted another war...and if Earth had chosen Matthews with that in mind, what if they'd also chosen her? Could they know about her fear and loathing of the S'sinn, know that that would be the first thing the S'sinn Translator would feel when they Linked? Did they hope that in itself might derail the negotiations?

She rubbed the back of her neck. Paranoia! The Guild didn't work for Earth, it worked for the Commonwealth—for all Seven Races. Its reputation depended on its neutrality, its pledge—her pledge—that Translation would be objective, that every shade of meaning, every emotional nuance, would be perfectly and impartially reproduced. "I renounce all ties to my home planet and species," the Oath ran. "I am no longer human, but Translator. I belong to no race, but am kin to all..."

"...and I serve the good of all, without bias or prejudice. I surrender my will freely, that others may speak through me. I make this Oath in the presence of Seven Races, by all the Races hold holy. May they judge me if I prove false." Kathryn had never been religious, but that last phrase seemed to echo in her mind, underscoring the seriousness of her commitment—that and the lead-like



blanket of solemnity pressing down on her mind from the Seven Witnesses surrounding her in the Guildhall.

Karak's round, dead-black eyes peered at her through the heavy glass of his huge aquarium, his tentacles weaving a slow pattern. A Swampworlder pulsated dreamily in thicker, darker liquid in the tank next to him. Ten metres away, but still too close, a brown-furred S'sinn rested on a padded wooden rack. Beside him hovered a single Aza drone, wings humming, its four golden eyes sharing all with the Swarm. On her left stood three more winged figures, humanoid, but beaked and feathered, a mated trio of Orrisian elves. Behind her...but she didn't want to look at Jim Ornawka just then. Instead she focused on the final two Witnesses, the Hasshingu-Issk. One wore the bright green armband of a Master, vivid against his black scales; the other wore Medic's blue. While the Master watched with unblinking, slit-pupilled yellow eyes, the Medic wheeled forward a metal container. Opening it released a sharp, salty smell that mingled with his own sulphurous scent, stinging Kathryn's nostrils.

She knew what she would see, but still she flinched: the slowly writhing ropy gray mass nestled in the pink nutrient fluid pushed ancient primate "snake!" buttons. But mere squeamishness wouldn't keep her from this climax of ten years of training. At the Medic's nod, she lowered her hand into the case.

At first nothing happened. But slowly tingling spread through her hand, which grew peculiarly heavy; and, as the minutes passed, the squirming tissue in the case diminished. The tingling moved up her arm, into her shoulder, like an internal itch she could not scratch, but she held perfectly still, though silent tears ran down her cheeks. The Witnesses watched impassively.

Just when she thought she couldn't stand the horrible crawling under her skin one minute longer, it stopped.

The container was empty.

Sound rumbled around the room as each Witness confirmed that Kathryn had freely accepted what the humans called The Beast. Behind her, Jim said, "Amen."

Kathryn felt vaguely disappointed. She had just allowed into her body a genetically engineered artificial life form, a universal nervous system interface designed to augment her own natural empathic powers by allowing her to connect directly with the nervous system of any of the Seven Races, and all she had felt was an unscratchable itch.

But now the Master came forward. He opened a small case of bluish metal, revealing two very different syringes and a coil of silvery cord. The Master took out the smaller syringe and proffered it to Kathryn, who took it from his claws, embarrassed by her trembling fingers. Then the Master took out the other



syringe, and plunged its dagger-sized needle into his thigh, his eyes never wavering from Kathryn's face. Kathryn, only too aware of the fear she was broadcasting to the Witnesses, put her own syringe against her bare upper arm and pulled the trigger.

The liquid hissed into her bloodstream. She felt only a slight sting and a faint warmth, but she knew that inside her chemicals were programming The Beast, preparing her for —

This. The Master uncoiled the silvery cord and touched one end to a matching patch behind his barely visible ear. It clung there as he held out the other end to her.

Kathryn knew some Guild trainees backed out even at this point. Many served faithfully in non-Translation duties. To withdraw would not shame her; it would simply prove she wasn't suited to be a Translator. You needed utter confidence in yourself to survive First Translation unscathed. Doubt could be fatal...

Breathing a prayer to One she wasn't even sure she believed in, Kathryn took the cord and touched it to the surgically implanted interface behind her own ear.

Humans talked of sex as the joining of two people. The night before...the young man behind her...but that union had been nothing compared to this!

She had never been to the Hasshingu-Issk homeworld, but in an instant, it surrounded her in all its sun-drenched beauty. She rolled on a baking-hot rock with her mate, fought in the Arena of God for the glory of the Toothed One, ripped out the throat of an issi'ki she had chased for kilometres across a lava plain. She knew the names of the Five Moons and the Cities of the Dead; she shed her skin and burrowed in ecstasy in the cooling mud; she understood why imperfect hatchlings had to be eaten and knew that she could explain that custom to the weakling Races that called it barbaric, if only she could...if only she could remember how! She panicked, her mind thrashing in the welter of overwhelming alien images. She was not Hasshingu-Issk, she was human, and she was lost, lost, lost...

...then she felt the Master lifting her dolphin-like out of the swirling depths, helping her shed him like he shed his skin, until they were linked, but separate; one, but two; a single organism with two minds, two mouths—two languages.

Kathryn opened her eyes and looked around at Jim for the first time. Those sweaty, exciting moments they had shared meant nothing now. This was what she had lived for, trained for, longed for.

The hole in her heart had been boarded over by a decade of empathic help; Jim had made her forget it for the briefest moment; but now, in this



glorious union with her Hasshingu-Issk comrade/friend/lover, that hole was filled.

Kathryn strove to keep her walk steady, her face impassive. She had since Translated with Ava, Orrisian, Ithkarite and Swampworlder. Each time had been even better, even more soul-healing. But now...

...now she had to join with a S'sinn.

The Translation case wasn't the only baggage she carried to the dais.

The round platform bore a table and chairs for the humans and a chest-high podium and resting racks for the S'sinn. Kathryn stepped up onto the platform and waited while Matthews and his two aides took their places at the table. One S'sinn, already in her rack, watched them in silence. Three others stood just behind her.

Each S'sinn wore only a broad metal collar, embossed with a sign. The female on the rack, with the spiral crossed by a lightning bolt, was the Flight Leader—Matthews's opposite number. The other two, male and female, would be aides/bodyguards. Their collars bore spirals without the lightning bolt and they stood with their batlike wings outstretched to show the insignia repeated in gold leaf on the black, leathery membrane. The fourth S'sinn's wings remained folded. His collar bore a triangle inside a circle inside a square—the same symbol Kathryn wore over her left breast.

Her head throbbed as she blocked the S'sinn Translator's attempt to establish a preliminary empathic link. By Guild etiquette that was unforgivably rude, but he'd learn soon enough what was in her mind. She stepped to the center of the dais, set her case on the floor, opened it and took out the injector. Her hands trembled as much as they had at her First Translation.

The S'sinn Translator joined her with his own case. His scent, warm and musky, sent her mind flashing back to that horrible moment when the S'sinn warrior had stooped out of the sky above her parents. The warrior's scent had been rank, stronger, but at base the same alien, predatory smell.

Silently reciting the Oath, "I belong to no race, but am kin to all," she met the S'sinn's ruby-red gaze. The syringe in his clawed hand was empty. His eyes slid down to the still-full injector she held, then back to her face. Mouth so dry she couldn't even swallow, she pressed the injector to her shoulder.

Her hand still trembled as she returned the injector to its case. Behind her Matthews stirred and muttered something, but Kathryn kept her eyes on the S'sinn, her heart pounding painfully. The Programming meant nothing without the Link. She could still turn around, tell Matthews she couldn't do it, tell him he'd have to delay the negotiations, wait for another Translator...

The S'sinn lifted the cord from his case. He proffered her one end, and she



took it hesitantly. With his eyes locked on hers, he touched his end of the cord to the tiny silvery patch beneath his sharply pointed left ear. Then he waited.

If she accepted the Link, there'd be no more hiding how she felt...

Matthews cleared his throat. "Translator Bircher—"

"Quiet!" she snapped. The Guild had no need to suffer fools, even important fools. Impelled by irritation, she firmly touched the cord to the patch under her own ear, and —

—Linked.

Air lifted Jarrikk over the jagged peaks. His twin hearts pounded. Behind him the humans rode the winds clumsily on black plastic wings, driven by raucous, smoking engines, graceless, ugly—but gaining, gaining all the time. He could hear their braying laughter. Desperately he sideslipped, then dove toward the thin white ribbon of river below him. Towering rock walls seemed to leap upward at him.

The humans' laughter changed to angry shouts. A beam slashed by on his left, another on his right. He was almost safe, almost into the gorge where the clumsy humans could never hope to—

Agony lanced his left wing. The stench of burning hair and flesh filled his nostrils, then his wing collapsed, the membrane ripping. He flailed out of control, fluttering down and down until he hit the river in a geyser of spray and pain...

Kathryn twisted her mind, fighting for self, as the S'sinn's deep-seated trauma threatened to overpower her. She could smell burning flesh and feel pain in body parts she didn't even have.

Her control firmed at last, and so did Jarrikk's. He had absorbed her nightmare, as she had absorbed his—and the Link had held. They opened their eyes, and after one look at each other, turned to their respective delegates.

"Begin," they said in unison.

The S'sinn reeled off a long list of grievances dating back to the War. Their words, inflections and body language Kathryn heard, saw and understood through Jarrikk's eyes, and Translated through her human flesh. She faced the humans with a sneer in her voice and a challenge in her stance, the closest human equivalents to the S'sinn's haughty contempt.

The humans responded with their own list, from the original S'sinn attack which they claimed had triggered the War (they didn't mention the half-dozen curious young S'sinn shot out of the sky before that by humans unaware they were sentient) to "this most recent outrage—landing colonists on a world al-



ready inhabited by humans" (they didn't mention that the two colonization attempts occurred simultaneously).

Charge and counter-charge flew, perfectly communicated by Kathryn and Jarrikk, formed by the Link into a flesh-and-blood computer with no concern about the belligerent content of the translated messages. At the end of four bitter hours, in the middle of one of Matthews's harangues, the timed-release antidote to the Programming severed the Link. Kathryn staggered as she lost contact with Jarrikk, feeling for a moment as if half of herself had suddenly died. She took a deep breath, pulled the Link cord free and stopped Matthews in mid-shout. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ambassador, but this session is ended."

Matthews glared at her, glared at the S'sinn, then bowed stiffly, gathered his papers and led his aides off the platform and out of the hall, footsteps clattering. The S'sinn stalked off in the other direction, showing their contempt by staying on the ground, although Kathryn knew Matthews would never realize it unless she told him. She shivered, chilled through and bone weary, and rubbed her throbbing temples. "I love being a Translator," she muttered.

Jarrikk cocked his head at her. Though the Link was gone, her inborn empathic ability remained, and she felt his own weariness and a concern that warmed her. "Sleep well, friend," she signed to him in guildtalk. "Until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he signed back. "Fly safely in this night's dreams." He closed and locked his case and trudged after the other delegates—and Kathryn knew that he stayed on the ground not from contempt, but because of that tragic boyhood contact with humans.

She picked up her case and turned to go—and stopped, feeling the red gaze of the hundreds of watching S'sinn. Instinct urged her to run for the distant exit; but mindful of the Guild's reputation, she walked slowly and deliberately across the marble floor.

In the human quarters, Matthews greeted her coldly. No surprise; Translators' own species often could not separate them from the message they conveyed so perfectly. Matthews undoubtedly thought of her as a near-traitor; but then, she thought of him as an absolute idiot, so they were more than even. He didn't even realize their windowless rooms were another deliberate insult; only the S'sinn's most contemptible criminals were locked up without a view of the sky.

She gladly retired right after supper and settled into bed. But sleep eluded her; what she had seen in Jarrikk's mind kept replaying in her head.

He had been a child on the planet where the War began. Linked, experiencing his memories, she had shared his horror at the humans' brutal murder



of his friends, his joy when the monsters were driven away and the Supreme Flight Leader called for war, his fierce pleasure at the news of each subsequent victory—including the destruction of the colony on the planet humans called Hardluck IV. With him, she had agonized as the humans struck back—and then shared his shame and anger when the Commonwealth stepped in, and his fury when the humans were allowed to return to his own planet, making it the only jointly inhabited world. In youthful defiance, he had sneaked across the heavily patrolled border—and suffered for it. The humans would have killed him if a S'sinn border patrol hadn't seen the incident and demanded his return under the Commonwealth treaty.

If the Guild had not discovered his empathic talent and taken him for their own, he still would have died—at his own hand. The S'sinn expected no less of the flightless. He had as much reason to hate humans as Kathryn had to hate the S'sinn. Today, both had Linked, for the first time, with the creatures of their nightmares—and overcome those nightmares to work together, proof, if only those they were Translating for could see it, that humans and S'sinn need not be enemies.

But the blind fools couldn't see it. To the S'sinn the humans were brutal child-killers and to the humans the S'sinn were hideous batlike monsters, and neither could wait to rid the galaxy of the other.

Kathryn's nightmare that night was Jarrikk's.

As she severed the Link at the end of the following day's acrimonious session, Kathryn felt sick, knowing that the next morning there would be only one thing to Translate: the declaration of war—war, which had slain her parents and crippled Jarrikk. And they could do nothing; nothing but Translate—

Or could they? Kathryn's mouth went dry. The idea that had just come to her, unbidden, would violate her Oath. It could mean expulsion from the Guild, the loss of a second family...

...but it just might stop a war. She touched Jarrikk's wing before he could leave the dais. He turned his ruby eyes on her, and she sensed his puzzlement. "We need private talk," she signed. "Where...?"

For a moment he regarded her, puzzlement growing; then he opened and closed his wings, a gesture equivalent to a human shrug, and signed, "Follow."

As they crossed the floor the hostility of the gathered S'sinn increased tenfold. Kathryn felt like a mouse at an owl convention, but kept her even pace. Jarrikk could move no faster in any event.

He led her through a ten-metre-high arch into a long hall with smaller arches leading off at three levels. They passed through the third ground-floor portal



on the right into a high-ceilinged, airy room with enormous, glassless windows opening onto the gardens outside the Hall of the Flock. Rough-woven tapestries hung from the other three walls above padded resting-racks of polished, multicolored woods, and fragrant bluish vapor rose from a censer over the comp terminal. "Your home?" Kathryn signed.

"Yes."

"Beautiful."

"Thank you." Jarrikk hesitated, then signed, "You need not use guildtalk. Here, no one will overhear, and I understand your tongue."

"You do? But how—" Kathryn stopped as Jarrikk's boyhood memories welled up in her. He had learned the humans' throat-hurting language to spy on them. He could not speak it, but he understood it very well indeed.

That would make her task simpler. Guildtalk was marvelously flexible, as it had to be to serve all four semi-humanoid Races, but it had never been intended to convey the idea she had in mind.

Jarrikk watched her with the natural stillness of a waiting predator. What if he reported her to the Guild, had her removed?

Then war would come anyway, and she would have lost nothing. The Guild would die with the Commonwealth.

Hesitantly she began. "We work well together."

"Agreed," he signed.

"Our negotiators do not."

She felt his grim amusement. "No."

"They do not want peace." That was her first dangerous statement; such speculation was against Guild rules. She waited for Jarrikk's reaction.

"Agreed," he signed after a moment. She sensed wariness.

"Both sides must want peace if we are to avoid war."

Self-evident, but Jarrikk replied slowly. "Agreed."

"So—we need new negotiators."

No hesitation this time—complete denial. "We have no say. Governments choose."

"Perhaps they chose badly." Suddenly she could no longer read his emotion: he was blocking. She rushed on. "We serve the Guild. The Guild serves the Commonwealth. War will destroy Commonwealth and Guild. Our loyalty to the Guild demands we prevent that."

A long pause. "We can do nothing."

"We can!" she insisted. Then she hesitated, suddenly afraid to make the final statement. In guildtalk it would have been impossible; even saying it felt—wrong. "We can fake the Link."



Jarrikk's red eyes widened and he backed away from her, growling. "No!" He let her feel his denial full-force.

"We must!" She countered with determination. "We must negotiate for them. We must find the compromise they will not. We must—"

"Lie! Break Oath! Dishonor Guild! Dishonor selves! Ruin everything!"

"War will destroy the Guild, destroy honor, destroy everything!" Kathryn moved after him. "War killed my parents." She pointed to his scarred, useless wing. "War made you walk!"

Backed into the corner, Jarrikk turned his head away, looked out through the window. A dozen S'sinn soared past. He watched them out of sight, then signed, very slowly, "Dangerous. You cannot know what will happen. Without Programming..."

"I know what will happen if war comes. And so do you."

Jarrikk looked at his crippled left wing, then at her. She felt his bitter agreement. "Yes," he signed. "Yes."

Kathryn blocked him then, trying too late to hide her sudden surge of fear. She felt Jarrikk's agreement waver. Hurriedly she said, "I'll prepare a proposal and send it to you before the morning session," and turned toward the door, barely catching his farewell message from the corner of her eye:

"May the Hunter of Worlds preserve us."

Back in her own quarters, Kathryn sat at the computer, trying to compose her thoughts, to recall all she had learned of Commonwealth law and treaty and the current dispute. They would need a truly workable compromise to pull this off, and she had only a few hours...

Yet her mind kept going back to the discussion with Jarrikk, and to another argument very much like it she'd had with Jim Ornawka, just before she left on the mission that had been aborted to send her here. Jim had come into her room while she was packing. No surprise there; he had persistently pursued her since that night before First Translation. She'd told him that she wanted to concentrate on being a Translator, that sex was part of her old self. It hadn't stopped him.

But the approach Jim had used that last time had been...different. "I just thought you might want something human to remember before spending six months alone with aliens," he'd said, running his finger down her arm.

Kathryn pulled away. "The Oath says—"

"I know, I know. 'I renounce all species ties...' Don't be too quick to take those words to heart, Katy. 'Species ties' are going to be pretty important if this Fairholm business blows up."

Shocked, she could only stare at him.



"Oh, don't get holier-than-thou." He looked hard into her eyes. "If war comes, will you side with aliens against your own kin?"

"They're our kin, too!"

"Even S'sinn?"

She tried desperately to read his emotions, then, and failed; he was blocking. Somehow, though, she knew her own reaction was nakedly obvious.

"Thought so," Jim had said, and left her, shaken and shamed. She'd slammed her suitcase shut and stalked out of the room that had been her home for half her life without even looking back. I'm better than that, she remembered thinking. I meant my Oath.

And now that same determination to treat aliens as her kin, as the Oath demanded, was leading her to break that Oath.

She wondered what Jim would have said.

She turned back to her computer, but she'd only been working for an hour when her terminal beeped, announcing a message. She punched "receive."

Words scrolled by. "Researched matter. Found following: 'Attempts to Link without Programming produce severe pain; one Orrisian volunteer suffered respiratory and circulatory arrest and narrowly escaped death. In all cases the Translator symbiote died, and volunteers required long periods of convalescence due to immune-system rejection of the symbiote dead tissue. All recovered, but were no longer able to function as Translators; their bodies rejected all attempts to introduce a new symbiote. Native empathic abilities survived, but augmentation became impossible.' Jarrikk."

Kathryn blanked the screen, then stared blindly at the windowless wall. Pain she could face—had faced, over and over—but the rest... "No longer able to function as Translators." It would be like bondcut all over again. A part of her would die.

But millions of others would die—fully—if she didn't take the risk. And Jarrikk didn't say where he'd gotten the information. Maybe he was having second thoughts, and was just trying to frighten her out of her scheme.

Well, he'd frightened her, all right—but not enough to make her quit. To prove to herself she meant that, she got up, took an empty Programming vial, filled it with distilled water, then colored the liquid pale pink with a drop of blood from her finger. She placed it in her Translator's case, but stared at it a long time before slowly closing and latching the case and returning to her terminal.

Near dawn, when sleep could no longer be denied, she felt she had barely begun—but she could do no better. She had the computer translate the proposal and transmit it to Jarrikk, then fell fully clothed into bed and instant sleep.



Only seconds later, it seemed, someone knocked. "Duty calls, Translator Bircher," Matthews said through the door. "One hour. We're all anxious to conclude this."

I'll bet you are, Kathryn thought savagely. She splashed cold water on her face, surveyed herself in the mirror, shuddered, then returned to the computer to review her creation. Jarrikk had sent it back with a few eminently sensible changes. We make a good team, she thought as she read them—but if the information Jarrikk had sent her were true, she'd never Link with him, or anyone, again.

She cleared the computer and picked up her case. If Matthews had done the work she had just attempted, she would have held to her Oath. But from his actions she could almost believe war had been intended from the moment Earth colonized Fairholm/Kisradik.

At the door, she paused. If that were true, she was about to throw away her career, maybe her life, uselessly. Why should Earth accept a compromise if it truly wanted war?

Because Earth depends on its allies, she told herself, and they'll accept anything reasonable that preserves the Commonwealth. Even Matthews is enough of a diplomat to understand that.

She hoped.

The anger of the S'sinn packed into every recess of the Great Hall beat down on Kathryn like desert heat as she followed Matthews to the dais, but the air only felt colder. Jarrikk met her, and ritualistically they made their preparations. But when Kathryn pressed the injector to her arm, she felt nothing. The Beast inside her slumbered on. She took her end of the Link—and froze.

She could feel the ravenous attention of S'sinn and humans, could almost hear them saying, "Do it! Link! Give us war!"

She could. She could make some excuse, return to her quarters, inject the real Programming, and Translate perfectly, as her Oath demanded. War would come, but she would still be a Translator, still have that wonderful union with other races, the only thing that could fill the void left by her parents' deaths.

Her parents...they'd left Earth for Hardluck IV, dreaming of building a new and better world, only to have their dreams snuffed out by war. What she was about to do would destroy her dream just as surely—but maybe, just maybe, it would ensure that millions of others could keep theirs.

She pictured her father standing in her place, and her hesitation vanished. She touched the cord to the patch behind her ear.

Agony ripped her open, screamed through every nerve, as The Beast woke to alien, untranslatable signals. Kathryn's vision grayed and the world spun



around her, roaring, but she clung grimly to consciousness, fighting for control, fighting to hide her suffering from Matthews, and gradually, oh-so-gradually, the pain subsided, leaving her nauseated but functioning—and, abruptly, terrified. She'd gone empathy-blind! She could sense nothing, not the hostility of the assembled S'sinn, not the worry of her Translation partner, not the impatience of Matthews. The symbiote inside her had died, and her own abilities with it!

Feeling blind, deaf and desperate, she nodded tersely to Jarrikk, and the S'sinn delegation began.

Kathryn heard only growling gibberish, but she began talking. "Upon consideration, the First Flight of S'sinndikk has realized that our mutual recriminations have been of little benefit to ourselves or to our allies. In the hope that these negotiations may yet produce a fruitful and lasting accommodation between us concerning the planet Fairholm/Kisradik, we propose the following compromise...

Matthews heard her out, expressionless. Her inability to perceive his emotions unnerved her. How did non-empaths communicate? She might as well be talking to herself.

The S'sinn stopped, and hastily she concluded, "Do you have a response at this time?"

Matthews whispered to one of his aides, then said, "We will study your remarks and make a counter-proposal at our next session. Tomorrow morning?"

Jarrikk began speaking, and Kathryn held her breath. If he Translated truly, as his Oath demanded, there would only be confusion on the part of the S'sinn—confusion and, very shortly, suspicion; suspicion that the human Translator had, unthinkably, lied. And the mere fact that a Translator had lied could destroy the Guild and Commonwealth as thoroughly as any war...

Matthews frowned as the translation of his simple remark went on for an inordinate amount of time, but there had been similar differences before. Besides, Kathryn thought, what could he possibly suspect? Translators don't lie. Everyone knows that.

Another thought struck her, and she groaned inwardly. What would happen at the "next session" if she couldn't Translate?

One thing at a time. There might not even be another session. And if the S'sinn did agree to it, how was she to know, maimed as she was?

Jarrikk found a way. As the S'sinn finished speaking, he nodded—a human gesture meaningless to his own people. "Agreed," she told Matthews.

The delegates departed, and the galleries buzzed as the news spread among



the S'sinn that negotiations would continue. Kathryn's knees buckled unexpectedly and she would have fallen if Jarrikk hadn't caught her. He gently tugged the Link free and she leaned against his broad, furry chest for a moment. "Thanks," she murmured, then, wary of how the crowd might react, straightened hurriedly. She knew Jarrikk wouldn't take it amiss; after two full sessions of Translation, they knew each other as well as anyone ever could know another person, better than she had ever known another human—certainly better than she had known Jim, whose image came to her unbidden, standing in her room, suggesting she might break her Oath...

Which she had. She shook her head, confused. "I'm blind," she told Jarrikk. He would know how she meant it.

"Very brave human," he signed. "Tomorrow both sides will present modifications to proposal, but I expect success."

"How?" Kathryn cried. "I can't Translate." A lump in her throat choked her; she swallowed angrily. She would not cry, not in self-pity; never!

"Please come to quarters?" Jarrikk cocked his head to one side, watching her.

Kathryn blinked. "Why?"

"Please. All will be explained."

How? she thought, but, "All right," she said.

In a way it was a relief not to feel the crowd's hostility as she walked with Jarrikk back to his sunny room. But when he ushered her through the arch, she stopped so suddenly he ran into her.

Karak's face looked out from the screen of Jarrikk's comp terminal.

"What—"

"Translator Bircher," said Karak. "I can hear you, but you are not in the visual pickup field."

She stayed put. "What's going on?"

"Translator Bircher, Translator Annette Mathieu is en route to S'sinndikk and will take your place in the morning session."

"Annette—" Kathryn stared at Karak, then suddenly turned furiously on Jarrikk. "You told him!"

He made no denial; simply stood, with inhuman stillness. She spun to face the terminal and strode into pickup range. "You said there were no other Translators near enough—"

"I said no suitable Translator was close enough. You were the ideal choice, therefore neither Translator Mathieu nor Translator Ornawka were suitable." Karak ignored Kathryn's glare. "The Council of Masters felt that if you and Jarrikk could overcome your mutual mistrust and successfully Link, it would



demonstrate graphically the possibility—and need—of humans and S'inn working together.” He circled one tentacle. “It worked.”

“It worked because I broke my Oath!”

“All unfolded as anticipated.”

“Anticipated!” Kathryn’s face flamed. “You expected me to break my Oath?”

“You did not break it,” Karak said. “You upheld it. Your Oath states that all races are your kin. You kept your kin from destroying each other.”

“But Translators can’t lie. If the Seven Races knew—”

“Please see they do not find out.”

“I need to sit down.” Kathryn’s stomach churned and a hot steel band seemed clamped around her forehead. She looked around, but of course there was no place to sit in Jarrikk’s chambers; she had to settle for leaning on one of the padded wooden racks. Jarrikk moved close beside her. “Why me? Why didn’t you send Jim?” Did Karak know what Jim had said to her before she left? she wondered, suddenly worried for him.

“Translator Ornowka was not suitable, but he was very helpful. He helped us ascertain the depth of your commitment to the Oath.”

Kathryn straightened. “That argument was staged?”

“Translator Ornowka was very helpful,” Karak repeated.

Kathryn shook her aching head and coughed. Jarrikk placed one clawed hand on her shoulder and she leaned gratefully back against his warm bulk. “Guess I misjudged Jim,” she said softly. “But I’m still going to kill him next time I see him.” She raised her voice. “There’s something else. I’m empathy-blind. I’m—I’m not a Translator any more.”

“True,” Karak said simply, and Kathryn closed her eyes. She’d hoped even yet that Jarrikk’s information had been wrong; a child’s hope. “However,” Karak continued, “your natural empathy will slowly recover.”

Kathryn’s eyes flew open. “Truth?”

“Translators do not lie.”

Kathryn grimaced. “So what happens now?”

“I see you are already feeling ill. This will provide the perfect excuse for you to withdraw. The ship delivering Translator Mathieu has an unusually well-equipped medical bay. Its personnel will take care of you.”

Jarrikk moved around in front of her, blocking her view. “Until then, I take care of you,” he signed.

She wished she could read him; at least he could read her. She let her gratitude flood her. He reached out his hand and patted her knee clumsily, and she laughed, knowing he had drawn the gesture from her memories. He moved



around behind her again. Karak watched them with no visible change of expression. "So it all worked out the way you predicted," she said to him, almost angrily. "But you couldn't know that I'd—do what I did. I almost didn't. I almost backed out. The thought of no longer being a Translator..." Her throat closed on the words.

"We didn't know," Karak said. "One can never know. Nor did we know what Jarrikk would do—until we registered his library search for information on the effects of Linking without Programming. Such information is normally restricted, but I personally informed him of the risk you were both about to take. The decision, however, was entirely yours—and his."

"Both?" Kathryn twisted around to stare at Jarrikk.

"Both," Jarrikk signed.

"Why? There was no need..."

"Was. S'sinn would be shamed if human took risk, S'sinn did not. Such shame could poison relations."

"But they'll never know!"

"I would know. Someday they may, too." He touched her forehead gently.

"Very brave human. Could not let you risk what I would not."

"But if you didn't Program..."

"As of today, two fewer Translators," said Karak solemnly. "Two new names in Hall of Honour. And new hope of peace."

Kathryn didn't take her eyes off Jarrikk. Crippled by the humans, his only worth in S'sinn society was as a Translator—and he had thrown that away for the sake of her wild scheme, trusting her completely...she laid her hand on the soft fur of his chest. "Very brave S'sinn." All this time she'd thought he could still read her, he'd really been as blind as she was. But he had still comforted her. "Very kind S'sinn," she whispered.

Jarrikk touched her forehead again. "Very good friend," he signed.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes." Without turning around, she asked Karak, "What use are we to the Guild now?"

"When your natural abilities return, you will still be able to seek out new human and S'sinn Translators. We will now need many more."

Kathryn remembered the day Karak took her from the orphanage. "I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

But Jarrikk signed sharply, "No. S'sinn will not accept such judgment from flightless one."

"Then what..." Kathryn stopped, appalled, as the answer crashed in on her from Jarrikk's memories. Flightless, no longer a Translator, Jarrikk would do what he would have done had he never become one—he would die, and



S'sinndikk would honor his name. That part of her that had been S'sinn warmed with pride at the glory of his sacrifice—but the human part of her went as cold as the depths of space. She wanted to scream at him, to reason with him, but, at war within herself, all she could manage was a choked, "No!"

"It is our way."

"Karak..." Kathryn turned pleadingly toward the terminal.

"It is the S'sinn way," Karak said, and his image vanished.

Kathryn faced Jarrikk again. "But I don't want you to die!"

The words exploded out of her.

Jarrikk opened his scarred wing. "Only in Translation am I free of pain. I no longer have that freedom. Death is my friend."

"I would not sentence you to a life of pain," Kathryn whispered. "But I will not be free of pain. Not if you die."

Jarrikk touched her cheek. "You will remember me. You will remember my memories. In you, I will live on."

Kathryn had no more arguments to give him. She gazed mutely at his face, the face she had thought horrible only a few days before, but that now seemed sadly beautiful.

Jarrikk gestured out the open windows. "We have a few hours. Are you well enough to see the glories of our city? We are artists as well as warriors. There are many beautiful things I would show you."

"You already have," Kathryn said; but she took his hand and walked with him out under the open sky. The old pain, or something like it, was back in her heart; but this time, it was there to stay.

## LAZY CHILD

by **BARRY HAMMOND**

squatting mud ape

squints at the stars

unreachable

defeated, he turns his face to the earth

this he can divide

this he can fight over

he'd even rather be buried in it

amid the worms than struggle for that distant, flickering light

he frowns and pouts

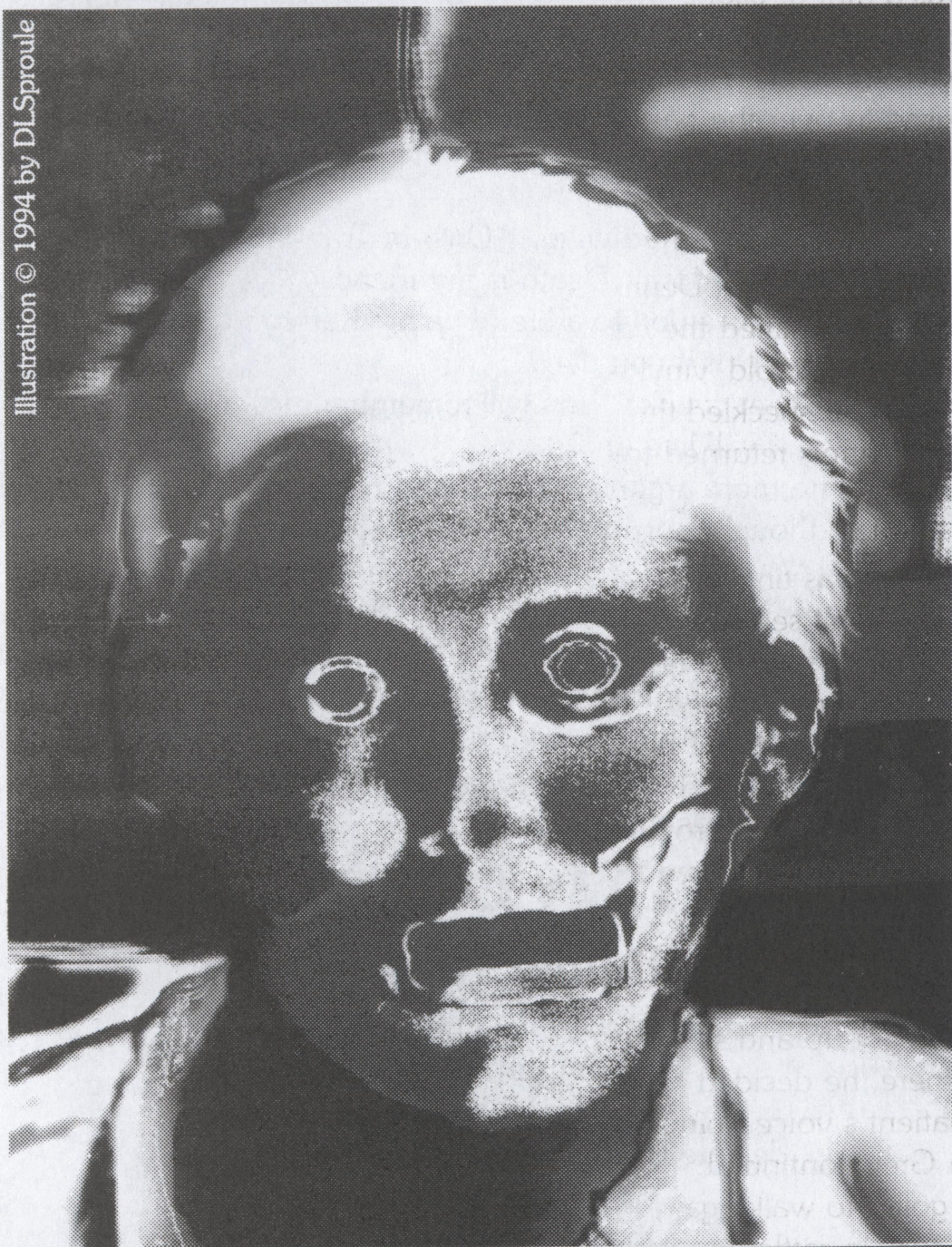
still a child

like his father.



# THE DUMMY WARD

Illustration © 1994 by DLSproule



by DAVID NICKLE

David's story "The Sloan Men" was definitely one of the highlights of *Northern Frights 2*, and "The Toy Mill", a story he co-wrote with fellow Torontonian Karl Schroeder in *Tesseract 4* won the **1992 Aurora Award** for Best Short Story in English. "The Dummy Ward" is an eerie and effective blend of SF and horror that tests the boundaries of what it means to be human.



**Different smells, thought Dennis** as the speckling cleared. There was a hint of ozone where the antiseptic should have been; intermingled with that, another sharp tang — like copper, an old penny on the tongue. And where was the stink? There was not a trace of the diaper-pail stink he'd been getting used to over the past two weeks of his stay at the General Ford North-Eastern Regional Trauma Centre.

He was in another long ward — a dim, still corridor of drawn yellow curtains, it was nothing like the trauma ward where he'd spent the lion's share of his stay. In the distance, Dennis could hear the buzzing snore of machinery that matched and amplified the capillary-drone behind his eyes. There was a chair beside the door, an old, vinyl visitor's rocking chair. Dennis lowered himself into it, and his vision speckled threateningly as he did so. But it did not darken, and in the end Dennis returned to himself.

"Who's there?"

The voice was tinny, as though it came from an intercom. But when Dennis looked, he didn't see a speaker anywhere nearby. Dennis cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry. I seem to have —" What? Blacked out? Wandered off? Dennis was suddenly embarrassed. "I'm Dennis Robertson," he finally managed. "I'm not really supposed to be here."

"Dennis Robertson." The voice seemed to be coming from behind the curtain opposite Dennis. Through the distortion, Dennis couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman. "I used to be good with names, but since the crash, I have to repeat introductions back before they stick. Dennis Robertson, right?"

"Right."

"Well I'm Tom Grey. I'm not supposed to be here, either."

Dennis got up and stepped over to the drawn curtain. If there was an intercom in there, he decided he would call a nurse, get back to his ward. But what was a patient's voice doing coming out of a bedside intercom?

Tom Grey continued: "The doctors here are saying my spine's broken, and I'm not going to walk again. I think that's a lot of crap."

The curtain rattled on its runners as Dennis pulled it aside.

"Of course, maybe I'm just in denial. What do you think, Dennis?"

Dennis had no answer. He stood frozen in place, gaping.

"Denial, or old-fashioned stubbornness?"

Jesus. Dennis couldn't make the word.

Tom Grey was a simulacrum of a man. Pink latex skin stretched like a stock-



ing-mask over the ridges and seams of his plastic face and he wore a toupee of silver-grey hair on the dome of his skull. His mouth moved up and down mechanically, like a ventriloquist dummy's. The most credible aspects of his visage were his eyes, which were a light hazel and convincingly shot with blood.

Tom Grey lifted his arm and Dennis watched, fascinated, as he flexed his fingers. Dennis thought he could hear tiny clicks — carbon-fibre knuckles cracking arthritically as the joints bent and straightened again.

"See?" said Tom Grey. "Strong as an ox. You should see the guy two beds down — he can't do anything but blink."

"That's—" Dennis felt a wave of dizziness and stepped back to the rocking chair. He sat down hard. "That's too bad."

Tom Grey's realistic eyes swiveled to look at the ceiling. "Tell me about it. He's got three kids, one who's going to college next year. His wife comes in every day and she tells me this. Who knows what they'll do, now he's —" he glanced back at Dennis, and his voice dropped to a staticky hiss of a whisper "—a vegetable?"

He'd seen things like Tom Grey before.

Dennis was working the phones at the tele-dealership that day. The dealership was pushing its mail-order service, and the pitch was emphasizing GF's comprehensive warranty-insurance package. Dennis and the dozen or so other reps who'd pulled pit duty watched the pitch on a big wall-monitor. Dennis was paying more attention than usual — he'd just bought the Taurus, his first GF product since joining the company, and he had lately found himself seeking affirmation for the decision. The warranty-insurance package was shaping up to be very affirmative indeed.

About fifteen minutes into the show, the host announced a special segment. He stepped off to one side as the curtains behind the half-dozen showroom cars began to part. The lights in the showroom dimmed, the host stepped out of view, and new lights lit up the glassed-in space behind.

It was a concrete-walled corridor, running parallel to the glass wall, that extended beyond the showroom in one direction and ended in a scarred cinder block terminus near the spot where the host stood.

The view cut to a remote shot of the same or a similar corridor. At its end, a burgundy GF Lance idled, waiting its turn like a bull in an abattoir.

Without warning, the unseen driver threw it into gear. The Lance lurched forward and out of the frame.

Seven point three seconds later (this according to the running digital time display at the bottom of the screen) the Lance hit the terminus in the show-



room. Although it was moving at sixty-seven point one-ought-three kph when it struck (another superimposed readout confirmed this number), there were no flames. The front end accordioned even as the rear tires left the concrete floor and the car's windshields cracked and buckled. A hubcap popped off the front wheel and flew towards the showroom audience, leaving a scuff-mark where it struck the thick glass between them.

Even through the headset, the noise of the crash stabbed at Dennis' ears.

As he lowered his hands, Dennis could make out what he was sure were screams. Not from the showroom audience — they sat in a shocked silence — but inside the car itself, screams and weeping noises, muffled by the enormous airbag which had plastered against the fragmented safety glass. Something was moving under the airbag.

"In the last century," said the host, "The old automobile manufacturers began an ambitious safety testing program on all their vehicles. Those were the days when shoulder-straps and safety glass were as far as anyone was willing to go with passenger protection."

As he spoke, a yellow-jumpsuited GF team poured into the chamber and surrounded the wreckage of the Lance.

Two of them hefted an enormous set of metal cutters and set to work on the driver's side door.

"They were sending their customers into the most terrible, most horrific circumstances," the host continued. "They were sending you— people just like you! — to places they'd never been themselves, places they'd only imagined. So Ford, General Motors and other major automobile manufacturers, decided to visit some of those places. They used dummies — crash-test dummies — to learn more about what happened to the human body in a crash. They wanted to make sure that anything that might happen to a driver of one of their cars would happen to a crash test dummy first.

"In those days, that was enough."

The Lance's door came away with a shriek. The crew with the cutters stepped back, while two medics pushed the sagging airbag out of the way. A third and fourth medic were maneuvering a stretcher through the car's detritus as the camera started to zoom in on the jagged-edged doorway.

"In those days, of course, four-fifths of all drivers could afford to carry some form of medical insurance. Major insurance carriers still issued collision policies. Motorists knew there was at least one hospital in their city that had a well-equipped trauma unit. When they were out of the hospital, drivers could count on a whole array of out-patient services, from counseling and physiotherapy sessions to home care programs to get them back on their feet."



Something like a hand appeared around the edge of the airbag, and one of the medics took hold of it. "You're going to be all right, sir. Take it easy," she said.

"General Ford owners know they can't count on any of those things today," said the host. "And because of that, General Ford knows that it's no longer enough to just make the safest cars on the road. Now, automobile safety is just the beginning of our responsibilities to our customers. The time-honored 'crash test' is just the beginning of our safety research program. Using new holographic artificial-intelligence processors and the most sophisticated animatronics technology in the world, we can now take our testers through every phase of the trauma — from the moment of the crash through the stay at a General Ford-registered trauma centre, to the day the General Ford owner gets behind the wheel of her own brand new Scorpio and puts all the nastiness behind her."

The airbag slid away, and the trauma team moved their patient onto the stretcher. The thing arched its shoulders and opened its ventriloquist-dummy mouth so wide it clicked.

"I can't feel my legs!" it screamed. "Oh Jesus fucking Mary, I'm paralyzed!"

Mercifully, the camera cut away from the dummy and returned to the host, who now was sitting in the driver's seat of a gleaming new Mustang convertible, his arm slung confidently over the back of the seat.

"We know what happens to the human body in a crash. Now, armed with the latest in predictive technology and the most sophisticated diagnostic techniques, engineers at the General Ford Group are learning just what happens to the human being."

Before the host could say anything more, the phones started ringing. Dennis had little time to watch the rest of the infomercial, but he closed few sales that day nonetheless.

Tom Grey stared at Dennis as the reality of his predicament settled in: In his black-out, he had wandered farther afield than ever before. He was in a dummy ward.

Dennis had always imagined that General Ford's testing facilities would be quite distant from their actual trauma centres — if for no other reason than to avoid exactly the kind of situation Dennis found himself in now. GF programmed their AI crash-test dummies with simulacrum-personalities to match their features, and designed blind spots in their programming such that the AI's remained convinced they were really people — GF drivers who had hit an icy patch on the highway or jumped a red light or smashed into a guardrail. Dennis understood that when they saw other dummies, the images they saw were simply those of other unlucky GF drivers, bloodied and bandaged. When they looked at their



room. Although it was moving at sixty-seven point one-ought-three kph when it struck (another superimposed readout confirmed this number), there were no flames. The front end accordioned even as the rear tires left the concrete floor and the car's windshields cracked and buckled. A hubcap popped off the front wheel and flew towards the showroom audience, leaving a scuff-mark where it struck the thick glass between them.

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As he spoke, a yellow-jumpsuited GF team poured into the chamber and surrounded the wreckage of the Lance.

Two of them hefted an enormous set of metal cutters and set to work on the driver's side door.

"They were sending their customers into the most terrible, most horrific circumstances," the host continued. "They were sending you— people just like you! — to places they'd never been themselves, places they'd only imagined. So Ford, General Motors and other major automobile manufacturers, decided to visit some of those places. They used dummies — crash-test dummies — to learn more about what happened to the human body in a crash. They wanted to make sure that anything that might happen to a driver of one of their cars would happen to a crash test dummy first.

"In those days, that was enough."

The Lance's door came away with a shriek. The crew with the cutters stepped back, while two medics pushed the sagging airbag out of the way. A third and fourth medic were maneuvering a stretcher through the car's detritus as the camera started to zoom in on the jagged-edged doorway.

"In those days, of course, four-fifths of all drivers could afford to carry some form of medical insurance. Major insurance carriers still issued collision policies. Motorists knew there was at least one hospital in their city that had a well-equipped trauma unit. When they were out of the hospital, drivers could count on a whole array of out-patient services, from counseling and physiotherapy sessions to home care programs to get them back on their feet."



Or maybe some local animal. It would be a nice change from tump meat. Taking the rifle and a length of rope, she hurried outside.

The cage held a creature about a meter tall, naked, gray, with a face of appalling ugliness. It hopped up and down in a squatting position, skinny fingers shaking the bars of its cage, stinking and gibbering with temper. It looked like a thin humanoid toad—but it was not human, therefore it couldn't carry the sickness, therefore it was nothing to be afraid of. Holding the rifle in one hand she began to tilt the trap.

"You're a bucca, aren't you? I'm taking you to the cottage. If you try to escape I'll shoot you. Do you understand what I'm saying?" To demonstrate her meaning she touched the rifle's button, transforming a patch of grass to smoking ash.

"Let me go or I'll set the trolls on you!" the bucca screeched.

Recovering quickly from the shock of hearing human speech from such a creature, Ruth pushed over the cage, seized the creature by a skinny arm and roped its hands behind its back. "Let's get something straight. You can't frighten me because I don't believe in trolls or any of that garbage." She hobbled the bucca's ankles, allowing it just enough slack to walk.

"We are the demons!" yelled the bucca dramatically. "And we live in bottomless pits!"

"There's nothing supernatural about you, and you live in abandoned tin mine workings," said Ruth calmly. "We've known about you for centuries, here in Cornwall. Now get moving!" She jabbed the bucca with the muzzle of the rifle. Once indoors, she lashed the little monster to a roof post and sat down. The bucca quietened, darting puzzled glances in her direction. A human who was not scared of buccas was new to its experience. "Now tell me why you keep breaking down my walls," said Ruth.

This triggered off a fit of chauvinism. "We are the new people!" cried the bucca. "We are the future. You are the last remnants of a doomed race. So we're taking over everything that was yours, including the tumps. Once the tumps are gone, you'll starve and we'll move in."

"That's ridiculous. You're just nasty little monkeys."

"You don't know the history of the buccas."

"I don't suppose you do, either."

She turned away angrily. Now she'd caught the little monster she didn't know what to do with him. Could she shoot him, in cold blood? Probably not. But maybe she could frighten him into staying away from her.

Then something more urgent demanded her attention.

"Ruth! Ruth!"



damage around here?"

The other shrugged, avoiding Arthur's gaze. "I'm not their keeper."

The men were already clattering down the circular staircase to the ground floor, talking excitedly. Outside, they split into two groups, scurrying along under cover of the stone walls in a pincer movement. Arthur watched from the door, helpless, with Trevellyan close behind him.

"They don't often get the chance of a woman," said Trevellyan, as if in apology.

"You bastard!" snapped Arthur. Swinging round, he drove his fist against the muscular wall of Trevellyan's stomach.

The bandit chief was unimpressed, and apart from raising his eyebrows in surprise at Arthur's temerity, he didn't move. Arthur began to run toward the distant cottage with crippled clumsiness. Trevellyan laughed, picked up Arthur's heavy walking stick and loped after him.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder and saw Trevellyan coming. There was something casual about the big man's movements, as though it was all a game, as though Arthur was a frisky dog he was humouring. As though Arthur was already dead and therefore of no consequence. So when Arthur screamed out, it was never clear in anyone's mind whether he was warning the woman in the garden, or appealing to her for help.

"Ruth!"

Trevellyan laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Ruth!"

His mind exploded, his reason slipped away and he never felt the second blow that broke his good leg.

For Ruth, it began as a very ordinary morning. She arose from her bed of old blankets and newer furs, stretched, walked naked into the cool outdoors and used her primitive outhouse, pumped a bucket of water from the well, splashed water over herself and gasped at the sudden cold, returned to the cottage and threw a few sticks on last night's embers. Kneeling, she puffed the fire into life and hung a kettle of water over it.

She went to the window to check on the tump.

The animal grazed contentedly in a corner of its paddock. She was about to turn away when a movement caught her eye. The leaves of a tree beside the wall were shaking, yet there was no wind. A rope hung from the branches; it twitched as she watched it. Now she could see the top of the bucca trap above the wall. It had fallen from the tree and was shaking violently.

She'd caught a bucca.



Or maybe some local animal. It would be a nice change from tump meat. Taking the rifle and a length of rope, she hurried outside.

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Tom Grey's gaze fell away from Dennis. It landed on his angular hands, and he studied them awhile.

"I was trying to merge from the Lawrence on-ramp," he finally said. "Northbound. But it was busy, and it looked like I was going to get pinned at the merging point. So I took a chance."

Of course, nothing of the sort had happened. Engineers had strapped the dummy in a test car, set its foot against the gas pedal, and put it on a course at the end of which stood an implacable cinder block wall.

To the dummy, the test course was the Don Valley Parkway's Lawrence Avenue on-ramp, northbound. There was no wall; just fifty yards of merging lane, a thick wall of traffic on the left, guardrail to the right. Tom Grey's perception was that he existed in this unhappy circumstance because of his own hubris; he had stupidly decided to take a chance.

In fact, Dennis reflected, Tom Grey had never stood a chance. The wall was ever before him, invisible.

"I don't remember much for awhile after that," said the dummy. "They pumped me up with a lot of drugs. They tell me I was forced off the highway by a semi, and my car flipped over on its roof when it hit the curb. You remember much about your crash?"

"No," said Dennis. "Not much at all."

"Do you remember a light?"

Dennis thought about it, shook his head.

"Me neither," said Tom Grey quickly. "I only bring it up because I hear that some people do see lights. A near-death experience, it's called. I guess neither of us rated; we weren't near-enough dead."

"It felt pretty near to me," said Dennis.

"Close but not touching." Tom Grey had adopted a gently chiding tone. "Don't forget that, Dennis. You're going to be out of here in no time."

Dennis smiled. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it." Tom Grey coughed. He glanced over at his empty night-table then, and swore.

"What is it?" Dennis asked.

"Ah, nothing. The goddamn nurse took my water jug away. All this talking has left me parched. Well, nothing for it but to call." He reached for the intercom button at his side.

Dennis felt a sudden panic, and when he spoke it was nearly a shout: "Wait!" The dummy's hand froze, and he looked at Dennis with questions in his eyes. "Don't bother the nurse," said Dennis, struggling to find calm for his voice. "I'll go find you some water."



And if she did catch one—well, she'd teach the little devil a lesson he wouldn't forget in a hurry.

The trap stood almost two meters high and took the form of a bell-shaped cage, open at the bottom with rocks woven into the rim. A tree leaned handily over the wall near the part she'd repaired. She attached a rope to the trap and hauled it into the tree. Then she wedged the end of the rope between two rocks at the base of the wall, so that if they were disturbed the cage would fall, trapping anything underneath.

She stood back and admired her handiwork. It was a satisfying sight. The cage was almost hidden in the branches of the tree. The buccas would never see it in the dark. And if they caught sight of the rope, with their natural curiosity they wouldn't be able to resist fiddling with it.

Suddenly hungry—she hadn't eaten since breakfast—she climbed the stile into her walled vegetable garden, checking the rocks for security. One black night three years ago, the tump had nudged an unstable section and the wall had collapsed. She couldn't blame the buccas for that; she'd found the section lying flat, still intact. The tump had made the most of its opportunity, devouring the entire contents of her garden: cabbages, peas, potatoes, carrots, fruit bushes, the lot. A hungry winter might have followed with nothing but tump meat, gleanings from the countryside, and the slimy remains of the tump's alfalfa silage to sustain her.

But that had been the winter of Lucius.

Lucius. . . .

She'd come home from the beach one evening, opened the door—and her bucket of kelp had clattered to the floor as she gave a little scream of terror.

A man sat in her chair.

A man, poisoning the air with his germs. She stared at him helplessly. It was too late to run. Her flesh was already violated. She had caught the Sickness and would be dead before the year was out.

"I had to come," he said. The words echoed and re-echoed around the walls. He had to come. It was always the men who made the approach. It was always the men whose lust conquered their fear.

"Why me?" she asked hopelessly.

"Because you're beautiful."

"Is that any reason to kill me?"

"I'm sorry. I can't help that. I'll be kind to you."

She knew who he was. Lucius, from Botallack. They'd shouted to each other in passing, many times. "You'll be kind? It's already too late for that."

"I haven't been near anyone for years; I may not be infected. Ask yourself,



talk to buccas?"

"No. But that doesn't mean they aren't real enough."

A roar of laughter. "I told you he was mad! Well, what shall we do with him, this cripple who's mad enough not to be afraid of us?"

"Throw him down one of the old mine shafts," somebody said. "That's where they figure the buccas live. They can look after him."

"Throw him off the cliff! Let the mermaids keep him!"

"Not just yet," said the leader. "First, we'll make the most of him. He came from the old lighthouse over there. He'll have food there; maybe a tump. Do you have a tump?" he asked Arthur.

There was no point in denying it. "Yes."

"People who live in houses always have tumps. Traveling men don't, because tumps don't move fast enough. So we have to take what we find. It's the way of the world." He spun Arthur around and kicked him. "We'll move in with you for a while. You lead the way."

Ruth worked in a cold fury, hacking long and slender branches from a tree adapted from the willow. When she judged the pile to be big enough, she split several branches with an old knife and used them to weave the unsplit withes together. Old Wanda, bent from age and from picking berries, passed by one field away. She shuffled on until the wind blew at right angles to an imaginary line between them: the polite hailing position.

Then she roared across the gap, "What ye be doin', Ruth?" People were good shouters in Zennor.

"Building a bucca trap!" Ruth yelled back.

"Ah," said Old Wanda more quietly. Buccas were getting to be a goddamned nuisance these days, forever sneaking into folks' cottages and messing them up, and stealing trinkets—and worse. Old Wanda knew very well that buccas also stole the minds of dead people, taking their memories for their own and trying to become human. She didn't consider herself superstitious, but it seemed that Ruth was taking foolish risks.

"Mind the bucca don't trap you, girl!" she shouted quickly, as the wind began to veer, carrying Ruth's germs perilously close to her. After a lifetime of worrying about the Sickness, Old Wanda could almost see germs, like a cloud of gnats drifting downwind from a person. She shouted as an afterthought, "And take care! I hear tell there be bandits about!"

By the time Ruth had finished her trap it was late afternoon and she was in much better spirits. There was a big difference between worrying, and actually doing something about it. Even if she never caught a bucca, at least she'd tried.



of Zennor began the day. Other tumps hauled themselves wearily around the walled fields like gigantic fleshy turtles, greeting the sun with lugubrious roars.

Ruth's mood began to improve—until she caught sight of a swirl of movement in the window of the ancient lighthouse at the cliff's edge, where the madman lived.

"Mind your own goddamned business!" she shouted, shaking her fist, once again furious with everyone and everything.

The madman bore the very ordinary name of Arthur. People knew he was mad because he had no sense of personal territory. He was forever walking up to them, getting too close, and trying to engage them in conversation in his outlandish accents. He also had a clubfoot. This caused no pity, but added a seasoning of revulsion to the people's fear.

It was a lonely life for a naturally friendly man. Arthur sighed and moved away from the window. He'd have liked to help Ruth repair her wall but he knew better, now. Instead he crossed the circular room and stood for a while watching the waves tickling the base of the cliffs. Finally he pulled on a tattered overcoat, made his way outside and began to limp west along the old cliff trail, toward the beach where he kept a small fishboat. Ruth lived in his mind's eye: a small determined figure fighting to stay alive.

Preoccupied, he didn't hear the quiet click of a disturbed rock.

Suddenly his arms were seized from behind. The shock jerked all the breath out of him. He found himself whirled around. Bearded faces were everywhere; cold eyes stared into his. The tallest of the group, red haired and red bearded, was smiling with no trace of humour.

"Well now," he said softly. "What do we have here?"

"Let me go!"

"We don't need to let you go. We have nothing to lose, see? We're all infected, and so are you, now. If you weren't before." The man stared into Arthur's face and seemed disappointed in what he read there. "You deaf or something? I said: We're all infected."

Arthur swallowed. "Too bad, if it's true."

"What do you mean, if it's true? Of course it's true."

"Maybe nobody's infected any more." He gestured toward the sea. "Where I came from the Sickness had run its course. People didn't teach their kids to avoid contact any more. You're generations behind the times, on this side of the world."

"He's mad," the leader said to his companions. "A mad cripple. He talks to buccas, like everyone else around here." He turned back to Arthur. "Do you



## **Some animals are born stupid** and never learn.

Ruth's tump was wedged into a gap in the stone wall around her garden.

The huge creature bellowed unhappily, gazing at a distant ocean that whispered to its genes. Its rump bore a new scar, already healing, where Ruth had cut her supper last night. Otherwise the animal seemed unharmed apart from a slight scratch near one of the nipples from which Ruth drew her daily milk. The tump was a personal food-factory created before the population crash, quick-growing, incapable of feeling pain, virtually brainless, a veritable mountain of meat and stupidity.

But not so stupid that it didn't know a gap in the wall when it saw one.

"Back, you brute!" shouted Ruth.

The tump pushed at the gap doggedly, flesh rippling, vestigial flippers scrabbling. Ruth glanced nervously around for signs of strangers, then scrambled over the wall and confronted the beast from the other side. Piggy little eyes stared dully into hers. Rocks had been cast aside but the gap was not quite wide enough for the huge body.

It was a good thing the tump hadn't gotten through. It would have been halfway to the cliff's edge by now, and how would she have driven it back? She'd have had to get help—and people didn't help one another readily, these days. Good neighborliness had gone the same way as the shock-fences that used to keep the tumps in. Lost in the fall of civilization.

She ran back to the cottage, fetched the stout pole she kept for such occasions, jammed it into the ground beneath the tump's shovel-like jaw and levered upwards. Recognizing defeat, the tump began to struggle backwards. Soon it was grazing contentedly on alfalfa again, the excitement of near-freedom already forgotten. Ruth, hot and furious, began to rebuild the wall. This was happening too often, these days. It was a war of attrition, between her and. . .

And those goddamned buccas.

Yes, it was the buccas doing this, the mischievous night-dwelling little devils. Trying to force her out of her home. Trying to take it over, the way they'd already taken over most of Cornwall; the world, for that matter. Well, in all fairness, maybe Earth had been theirs in the first place, before the humans evolved and multiplied.

The wall repaired, Ruth straightened up and brushed brown hair from her eyes. It was a fine, crisp morning. The early sun threw long shadows toward the Atlantic. Smoke trailed from ancient chimney pots in the valley as the rest



There is a wooden tower  
in the woods  
upon the hill,  
above the lake,  
forgotten;  
walls greyed like old barnwood,  
wizard-hat roof,  
closed around  
in autumn  
by crowds of goldenrod and maple.

Refuse litters  
the first floor:  
rusting stovepipes,  
rusting stove,  
broken chair,  
forgotten raincoat  
hanging from a peg  
beside the rickety  
ladder stairs.

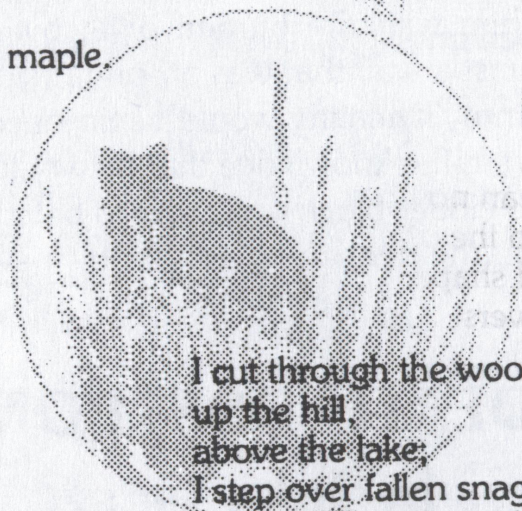
Up those stairs,  
dust lies thick as neglected dreams  
there,  
in that forgotten tower;  
up again,  
one more floor,  
into the wizard's hat now,  
where a mountain range of  
shin high batguano  
strides across the water stained wood,  
skitter-skree of bats  
in the crown of the raftered hat above,  
but you can see,  
through the trees,  
a glimpse of water,  
you can understand  
how the tower came to be,  
if not why it was forgotten

The road that once  
wound up the hill  
is so overgrown now  
you need imagination  
to mark its turns,  
but I don't ever follow that road;

# TOWER & BEAR

## by CHARLES de LINT

POEM AND ILLUSTRATION © 1994 CHARLES de LINT



I cut through the woods,  
up the hill,  
above the lake;  
I step over fallen snags,  
work my way through the new growth,  
over the humped bones  
of granite behemoths  
more forgotten than any wooden tower;  
for a time  
I follow the swath Jim and Paul cut,  
removing dying trees  
for firewood,  
Then I slip into the deeper woods,  
through the sudden surprises  
of small sunned meadows,  
past the dry paper football  
of a hornet's nest  
hanging from  
an impossibly thin twig,  
down into a gully, scramble up again  
and then I see it,  
first the wizard's hat,  
shingles black,  
then the tower.

I sit  
where the moss makes no differentiation  
between limestone and granite  
and fallen snag,



where the goldenrod rustles  
and the birch and maple murmur,  
and I listen to their gossip,  
all the gossip

—because even  
the silent stone underfoot  
and the motionless Queen Anne's lace  
has a voice;  
the only sound I make  
is the faint skritch of pen on paper,  
waking the tower  
in my sketchbook,  
ghostlike, at first,  
lines so faint, they mean nothing,  
but connecting, one to the other,  
gathering volume and shape,  
until there are two towers  
in the wood,  
upon the hill,  
above the lake:  
one an echo,  
the other forgotten.

And that would be enough:  
the tower, the gossip,  
the insect hum,  
the sunlight of an impressionists's dream  
as it patterns the hilltop,  
yellow on green,  
violet on green,  
green on green on brown,  
the maples red, the tower brown and grey,  
as though it had grown,  
moss-like from the forest floor,  
rather than raised by human hand.  
My heart is so full.  
it would be enough.

But the forest allows me  
one more gift:  
a rustle in the berry bushes  
down in the gully.  
The bear seems as surprised as I am  
delicate for all his bulk;  
coat, a midnight black;  
nose lifted as he senses me  
sensing him;

eyes the dark of the shadows  
that collect at the bottom  
of the lake.

He stands so close,  
not ten feet from me,  
I could count the hairs on his muzzle,  
were I so inclined,  
but at that moment  
my gaze encompasses everything:  
no one detail,  
but all details at once.  
My pulse drums,  
first with fear,  
then with awe,  
then with a gratefulness  
that words cannot express.

I hold my breath  
and know that,  
although I am only a guest here,  
for one brief moment,  
I may call this home.

I have been given,  
for one brief moment  
which lasts a lifetime,  
a glimpse into the Otherworld  
from which all our spirits  
once came.

Then my host turns,  
broad black back  
slipping away among the trees  
like water running downhill,  
retreating like a faerie glamour,  
and he is gone.  
But the wonder remains,  
lodged inside my spirit,  
and I know I will never forget  
the tower,  
the bear,  
the gift I was allowed,  
there in the woods,  
upon the hill,  
above the lake.



ries he had sustained in his motor-vehicle accident. You fulfilled his Trauma-Plus Warranty to the letter. But you forgot that Tom Grey was an old man, whose body may have been betraying him in ways that had nothing to do with the trauma of his accident."

"That's not entirely true, Dr. Corbett." It was Louise. "He was on a prescription, and if you'll look, that wasn't interrupted throughout —"

Dr. Corbett yanked the cables from Tom Grey's head and the computer screen flashed white. "And who," she snapped, "do you think the Widow Grey would sue? The walk-in clinic that wrote out her dead husband's prescription two years ago and hasn't been in touch with him since? Or GF, who was looking after Mr. Grey when he died and had a clear legal responsibility as attending physician? This isn't some dealership service bay, Louise. This is a hospital, we're what passes for physicians these days, and our responsibility extends a little bit farther than making sure we're using the right engine oil."

Dennis could see Louise draw her breath to reply, but she appeared to think better and stood silent, fists rammed into the pockets of her lab coat.

"There's nothing more we can do here," said Dr. Corbett. "Lorne, call downstairs and tell them to send someone from the morgue. Maybe we can use this for some loss-counseling simulation with the others tomorrow — it's not often they have to deal with the shut-down of one of their fellows. I want to see a program drawn up before the end of your shift, Louise."

"Right away, Dr. Corbett," said Louise and turned away. Lorne started to follow.

"People," said Dr. Corbett, and they stopped. "This is only a dry-run. An experiment. Nobody's dead. But remember how you feel about it."

The doctor turned to leave just as Dennis felt the ground under his feet slide, the familiar speckling come before his eyes.

"What —" Dr. Corbett started, but before she finished Dennis was tumbling forward and his senses had shut down completely.

The world was black and Dennis' limbs grew numb, but his awareness remained intact. His body and his mind, he realized, had become discrete objects.

And here, he thought with a little wonder, is the fissure, the space between his life before the crash, and his life now. The space he traversed unconscious every time he blacked out.

Was there a light? Tom Grey had asked. Dennis was sorry the dummy hadn't asked it later, because Dennis had an answer now. There is no light here — only the perfect blackness of the fissure.

Tom Grey, or the dummy that contained him, would become another when



Nursing Team arrived.

"All right, let's review." It was a woman's voice, rasping a little with age and cigarettes. "The patient was listed stable at the last inspection, 1854 hours."

"There was nothing out of the ordinary, Dr. Corbett. If anything, he seemed a little livelier than he had at yesterday's inspection." This voice was male, and didn't sound as though it belonged to someone who was much older than Dennis.

"`Livelier.' Would you care to quantify that observation, Lorne?" asked Dr. Corbett.

"It — I mean he — he was making jokes," replied Lorne. "He was barely talking to anyone the day before."

"We'd been charting a clinical depression curve," said a third voice, female. "If he had gone on that way another day, we would have moved him onto a Prozac simulation and —"

Dr. Corbett interrupted. "We're getting off-track, Louise. The patient was listed as stable, and Lorne had noted an improvement in mood tangential to a previously-noted depression curve. Anything to add, either of you?" Neither spoke, and after a moment Dr. Corbett continued.

"Sometimes in the real wards, we lose a patient, just as suddenly as —" she paused, rustled paper "— Tom Grey here shut down. A burst aneurysm between shifts is all it can take. The older ones are particularly vulnerable, and I see here that Mr. Grey was configured as a 63-year-old male; the possibility of such an event is built into his program."

Dennis peeked around the edge of the curtain and saw that Dr. Corbett was taking a small notebook computer from under the bottom of a clip-board. She set it down on the back-board and took a pair of connecting cables from her yellow smock. After another moment of fiddling, the computer was connected to a socket in the side of Tom Grey's skull. Squinting, Dennis could make out cutaway anatomy-drawings flash by on the computer's tiny screen.

"And an aneurysm it was," said Dr. Corbett finally, a note of satisfaction creeping into her voice. "It looks as though our Mr. Grey had a history of strokes — this was his third. And what have we here?" Dr. Corbett's voice seemed to fall an octave. "Lorne, why didn't you think to prescribe a de coagulant after this —" she tapped the screen with her pen "— showed up on the blood inspection Thursday?"

"I—" Lorne hesitated.

"That was a rhetorical question," said Dr. Corbett. "I can tell you why you didn't think, Lorne. You and Louise were treating Mr. Grey in terms of the inju-



have been a man's, and the words it snarled and spat were terrible. Dennis was certain the commotion would draw a nurse, and he wondered briefly where he would hide if one were to come.

The panic that had brushed at Dennis with Tom Grey solidified then. A nurse would return him to his own ward, to the inclusive care of the GF Trauma Regional Trauma Centre. And then he'd be no better off than Tom Grey, or the poor woman-machine that cursed from her scrambled brains behind the curtain. Dennis would once more be reduced to a project for the GF medical techs, cut off from his own resources.

If your brains are going to heal, they'll have to do the job themselves.

The obscenities finally abated, and as they lessened Dennis was overcome with another certainty. The dummy behind the curtain didn't simulate a woman at all, but was an imperfect simulacrum of Dennis Robertson. If he pulled the curtain aside, that was what he'd see — Dennis Robertson in plastics, whose holographic brain remembered a job at the tele-dealership and a friendship with Shelly and a GF Taurus only a little more vividly than Dennis did himself. The certainty was preposterous, Dennis knew that; but he wouldn't test it by drawing aside the curtain.

Heart pounding, Dennis continued down the corridor. It wasn't long before he came upon an empty station. Hands shaking, Dennis found an plastic jug and filled it from a tap. It mustn't have been used in some time, this tap, the way the water shrieked as it filled the pipes.

Dennis returned with the water-jug to find that Tom Grey had drifted off to sleep. With the rubber eyelid flaps pulled down over his eyes and his clicking fingers motionless at his sides, the simulation of humanity was laid bare. Dennis set the water jug down on Tom Grey's night-table and looked at him. He wondered if the dummy's simulated dreams were anything like his own.

It didn't occur to Dennis that Tom Grey might not be asleep at all until he heard the urgency in the flat-soled footsteps that clattered from the far end of the ward.

Dennis leaned closer to Tom Grey's face, studied it for any sign of activity in the simulation. He lifted Tom Grey's hand —the device was such a cunning piece of puppetry that Dennis couldn't believe the GF engineers would have left out something as easy as a pulse. There was a lot you could learn from a pulse, thought Dennis. It ought to be there.

But there was no pulse, and Tom Grey's face was placid.

Catching his breath, Dennis set the hand down at Tom Grey's side. He slipped behind the yellow curtain to the next bed, and waited there silently until the



Helen, a complete write-off. But she and Peter weren't there to sell him a new car. They'd both been over Dennis' charts, continued Peter, and were happy to inform him that he was a good candidate for full and speedy recovery. But they wanted to make sure, said Helen, that Dennis' mind healed as well as his body. Is that part of my warranty package? Dennis had asked, intending it as a feeble sort of joke. But Helen and Peter took the question quite seriously.

Absolutely, they both said, nearly in unison. You're going to come out of this as good as new.

When they moved Dennis to his semi-private room later that night, the blackouts had already begun.

The doctors at the trauma centre were very concerned about the blackouts; if they persisted, it might mean that Dennis would be legally barred from driving a General Ford product or any other motor vehicle, possibly for the rest of his life. The thought gave Dennis a vague chill, as well; just how was he supposed to sell GF products down at the tele-dealership if he couldn't drive one?

Simon, who worked in GF's accounting division and shared Dennis' room for the first week, was the one who explained his predicament to him best. When the Taurus slammed into the guardrail, Dennis' brain had actually shifted inside his skull. The force of the impact pulled one side clear of the brain pan, even as it compressed the opposite side hard against the unyielding bone. And then the damaged cerebellum sloshed back into place, its delicate structure scrambled in ways that even GF's sophisticated neuro-medical technology couldn't repair. If Dennis' brain were to fully heal, Simon had told him levelly, it would have to do the job itself.

The machine noises oscillated wildly as Dennis moved through the dummy ward. They might have been from a dummy operating theater. Dennis imagined it as a cavernous service bay, where the GF surgical technicians used every instrument at hand to complete their indelicate procedures: oxy-acetylene torches, band-saws, drill-presses, soldering irons and rivet-guns. They'd need them, thought Dennis - an ordinary scalpel would make little impression on Tom Grey's unyielding flesh.

But there was no sign of an operating theater anywhere along the corridor of the ward. The stretch of curtained beds seemed to go on endlessly, identical cubes of yellow vinyl that trembled in the breeze of Dennis' passing.

He stopped only once, frozen like a rabbit in a hawk's shadow, as a torrent of obscenities grew from behind one of the curtains.

The voice was female in the digitized manner that Tom Grey's voice could



lush undergrowth and palm trees fringing a beach of pink sand, a place of blue waters and blue skies. He'd put a lot of himself into that mural, and many hours of work. When he sat before it, the curve of the wall filled his field of vision with color and he could almost believe he was back in the land of his childhood.

"Just decoration," he said carelessly. In the morning light it glowed with tempting clarity.

One of the men walked over to it with a charred stick. "What kind of a place is it, for God's sake?" he asked, the end of the stick a threatening hairsbreadth from the pigments. Somebody chuckled, guessing what would happen next.

"That's where I used to live."

The man stared at the mural for an age, then stepped back to get a better view. "You're lying," he said finally. "There's no place like that."

"Have it your own way."

The bandit stepped forward again, deciding where the desecration would begin. The end of the stick wavered. "Garbage," he said.

"Leave it alone," said Trevellyan quietly. To Arthur he said, "If you lived in a place like that, why did you leave?"

Watching the other man back away from the mural, Arthur explained, "You can get tired of a place very quickly, when your woman dies. You'd be surprised how much you can get to depend on a woman, in that kind of a place. So I got into my boat and sailed away. A long time later I finished up here. It was the kind of place I needed, because you can be alone here. Apartness is a strange kind of behavior, but it suits me."

Trevellyan stared at him. "You can't have been here long. Apartness is a natural defense against the Sickness."

"So why do you and your men live together? Aren't you scared of infecting one another?"

"We'll get infected in the end. Maybe from one another, maybe from someone like you. What the hell does it matter? What is there to live for? And why talk about it, anyway?"

He turned away angrily, and Arthur wondered if he'd gone too far. Fortunately there was an interruption from one of the men.

"The woman, Trevellyan. She's outside again, in her garden. She's got some kind of pet animal there. Come and take a look!"

They crowded the window. "We could move in under cover of those walls."

"Why not leave her alone," said Arthur. "She's a nice woman."

"Not bad at all," somebody said. "You should have seen her earlier, without clothes."

"Trevellyan!" Arthur appealed to the leader. "Haven't your men done enough



carbon-fibre, latex-and-metal hands, they saw flesh, bone, fingernails. GF must have been confident indeed in the strength of their illusion to have dropped their robotic guinea pigs in the middle of a working trauma centre.

"You got a girlfriend?" asked Tom Grey suddenly.

"Uh, yeah. As a matter of fact, I do." He hesitated only an instant before adding: "Mr. Grey."

"Call me Tom."

Dennis smiled. Play along, he thought. Play along, just to be safe.

"Okay, Tom."

"Now tell me about her."

"Well..." Dennis thought about Shelly, conjured a mental picture. "Her name's Shelly Wolkerski."

"Polish," offered Tom Grey helpfully. "You may not be able to tell by looking at me, but I'm Polish too."

"Is that so?"

"On my mother's side." The latex around Tom Grey's mouth pulled up at the corners, into a strangely convincing smile. "So how's she taking it? Shelly, I mean."

"She's all right, I guess," said Dennis. In fact, he hadn't seen much of Shelly during the entire two weeks of his stay. It was a ninety-minute drive to the trauma centre from her condo, and Shelly had been pulling a lot of overtime these past few months.

The dummy nodded sympathetically. "Got you pretty hard on the head, didn't it?"

"It shows?"

"Takes one to know one, I guess." Tom Grey's laughter came jagged. "You're taking your time remembering things. It's a good sign something's not right."

"It could have been worse," said Dennis quietly.

"You got that right. A guy was through here Tuesday, he had a bandage on his head, and he couldn't stop swearing. He was screaming these words, these terrible words, at anybody he saw, like he was a crazy on the street. He was a young one, just like you."

Just like Dennis. The idea sent a shiver up Dennis' arms, but there was a certain comfort to knowledge as well: as the infomercial told him, GF was going there first.

Dennis sat forward in his chair. "How long have you been here, Tom?"

"Six weeks," replied Tom Grey. "And three days."

Dennis couldn't help relating Tom Grey now to the dummy in the infomercial, as the trauma team pulled it from a demolished Lance at the end of a show-



room crash tunnel. Arching its back, screaming about its useless legs: panicking.

Tom Grey, with his easy banter, his pleasantly innocuous interrogations, seemed quite distant from that image: as distant, Dennis supposed, as anyone would be six weeks and three days following the accident that crippled them. General Ford had made one hell of a simulation in Tom Grey, there was no denying it.

The dummy's voice lowered confidentially. "I tell you, Dennis, it's been a bloody eternity in here. You can't know."

"I've just been here two weeks," Dennis admitted.

"I hope they let you out soon," said Tom Grey. "You're up and walking, that's one thing in your favor. But listen, you look like you could do with some rest. Do you want me to call the nurse?"

Dennis opened his mouth to answer, reconsidered, and shook his head.

"There's no rush," he said. "I'm fine."

The crash had shut him down.

The instant of the impact was lost to Dennis. Prior was a blur of activity: the Taurus starting into its spin as Dennis massaged the brake and worked the steering wheel — shadows cast from the stationary lights above waltzing across his tightened knuckles in ever-more frenetic circles — the approaching guardrail from the front — now from the side — the back — and finally — cessation.

It was as though a fissure had opened then and Dennis' life lay on either side, cleaved in two. The elephant-scream rending of the jaws on his car-door marked the fissure's nearest edge.

Dennis' arms came up, pushed the billowing fabric of the air-bag away from his face. Cold January air flooded into his lungs, even as he felt his seat shift underneath him, the world spin. He groped wildly, searching for purchase in the whirling wreck of the Taurus.

From the darkness above, a hand found his. He gripped it, the hand squeezed back, and the Earth steadied a moment in its off-kilter spin.

"It's all right, Mr. Robertson. Take it easy. You're going to be all right."

She wore a yellow GF Trauma Team coverall. Her short-cropped hair impaled the snowflakes as they fell. In the distance, he could hear the unattended cries of another victim, an import owner no doubt, waiting for the Salvation Army meat truck.

Dennis had no words for his rescuer, and when it came time for the team to move him, he did nothing to impede them.

"What happened to you?" asked Dennis. "How did you come to be here?"



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newly dead floated free. More spirits for us, more memories, more history. Soon the last human will die, and we'll know everything!"

"We'll get over our fear of one another. Perhaps the Sickness has run its course."

The bucca leered at her, gap-toothed. "The Sickness? It's not the Sickness that's your problem. It's civilization, and generations of humans frightening one another with tales of murder and rape and robbery until you're scared to go outside your own doors. That's your real sickness, the fascination with evil, the fear of one another. . . ."

A shocking thing happened then. The bucca opened its mouth to speak, but a new voice came out; different in tone, different in accent, and hauntingly familiar.

"I fell. I remember falling, and when I hit bottom I knew I was going to die. And I thought of you, my beloved Ruth."

It was Lucius's voice. Lucius, who had walked away one day and never returned. Her knees gave way and she sat down suddenly on the flagstones.

"And some time later I died as a human," said the Lucius-voice. "I must have, because I found myself changed. My mind is full of new memories. I remember standing on a clifftop in a storm, waving a lantern to lure ships onto the rocks. I remember swinging a pick far underground, chipping at a cavern wall."

Lucius, who had betrayed her. Yet his touch had been gentle, and when he'd laughed the cottage had chimed with joy. Ruth closed her eyes and the crude shape of the bucca was replaced in her mind with another creature; one of beauty with golden hair and strong arms.

"Lucius," she whispered. "It's really you?"

"I'm the man you love, Ruth. Even more so, now. I have all the memories of Mankind."

She sat very still for a long time, hugging her own memories. But there was still something wrong; even with closed eyes a vile dwarflike thing lingered on the fringe of her consciousness. "What about the bucca?" she asked at last. "Who's in charge? You, or that thing?"

"He only handles the physical side. He has the hungers and lusts and he satisfies them as necessary. I'm the spiritual side. I have the memories and the genius of past humans, and their love of beauty. You could say I am good and the bucca is evil. We are Jekyll and Hyde, as they used to say. The bucca may raid your crops and steal your tump, but I am your lover. . . ." The voice became practical, persuasive. "Of course, if you didn't need those crops there would be no problem. And anyone can cast off their physical needs if they want to."



It was a desperate cry from the outside world. She ran to the window.

Across the next field she saw a man strike another man with some kind of heavy stick, smashing him to the ground. She saw him swing the stick again, two-handed as though splitting wood with an ax. And she saw more men, running toward the cottage. Seizing the gun, the bucca forgotten, she ran outside. The bandits were within easy range. One group was scaling the wall near the bucca trap, the other sprinting across the vegetable garden. Bracing herself against the cottage wall, she raised the rifle. . . .

The battle of Zennor was over quickly.

She saw the tracer swing across the first group, heard screams as she swivelled and cut a swathe through the vegetable garden. Green leaves exploded into smoke and one man fell. The others threw themselves behind the shelter of the wall. She swung back to the first group. Two lay writhing, one lay still, one was running away, head bobbing above the wall of the tump's field. Another was lagging behind, limping. She ran left, getting into position above the garden wall. Four men lay exposed.

"Don't shoot," whispered one of them. "For God's sake don't shoot." Three pairs of eyes watched her in supplication. One man's eyes were squeezed shut in pain and his hands cradled a burn across his gut. Blood seeped from between his fingers.

Ruth longed to shoot because the nearness of the men terrified her. But while they watched her, she couldn't. The sights of the rifle wavered and trembled. "Get the hell away from here," she said, "and don't come back. Take your dead and injured with you."

The bandits trailed away, leaving a single figure behind. He lay on the short grass near the lighthouse in an untidy bundle like unwashed laundry. He didn't move. Ruth watched him from a safe distance, hoping he was beyond suffering. Finally, as she was about to turn away, she thought he stirred, and she imagined his eyes on her, condemning her. He was the madman who didn't mind getting close to people. If their situations were reversed, he would have helped her. Furious at her own weakness, she hurried back to the cottage.

But if she could shoot men, she could shoot a bucca, couldn't she?

The small monster was eyeing her cunningly. "Of course we know our own history," it continued in a shrill voice, as though the interruption of the battle had never happened. "It's quite simple—at first we existed only as spirits; here in Cornwall we took on the souls of dead miners. While you were filling the Earth with your kind the spirits of the dead were absorbed into your newborn—reincarnation, you call it. But when you stopped breeding, the spirits of the



newly dead floated free. More spirits for us, more memories, more history. Soon the last human will die, and we'll know everything!"

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"But how can you live inside that body?"

"Once you're inside it, it seems quite natural. It's a convenient fellow, the bucca. We spirits simply use it as a vehicle for existence. We're above worrying about appearances."

"I liked your human body."

"It's irrelevant. Our love is a spiritual thing, isn't it? The body is the source of evil, Ruth. It gets old and it hurts and it lets you down in the end. Why don't you cast it off? Join me. Just as humans created the tump to suit the circumstances of apartness, we've adapted the bucca as the hands to shape the new human society. The bucca is a tool, nothing more. Join us, Ruth. Join me. You have the means. Look."

Ruth opened her eyes.

The bucca was pointing a skinny finger at the rifle.

Arthur awakened to find himself on the ground floor of the lighthouse. How had he got there? He must have been unconscious for a long time because the patch of sunlight from the window was well past its noon position. His head lay on a pile of furs beside the bottom step of the circular staircase and now another memory came back: being slung across strong shoulders, being carried, being laid down gently.

And a voice saying, "Listen, I'm sorry about this." A tall outline against the light of the doorway, dark eyes in a bearded face regarding the mural for a long moment, a brief gesture of farewell.

It was too late for Trevellyan to be sorry, wasn't it? One leg crippled and one broken, and he was too weak to move. In the end, he would starve.

He heard a high-pitched cackle. Small figures appeared from under the staircase, from the dark recesses of the room. They surrounded him, nudging one another and chuckling, watching him expectantly, watching the blood trickle away from him. They broke into little dances and urinated intermittently. One uttered a screeching whoop and performed a handstand. Eventually, one spoke.

"You're going to die soon, huh?"

"Go away. At least let me die in peace."

"Show us your memories, huh? Show us your treasures?"

"Leave me alone."

But they wouldn't, and soon a strange and terrible thing began to happen to him. Weird thoughts began to flit through his mind like bats; thoughts he'd believed were long behind him, guilts and fears from his youth, all fluttering up from the pit of his subconscious and into the waiting hands of the buccas. They caught them and held them up to view, exposing him.



"Ha-ha-ha! Look at this! This is how humans think!"

"Now isn't that a funny thing to be scared of?"

"Now isn't that a funny thing to be in love with!"

"And that surely is the funniest way to do it!"

"And that? You like that, man?"

One of the buccas squatted close, waving a memory like soiled linen. "And I bet you didn't even know you were turned on by that! Isn't it fun, the things we find in human minds?"

Arthur groaned. "It's not like that. Find something good, will you?"

"Why bother? There's enough dirt in here for a mineful of buccas."

"I want this one!" The buccas were squabbling over the memories, snatching them out of one another's minds even though they were easily shared.

This is not the way a human should be remembered, thought Arthur, and tried to concentrate on the good; remembering his wife. Holding hands and walking along the beach at sunset, and—overcome by mutual passion, falling to the sand under a coconut palm, pulling off each other's clothes, and. . . .

"I like it! I like it!" A bucca squealed with delight.

"Leave me alone," he whispered, a coldness spreading through his body. "Leave me with something, please."

"There isn't anything else." A bucca crouched close. "Every human thought comes back to the same thing. That woman in the cottage, now. . . . What do you think of her, man?"

Ruth, dancing naked through his dreams, performing lascivious acts upon his body. . . . "It's not like that," he said weakly.

"Oh, yes it is. Oh, yes."

"I've got a new one!" a bucca shrilled. "Treachery and betrayal!"

They fondled it and considered it.

"Where did this one come from? It's not his. It has a different feel. Where did you find it?"

"Another death!" cried a bucca excitedly. "There's been another death! And nearby, too!"

Ruth, was Arthur's first thought. Please, no.

"Gather in the memories, buccas! Don't let them slip away! Oh, look at this. Humans can't even trust their own kind. See what this human does? Plotting, plotting, deceiving. . . . Lovely! And then. . . . Pain!"

"But where. . . ?"

"I don't know, I just found them. Lots of them, floating free!" Quietly now, chuckling softly as they combed a dimension humans had never known, the buccas assimilated the new knowledge. "They're good," one murmured.



"They're very good."

Suddenly they went still. "But they're used memories. A bucca has died. Oh, pity, pity. Gather them before they fade, buccas!"

"You won't have a chance to use them."

The new voice, the human voice, jerked Arthur's mind back. He turned his head slowly.

Ruth stood at the door.

"Get away from him," she said to the buccas. "Stand against the wall."

"Run while you can, woman," said a bucca. "Or we'll infect you."

In reply, Ruth let loose a short burst of light that hurled the bucca backward, burning a great smoking hole in the naked chest. "Line up against the wall," she said, once the squeals of fright had subsided. "Go on, line up! I'm getting a taste for this." She gave the rifle a little twitch of impatience.

The buccas scampered for the wall. "We'll turn you into a pillar of granite!" one yelled over its shoulder. But it ran nevertheless, and soon they were all crouching against the curving stonework, jostling one another and gibbering in fear. "What are you going to do?" one asked.

She laughed shortly. "I'm going to kill you, of course."

A bucca stepped clear of the mob and said in measured human tones, "Don't do it, Ruth. Their bodies are only a veneer, like their manner. Underneath is grace and beauty and all the knowledge of Mankind. Kill them, and you're killing the minds of Einstein and Christ, of Beethoven and Martin Luther King. Can you do that? And can you kill the mind of me, your Lucius?"

The expression on Ruth's face frightened Arthur. "Of course I can," she said. "And I can kill the minds of Genghis Khan and Eichmann too. And your mind, Lucius. I did it back in the cottage and I can do it again. Don't let it worry you. You'll pop up again in some nasty little body in some other stinking pit, and you'll be just the same man, using others as an excuse for your own wickedness. It's not the bucca that's Mr. Hyde, Lucius. It's you."

Arthur squeezed his eyes shut at the crackling and screaming until it was over, and a sudden silence pressed upon him. He opened his eyes cautiously, fearful of bringing the wrath of the rifle upon himself, because the buccas had taught him he was no better than any other human. A blue haze hung around the doorway. A roasting stink drifted around the room. Ruth still stood there, but the gun was pointed at the floor.

He said, "Thank you." His voice sounded small.

"That's all right." Everything was very ordinary suddenly, and she looked very tired, standing there with sagging shoulders and not looking at him.

He knew she would leave in a moment, and he didn't want it to happen.



"What was all that about Mr. Hyde?" he asked, to keep her there.

"Oh. . . . A man I once knew, he talked some nonsense about good and evil, as though they could be separated in a person. It was just an excuse, because when you weighed him up he wasn't a very nice man."

"I see." He thought about the things the buccas had dragged from his mind, while the pain in his leg built up. "We all do the best we can," he said diffidently.

"You've hurt your leg. There's blood all over your pants."

"I'll be fine. You'd better get back home."

"He ran out on me, after I thought we were sharing something. Sharing. There's a word we don't often use."

"I'm sorry."

"You helped me," she said. "You warned me."

"The bandits. . . . Trevellyan isn't so bad, but he has a different view of life. It's not my view. I don't think it's yours, either."

"Thank you for thinking that." She considered him in silence for a long time. Then, taking a deep breath, she crossed the room and knelt beside him. She slid the knife from her belt and began gently to cut the cloth from around his swollen leg.

## NEXT TIME GO ALONE

by steve sneyd

by rule three in the crew to watch each other;  
odds Base says mean never more than one will go  
insane at any time and so the mission can go on  
safely towards the duty they demand of us to go  
tell Beings rainbow-ghostly coming closer here is  
no room for them and they must turn away elsewhere;  
oh dammit though if there were here no other two to  
watch me I could be so happy wrapped in love with  
what has entered into our ship a summer-perfect joy  
wrapping each part of me from inner brain to outer  
genitals in absolute acceptance faith as true as  
any dog i ever had a child but still the other two  
insist that these are dangerous alien enemies and i  
am mad as if it could ever be crazy to be glad to be  
a child again and let a bigger stronger warmer Other  
take back the charge and burden of my life i never  
chose to live alone with only two madmen by my side



## no make-up karen verba

on break/ the harpies come  
fresh from their female grooming ritual  
in a sit-com spasm of dialogue—  
a kibbutzing communion, caustic tongues raucous  
they congregate like gnats.

a chain-reaction, that shattered second  
when you know that you've been seen—  
scourged under scrutiny  
weighed & found wanting in their scales.

a lynch-mob chatty & cruel  
cackling over diet cokes  
the cataclysmic truth—  
their faces picture-postcards, their minds  
on the other side, blank.  
their poisonous glances scathing  
as they look over their shoulders  
—collateral amusement as you spoon out that freeze-dried anxiety  
dropping the coffee-mate on the floor—  
shunned and stigmatized, scrounging for camouflage.

yapping w/ unholy glee  
the judging reverberates like leniency's impossible—  
stricken by vanity & conformity  
a conviction of the injustice system.



# RUSS AT PLAY



Illustration © 1994 by DLSproule

by SEAN STEWART



Sean's first published novel *Passion Play* won the Authur Ellis Award and the 1992 Aurora Award for best SF Novel in English.

His second published novel *Nobody's Son* won more awards, including his 2nd Aurora. *Nobody's Son* will be released in the U.S. very soon. Keep your eyes open for *Resurrection Man* due from Ace books in 1995. Then there's *Cloud's End* and *Night Watch*, which he just sold. And -- hold on a minute...there's the telephone. It might be Sean with another update...

**Bottom: Alack! Alack! Alack! Alack! Alack!...**

**O night that ever art when day is not!**

**A Midsummer Night's Dream (V, ii)**

3.47 AM; I was hungry, hungry for the brutal kiss of sensation to sweep away the stale scent of boredom that had clung to my life like an ever-thickening pall of cigarette smoke. I needed to go out, out where I was home, out into the night.

The autumn wind slid under my jacket like a knife-blade; I smelled steel on the air. The moon wept shattered fragments of stone-white grief over the city whose million blind lights stared sightlessly back at the dispassionate stars. Trolley lines whined with oblique electric prophecy above my head.

I felt the night move within me with the ruthless grace of liquid helium, opening me up to the tension, the fear, the animal cunning and casual asphalt brutality of the slums. Sensation cut through me, spindling me like spears of angel-piercing light.

Three-quarters of a cat staggered by, a cross-eyed tabby dragging a length of its own viscera behind it. It snarled and spat feebly as I approached, trying to jerk away from its entrails as if trying to writhe out from under its own shadow; but those guts followed after it as relentlessly as the Crusades had followed the twisted logic of the Church Fathers, a catastrophe implicit in an ancient decision whose consequences had never been foreseen.

In a fit of sentiment, I shot it to death.



# THE VIRUSES OF QUIET DESPERATION



Illustration © 1994 by Cathy Buburuz & Randy Nakoneshny

By DENNIS VALDRON

Dennis, who practices aboriginal law in Winnipeg, finds time between cases to turn out dark, quirky stories for magazines such as *Bardic Runes* and *Terminal Fright*. Dennis tells us he likes to challenge convention. We think this story will challenge your perception of time and space, and the nature of reality itself.



**The screaming starts as soon as he wakes** up. It rises and falls hysterically, sporadically bubbling with terror. Sometimes it almost dies into a series of painful hacking gasps, but it always crawls back to its desperate, bloody, tooth grinding peaks. Occasionally the wall thumps so hard the dishes rattle. He lies there listening to it, eventually gets up to brush his teeth. The phone begins to ring.

In the bathroom he faces the mirror as he brushes his teeth. It is a habit more than anything, as the mirror is spray painted an uneven dull grey. He can hear the sound of the phone even over the screaming.

An image comes to him suddenly. He is standing in front of the mirror with a spray can, painting it.

He spits the last of the toothpaste into the sink. The screaming goes on and on, the phone is ringing insistently. He walks to the dingy kitchen and pours himself a glass of orange juice. He drinks it.

Eventually, he picks up the phone.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"It's all right," comes her voice. The screaming has stopped.

*"People owe things to each other," Jake tells him, "just by being human beings." The policeman's voice is controlled, yet insistent. "Once you touch someone, you can't walk away."*

*"There was nothing I could do," he insists, "nothing I could do for her. I'm sorry."*

"Really, it's all right," she says.

They are in the hallway. He is standing by his door, embarrassed. She is on her knees, sopping up his vomit with pieces of kleenex. She has a nervous smile, and wears a look that is lost and frightened. It isn't an attractive look, he thinks, but rather a despairing one.

"No, I mean I hardly ever get sick like that. It's just that I was on a real bender last night."

He takes a tentative step toward her.

"Don't worry about it, sometimes things just get out of control."

She begins to slide the tissues into a paper bag. "I know about that," she finishes.

"Well, it's not fair that someone else has to clean up my messes. I feel bad enough as it is." He helps her with the last of the tissues. They stand up together.

"You look pretty bad," she says. "I have some herbal tea that might help. Why don't you come inside?"



Suddenly they are making love. His bare back heaves above her as her body stiffens intermittently, her expression somewhere between pain and transcendence.

*"First rule is you never fuck anyone who has more problems than you do," Jake is saying. "For you that's an accomplishment."*

*Jake is a police detective. He paces around the apartment, his fury caged by cracked fading paint and threadbare furniture.*

He is in her living room. It's like a spider's nest—lines cross and criss-cross at every angle. Bizarre wire constructs and crystals hang suspended, like a cage from outside time and space. Light comes from strange directions. He is vaguely disoriented. She hands him a cup of herbal tea. The aroma is strange; it makes him think of the far east.

"The outer layers are a silver oxide paint. It's really expensive," she is saying. "The inner latitudes are silver wire, and I keep them in place by laying duct tape over it. Silver is very strong."

"What is it?" he asks, bewildered.

"It's a sort of pentagram," she explains, "like they use in magic for keeping demons in, or out. But in three dimensions."

She laughs quietly; the laugh is a broken little thing. "There are too many dimensions."

He shivers then, and some part of him whispers to get up and leave her now. Whatever she's involved in, wherever her head is from, he doesn't want any part of it.

Instead, he looks down at the design at his feet.

"That's my astrology chart," she tells him. "I use it to see things. Shapes in the past and future."

"It's all wrong for an astrology chart," he says. He's seen them before, dabbled in it once, long ago.

"No. Actually it's the only working astrology chart in the world. You see, astrology was invented by the Sumerians, and it was based on the positions of the stars then. But for the past six thousand years the stars have been drifting out of position. The old charts have been useless for almost two thousand years."

At that moment, he can hardly bear to look at her, in the center of her web of silver lunacy, but he does not leave. Where does he have to go, but to an empty dead apartment? At least she's alive.

*He is on his knees, the room is empty. He is bending over the chart with kleenex in his hand. The chart is considerably faded, or maybe the light is just brighter. He traces a line with his fingertip. On and around the chart, shapes are outlined with chalk. The largest of them is the outline of a human leg. He touches it.*



"It's completely accurate up to 1996," she says. She is sitting very close to him now he is as conscious of her body as of her words. Perhaps more.

"What about after 1996?" he asks her. His mouth feels very dry, his voice is rough.

"There is nothing after 1996. Nothing at all." She laughs nervously, the broken thing again. They are very close together. He touches her leg. She appears not to notice.

It's afterward. The sweat dries on their bodies as they lie together.

"Thoughts are like viruses?" he asks, picking a thread from her soft monologue. He's been trying not to listen, but this has slipped through his defenses.

"No. Thoughts are viruses," she corrects him. "They use us to transmit themselves. To reproduce themselves. Sometimes they take over and destroy their host."

"Are you saying they are alive?"

"I don't know. Is a virus alive? I think our whole history is just different breeds of viruses being transmitted farther and more efficiently with our exploration and our technology." She pauses.

"It used to be we had to talk to each other, now we have television." She seems so sad, when she says this. Sad and... his mind casts about for a word...obsolete.

She is outside his door. "They are coming closer. You have to let me in."

"What are they?" he almost asks, but realizes that he doesn't want to know.

He is sitting at his table, with a glass of orange juice. Her voice carries. The phone is ringing.

"They have doors, little doors everywhere. In 1940 they sealed the doors, but it only slowed them down. It didn't stop them. You must have seen the doors."

Outside the door she yells: "You have to let me in. There are things you have to know."

Inside he sits at his table. Behind him the television plays. It makes no sound.

*Jake turns off the television.*

"What? You couldn't open a frigging door," Jake swings back to him. "What the hell were you doing?"

Outside his apartment he drops his keys. The screaming goes on and on as he bends to retrieve them. He looks to his left.

"Do you remember the naughty beast?" she asks. Jake shakes his head.

"It's a childhood monster that your parents tell you about. The thing is, it couldn't see you if you couldn't see it. All you had to do to be safe was to close



your eyes..."

"Yes," he says to her. There is something in her voice.

"I can't close my eyes," she whispers.

He looks up at Jake. *"She said the doorways were opening... the dark lights were coming through."*

"What the hell was that supposed to mean?" Jake asks. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm seeing things now," he says to Jake. "I'm starting to see what's on the other side of the doors. Tentacles of dark light."

"Get a grip," Jake snarls. "You're losing perspective."

As they lie together she swallows once and speaks. It has nothing to do with what they were talking about.

"Sometimes," she says, "sometimes, I don't know if I'm remembering the future or looking into the past. Sometimes I get so lost in perspective that I can't find the now."

Disturbed, he kisses her. Her response comes from far away.

He is outside his apartment bent over his keys. Down the hall there is a shape, and a light.

She is outside his door. "You have to talk to me," she is saying.

"It was a mistake. I didn't want to get involved," he says to Jake.

"How can you not get involved," Jake is yelling, "she was screaming right next door."

He lowers his head.

Abruptly the screaming starts. He jumps up, leaving his apartment, entering the hall. He races to her door. Just as he reaches for it there is a fierce thump and for a second it seems to bulge out towards him. A terrible light spills through the keyhole, and along the doorjambs. He backs away. Abruptly he is back in his apartment, locking the door and leaning against it. The screaming goes on and on.

"Why did you paint the mirror?" Jake is asking. "Didn't you like what you saw?"

"If I can't see myself," he says, "maybe..." He does not finish the sentence. "Maybe they can't see me," is the unvoiced thought. He looks up suddenly.

The thing in the hallway is dark, and he can't quite make it out. It looks human, but the closer he looks the less human it is. Things like tentacles seem to twist and coil inside just below the surface. He picks up his keys.

"Do you think time is a particle or a wave?" she asks. "Most people see a wave, I think it's a particle."

"What's the difference?" he says. Her cup of herbal tea is cooling in his



hands. He decides that he would like to kiss her.

"A wave is continuous," she explains, "it has a beginning and a middle and an ending. All in order."

"If it's a particle..." She sits quite close to him, her teacup resting on her knees. "...then every moment exists separate and indivisible from every other moment, each one forever."

He takes the teacup from her knee. She barely notices, lost in her vision of chaos.

"Every moment exists simultaneously, accessible from every other moment..." Chaos giving birth to strange order.

He kisses her.

The wall thumps hard and dishes rattle in the kitchenette. He reaches for the door...

The phone is ringing in his apartment. He picks it up.

"Help me," she says.

"You're dead," he speaks into the receiver, "I saw the body."

He is in her apartment now, kissing the chalk outlines, torn by need and pain. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

"Particles are accessible to each other," the answer comes through the phone line, "not just in the linear way we know. Particles speak to one another, see one another. Particles can touch."

His mouth goes dry, and his heart pounds as he listens to the voice of the dead woman on the phone. Suddenly, he knows what she will say next.

"You can see them—do you know what that means?"

He hangs up abruptly. Particles touching, he thinks, backing away from the phone. Strange order.

"Viruses." Jake says, trying the word on, "There's more to it than that. Isn't there?"

"Yes," he tells Jake, "there are shapes." He closes his eyes. It doesn't help.

Inside, up against his door, he closes his eyes. The screaming goes on and on. He begins to scream.

"She screamed and she screamed and you didn't do anything." Jake is yelling at him. He doesn't say anything.

"You didn't even call for help," Jake yells.

They are lying together, the sweat drying on their bodies.

"I love you," she says. He doesn't say anything.

"Am I under arrest?" he asks Jake.

Jake pauses, letting a silence stretch out. "No," he speaks finally, "but I want you to call me if anything else happens."



*There is something beyond standard police work in Jake's voice, something almost caring. It strikes him, at that moment, that Jake is not just a police officer. Jake is human. Humans touch.*

*He is kneeling in the centre of the astrology pattern. Studying it. Behind him is a plastic police barricade. All around him are chalk outlines laid across her delicate tracteries. Some of them are shaped like body parts. He bends down and kisses the outline that resembles a head.*

*He whispers to it, lips pressed against the outline, "I see it too."*

*"What did you see?" Jake is asking.*

*"I didn't see anything," he tells them.*

*"They can see you now," is what the voice on the phone would have said, if he hadn't hung it up. As he stares at it, the phone begins to ring again.*

*"What were all those lines and tapes?" Jake is asking him.*

*"Protection," she says.*

*"Concealment," she says.*

*"What was she afraid of?" Jake is asking.*

*"Viruses," he whispers.*

*"Viruses shape particles," she tells him as they lie together. "They make time linear, they impose cause and effect. But that's only one way to arrange time. There are other shapes, if you can see them, beyond the walls the viruses make for us."*

*She makes him feel claustrophobic. His body tenses.*

*"Don't leave me," she whispers.*

*"I hear her screaming all the time now. The particles are touching," he says.*

*"That's your guilt," Jake tells him.*

*"I'm starting to see it now," he says, "Shapes in the darkness, empty lights. I see the doors and the doorways. And I think it sees me."*

*"Listen to me:" Jake is saying, "She was insane. That's not your fault. She is dead. That's not really your fault either. You feel guilt. Your guilt is making you adopt her insanity."*

*There is an urgency in Jake's voice, as if intensity could fortify truth.*

*"If I can catch her insanity, does that mean it's a virus? oes it destroy its host and reproduce itself, spreading like an infection?" he wonders. "Is it alive?"*

*Jake throws up his hands in frustration. "Come back to the human race," Jake snarls/pleads.*

*But Jake is drifting away.*

*He realizes with a flash of inspiration, as he watches Jake, inches away, but almost unimaginably distant, that he is losing human contact. Perhaps he has already lost it. Perhaps everyone is losing it. All those lives of lonely quiet*



desperation, of needing and fearing unbearably, they create a sort of vulnerability.

Vulnerability to what? He wonders.

To madness?

To viruses?

To the shapeless things waiting outside the walls of shaped linear time?

"It's safer on the inside," she tells him, just before they make love.

He doesn't understand, so he simply moans an almost-word, as he revels in the feel of her.

He is on the inside now.

"I love you," he says into the phone. "I wasn't strong enough."

"I know," comes her voice over the phone.

"I need you," her voice, "will you help me?"

"Yes," he says.

"Come to my place," her voice, "I need you."

"But there's nothing there anymore."

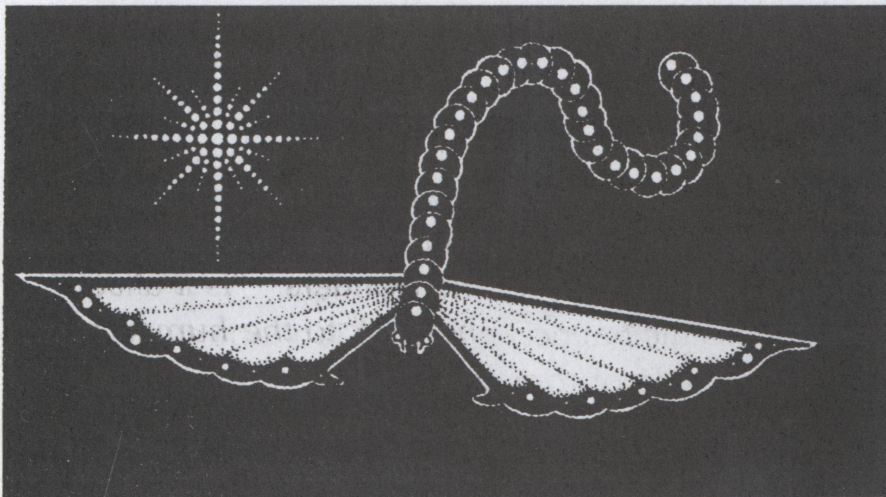
What's left of us if we can't or won't?

He listens but the silence drags on, finally he says, "Yes."

He turns towards his door.

He is outside her door. He knows that whatever happens next, he has made his peace with the gods of conscience. A terrible light spills from the keyhole and around the jambs. There is a roaring in his head.

He reaches for the doorknob.



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"Bings"

W I N D S W E E P T

TREES

shed  
vampire  
leaves  
on  
desecrated  
ground

By William P. ROBERTSON



# BY THE CRATER OF TYCHO

**Elizabeth K. Campbell**

By the crater of Tycho I have sat down and wept  
My moonstruck journey and my sterile end.  
The miles were mythoclastic, and where maps  
Lured with soft lake-names—Peace, Serenity,  
Nectar—broadens in utter bone-chill brilliance  
A lunscape monochrome with Conflict, Cold,  
With rumoured ranges of Eternal Light  
Dwarfed in Vapours, and the Bay of Rainbows  
Debouched in Death. How shall I sing? O lost  
Revolving world, with all your coloured rivers  
Of sap and blood, blooming with tides and seasons,  
Where days were kind, and the dark warm with life:  
In my frigid ellipse still swinging geocentric  
I watch your April grace surge north again,  
And weep, by the ruined frame of my rocket will,  
My fuel less than half, and courage gone.

## RADIO AND CHILD

**Elizabeth K. Campbell**

Into the radio the shining child  
Dips her four-year, one-dimensional notion  
Of pain and planets, comes up wild  
With her gleaming catch from that etheric ocean:  
“Don’t let the stars get in your eyes! Don’t let  
The moo-o-on break your heart!” Nursery delight,  
Nourished on wolves and fabled gore, translates  
The artless symbols of a summer night  
To actual cosmic havoc. . . Since I too look  
From the far side of romance, now may my error  
Be greater still, seeing with the quick shock  
Of powerless premonitory terror  
The lunar influence waxing in her blood,  
And comets veering toward that innocent head.



# CHINA DOLLS

NANCY BENNETT

Aunt Claire—broken black teeth—and her sister Ruth brought back those fairy tale dolls from around the world. My sisters were wise, they knew what to say, said I wouldn't be careful enough, with the fragile porcelain souls. They got to choose, which doll, which country. Soft silken dresses. Aunt Claire rummaged through her travel bag tossed me a water orb, small little world in white to the whiny brat, snow to cover the plastic alps. I was happy I could control storms in the lives of people, turn their worlds upside down Claire knew. I grow older, they grow frail like dolls... Now the white crisp uniform I put on this morning becomes flecked with red. I am in the zombie room. They do not move, vacant old porcelain dolls. I carve smiles on their faces and chip open their white porcelain chests to see if they have candy sugar hearts. I told them I could be trusted, I would always be careful with china dolls... Aunt Claire smiles at me with her blackened gums. I turn the glass chalet over and over again, storm again in the alps. Knife in hand, I see the glimmer of remembrance, fear in her eyes. I smile back at her.





# THE MAN WHO GATHERED BIRDS AT DAWN

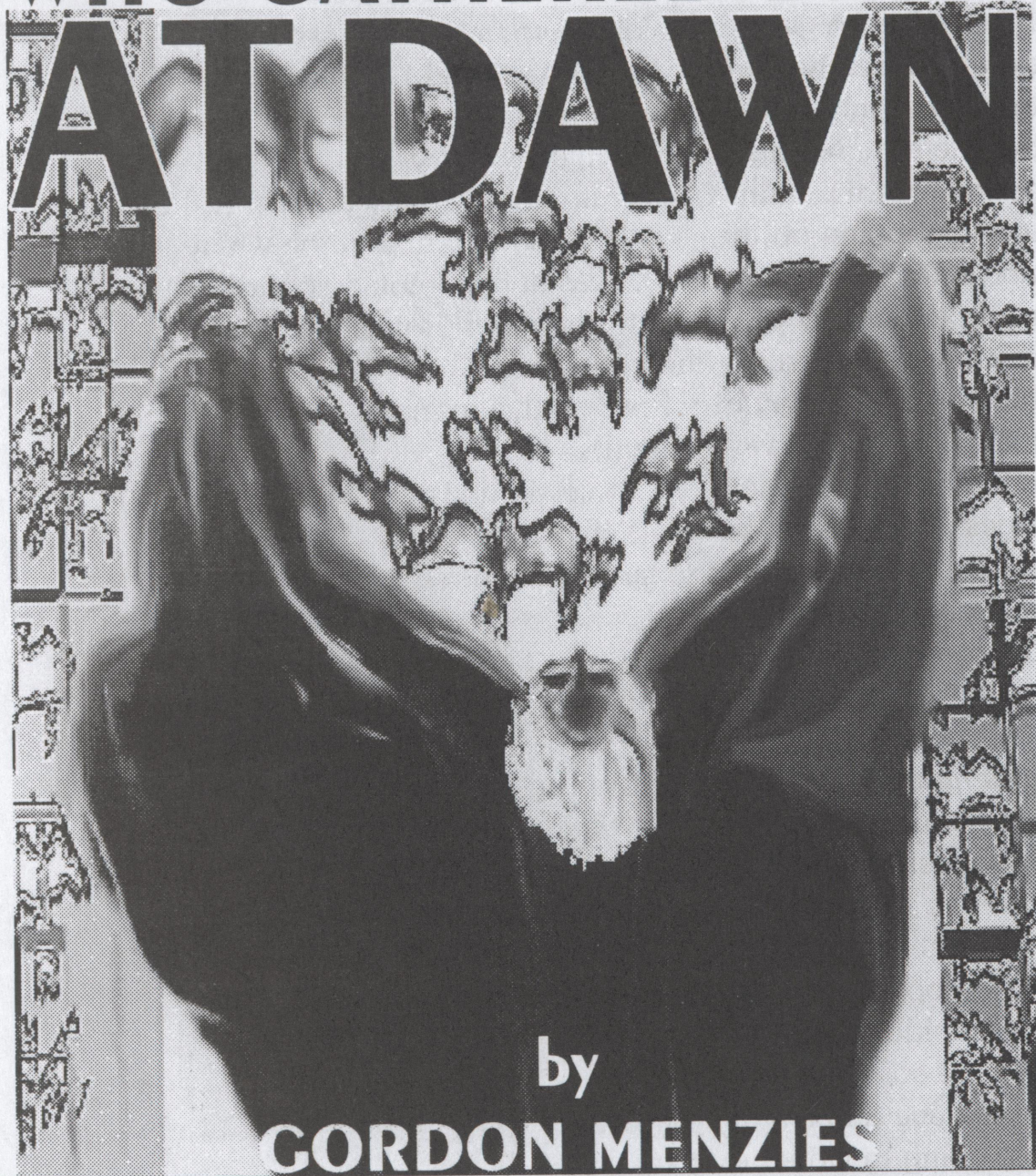


Illustration © 1994 by DLSproule

Several years ago, Gordon Menzies edited a superb little Canadian dark fantasy magazine called *Standing Stone*. Since he quit editing he seems to have spent most of his time writing. One of his stories placed second in the First Quarter of the 1994 Writers of the Future contest. An amazing number of others have sold to magazines and anthologies since then. It was sad to see his magazine depart, but as long as it gives him more time to write magical little stories like this one, it's worth it.



**The clock radio came on at 4:30 am** with a blare of garbled music, and Terry Hall reached out automatically to shut it off. Beside him on the bed his wife Ginette stirred slightly and exhaled as she adjusted her pillow and drifted back off to sleep. He could see the swell of her hip beneath the sheets in the gloomy glow of the night-light they'd bought so they wouldn't stumble over anything when they got up to check on the baby, and reached out to touch her there. A glance over to the nursery monitor on the night table near the clock told him all was well in the other room. As he watched, its red band of light shrank and grew rhythmically.

With an effort, Terry pulled himself away from the warmth of his wife and stumbled towards the bathroom to urinate. Snapping on the light there, he squinted painfully at himself in the mirror and scratched the stubble on his chin. There were bags under his eyes. "Not getting enough sleep," he muttered to himself.

Once under the warm spray of the shower he turned on the shower-radio to hear what was happening in the city. Nothing good. A woman had been sexually assaulted on Yonge Street near Mount Pleasant Cemetery; three Scarborough teenagers were up on weapons charges; and there'd been another gangland-style shooting in Chinatown that had left two dead. The first news item made him glad Ginette was still on Maternity Leave, the second conjured up images of his baby daughter Ellen, all grown up and toting a gun to school and the third he wrote off after making a mental note to give up all but home delivered Chinese food. *God, what a place this is*, he thought. *Toronto the Good. Give me a break — Toronto the Disillusioned was more like it.*

The first song following the news was "Superman's Song" by a group called "The Crash Test Dummies", and listening to it made him wonder - *why weren't there any new heroes?* Especially now, when it seemed they were so badly needed. All the old ones seemed to be dead or dying off.

He had a bowl of cold cereal - "Kellogg's Squares" (the ones with the blueberry in the middle) - and then dressed quietly at the foot of the bed while he listened to the soft rhythm of Ginette's breathing. He kissed her lightly on the corner of the eye and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Before going to work he looked in on his baby girl. Ellen was lying on her belly, her little rump in the air, and one pudgy fist jammed into her right ear. She was sleeping as soundly as her mother and had kicked her blanket off during the night. Terry pulled it back over her and touched the dark, wispy curls on the back of her neck. He smiled to himself. She was still so tiny, only three months



old, and yet with the dark hair she already looked a little like her mother.

He could've lingered there for hours, but a glance at his watch told him he'd better get moving or he'd be late.

As a supervisor for Dolan Allied, a window leaning company that held contracts all through the downtown core, Terry rose early and worked long hours. He had a dozen men under him and his team was only one of many that Dolan employed to keep Toronto's glassy office towers gleaming despite the clouds of dust from the never ending construction in the city. Actually, the dust was good for business.

Terry liked his job for the most part. He'd been with the company almost seven years before they promoted him though. It hadn't been an easy accomplishment either. As an average White Canadian working in an industry dominated by Portuguese, he found them resentful of his presence and difficult to get along with right from the start. Only when he began picking up snatches of their language and playing up to their common mannerisms did they begin to accept him. Seeing the obvious advantages here, he signed himself up for a comprehensive language course - the first formal education he'd had since leaving high school - and three years later he could speak the language fluently. Management couldn't ignore his efforts. The new job gave him and Ginette the confidence to go ahead with their plans to have a child. Ellen followed soon after, filling Terry with pride and ambition to strive even harder to provide for his new family. Right now he was taking a course in Architecture part time at George Brown...

Stepping off the King Streetcar at Bay, Terry walked to the Harbourview Business Centre and found his men waiting there for him, lounging around the fountain out front. The sun was just rising over the Redpath Buildings near the lake and the streets were slowly coming alive. Newspaper vans and rusty bakery trucks whizzed back and forth making deliveries and the day shift taxi drivers were beginning to cruise around sleepily. Everyone seemed to have one hand on the wheel and the other on either a cup of coffee or a pastry of some sort.

"Morning, guys," Terry said. They looked up from their cigarettes and the day's Sunshine Girl and returned the greeting. Terry had a look at her himself, made the appropriate comment and asked if the swing-stage was ready.

Fernando, his face drawn with sleep, was the first to answer. "Yeah, it's all ready to go." He knew more English than the rest of them and was Terry's self-appointed right-hand man.

"Did you guys sweep the perimeter?"



"For birds?" Fernando blew out smoke. "Uh-uh, don't need to here - watch." He pointed with one hand, which held a half-smoked cigarette pinched between dirty yellow fingers.

Terry turned to see an old man wrapped in a dark grey raincoat slowly shuffling around the side of the Centre. The coat was dirty and stained in places and the old man's face was hidden beneath a wide-brimmed, rumpled-looking hat with a ragged gull feather stuck in its band. Terry watched in utter amazement as the vagrant stopped suddenly and bent down to pick up one of the dozens of tiny feathered bodies that littered the granite walkway and carefully place it inside his coat. He must've had several pockets inside it, for he walked only a short distance before stooping down again. And again.

"It's the Bird Man," said Fernando with a grin. "Every day that guy is here."

Terry couldn't take his eyes off the old man. "What does he do with them?" he asked.

Fernando shrugged. "I don't know - eats them, maybe."

Terry couldn't explain why that thought revolted him so much, but it did just the same. Every night so many birds - sometimes dozens - accidentally flew into the mirrored windows of the office towers in the downtown core. The impact wither broke their necks or stunned them, it depended on how hard they hit the glass and how high up they were in the first place. Most died, especially the smaller ones. Even if they were only stunned, they often fell prey to cruising gulls looking for just such a meal, who swooped down and swallowed the smaller ones whole or tore the larger ones apart at their leisure. In the winter, it was the cold that got them. They didn't stand a chance. Terry had seen all kinds of birds meet a similar fate over the last seven years - sparrows, finches, chickadees, woodcocks and woodpeckers - and many others he couldn't identify at all. Cleaners like himself were contracted by building management companies to sweep them all up early every morning so Mr. Business didn't lose his breakfast over the sight of them all.

"Send a couple guys anyway," Terry told Fernando. "Surely he Won't get them all."

Fernando clucked his tongue and looked hurt. "Boss, trust me. He will. You walk around the way he came just now - you won't find any."

Terry did look, and was surprised to find Fernando was right. The sidewalk was clear. *What next*, he thought.

The Bird Man arrived and did his thing on Tuesday and Wednesday as well. It was on Thursday that Terry decided to follow him. The old man was in no hurry. He shuffled up Bay to Wellington Street and headed east to an area



where some older buildings made of brick still stood. At the entrance to a narrow alley he stopped and looked around, furtively scanning the streets, forcing Terry to jump back and hide in a doorway. A moment later the Bird Man entered the alley with Terry close behind. Iron fire escapes, stacks of abandoned boxes and piles of rotting wooden crates formed a zigzagging maze towards the alley's far end, which widened into a 30' by 30' square. The windows of the buildings that bordered this little cul-de-sac were either bricked or boarded up, and it was instantly apparent to Terry that no one ever came back here except the old man.

The Bird Man had his back to Terry now and was looking up at the blue square of morning sky high above. He was hugging his coat around his thin frame tightly and humming something to himself. An instant later he whipped open his coat, making Terry wince, who expected a dozen or more dead birds to fall out and land with dull thuds at the old man's feet. But they didn't fall out... they *flew* out. In a blurred flurry of multi-coloured wings and sharp, piercing, joyous cries, bird after bird - sparrow, starling, bluejay, finch - launched themselves from the depths of the old man's coat and spiralled upwards towards the open sky. All the while the Bird Man was laughing gleefully like a boy, holding open his coat and flapping it wildly as if in the next instant, he himself would join the feathered throng. As the last few birds left him he faltered and his laughter was choked off into a hacking cough. He clawed at his chest and fell to one knee, lowering his head and spitting out red mucus. Terry started forward to help him and then stepped back into hiding. The old man dragged himself to a pile of cardboard against one corner and rolled over on his back. He giggled breathlessly to himself and coughed again. Then, with a smile spreading over his bearded face, he put the hat with the gull feather over his eyes and was soon fast asleep.

Terry looked up. The birds were gone. Terry watched the old man for some time before convincing himself he was fine, and crept away before he was discovered.

"You're quiet tonight," Ginette said from across the table.

Terry looked up from his dinner and put his fork down - the pasta was too hot to eat anyway. "I saw the strangest thing today at work... nah, forget it."

"No. Tell me."

"It's pretty crazy."

"Come on..."

Terry took a drink of his cherry Kool-aid and began. "There's this old man..."

"Oooo," she said, when he told her about the dead birds in the old buy's



coat. "That's really sickening. Did you get security to send him away?"

"No. He wasn't hurting anyone - there's no one around at that time. Anyway, I'm not finished."

Genette grimaced. "I don't know whether I want to hear this. Do I?"

"Well, it *won't* make you throw up."

"Fine. Tell me then."

He did, and when he was finished she gave him a look that said *do you really think I'm that stupid?*

He shook his head. "Don't believe me then, but it's true. I saw it."

"If you saw what you said you did, then they weren't dead. Dead birds *don't* fly."

"I was thinking he picked up the ones that were only stunned. That's possible, and it would explain everything. Still and all, it was the weirdest thing to see... "

Terry left for work an hour earlier the following morning, intent on an experiment to find out the true nature of the Bird Man. Donning a pair of cloth work gloves, he gathered nine certifiably dead birds from the sidewalk around the office tower, popping them one after the other into an old Druxy's bag after crushing the head of each beneath his heel. Then, he scattered them randomly along the sidewalk near where he and his men would be working that day.

Later, he sat with Fernando drinking an extra large coffee and nibbling on a Danish. It was not long before the Bird Man came around to harvest his crop. Terry saw him pick up each and every one he'd laid out for him without hesitation, and many more besides.

Following him to the hidden alley a second time, he once again witnessed the old man throwing open his coat and dancing as the birds - *the once dead birds* spiralled up and away from him. As the old man crawled towards his cardboard bed, obviously taxed from performing his miracle, Terry staggered from the alley feeling light-headed and confused. How could it be? Genette would never believe him. He'd have to bring her down here to see for herself.

On the way home after letting all the guys leave early, Terry stopped at the toy store near King and Spadina like he did every Friday to pick out some little thing for Ellen. This time he bought a stuffed bunny with yellow fur, extra long ears and denim overalls.

Locking the apartment door behind him, he put the bunny behind his back and crept into the living room where Ellen would be playing on her blanket there on the floor. Genette knew of his Friday Ritual and always set him up for it. But



today the baby was nowhere to be seen...

Genette was sitting by the window in the ricker he'd bought for her to feed the baby in. But she wasn't rocking, and she didn't have the baby. Her eyes were glazed, raw and bright red around the rims.

"What's wrong?" he said in a small voice.

Then he saw the receiver for the nursery monitor sitting on the window ledge. It was on, he could hear its static, but there was no pulsing red band of light on its face.

Genette slowly looked up at him, her throat working to form words. She began to shake and fresh tears welled up in her eyes. "S-S-She just st-topppd breathing."

The stuffed bunny fell from Terry's hand, he moaned and shook his head.

*No. Please. Please God, no. Don't let this be true.* He walked on leaden feet to the baby's room and found his little girl in her crib.

Dead.

"Nooo," he whimpered, and fell to his knees clutching the railing of the crib. He seized the bars and shook them angrily. "No!"

There was no telling how long he lay there on the carpet weeping his heart out. He didn't know and he didn't care. He just kept asking over and over why this had happened - what had he done to deserve this? But there were no answers forthcoming, not from God, and not from anyone else. When he finally pulled himself to his feet it was after 10:00 pm and he knew what he had to do.

He washed his face and put on a fresh shirt, noting as he passed from bathroom to bedroom that Genette hadn't left her place by the window. In the baby's room again, he dug Ellen's Snuggly out of the bottom dresser drawer and strapped it on to himself. Then struggling not to cry, he lifted Ellen's tiny body and put her into it. She was cold as ice. He put her blanket over her and held her close.

"What are you doing?" Genette asked in a strained voice as he opened the front door. He never answered. Just left.

He took a cab to the corner of Bay and King. The driver kept peering suspiciously at him in the rear-view mirror. Terry smiled at him and rocked his baby, whispering into its forever deaf ear. His legs were shaking as he climbed out and headed towards the alley. He could feel the cabby's eyes burning into the back of his neck, so he walked past it and stepped into a building where a lone security guard looked up at him briefly before returning to his paperback. When Terry went outside again the cab was gone.

The alley was dark... and empty. One bare lightbulb lit the place, and the



old man was nowhere to be seen.

Terry gave over to his grief once again and collapsed upon the Bird Man's pile of cardboard. He bowed his head and hugged his baby tightly, drawing up his kneed protectively against them both. He crooned to Ellen until he was exhausted, and afterwards he soon fell asleep.

The small square of sky overhead was blue tinged with grey when he awoke and looked up. As he stared, a cloud scudded by, then two screaming gulls on the hunt. It was morning.

Terry turned his head towards the shuffling footsteps approaching from the neck of the alley. A moment later the old man entered and saw him sitting there, looking up at him with an expectant face. The Bird Man's eyes widened, he was clearly surprised to have found anyone here. But he didn't speak, just lowered his head and turned away.

"Wait!" Terry pleaded.

The old man halted in his tracks, but kept his back to him.

"I know what your can do - with the birds. I've seen you."

At this, the old man whirled around and locked his eyes fiercely on Terry's... then saw the tiny body the stranger was holding up in his hands.

"Please, if you can help me..."

Terry remained on his knees, but the old man was no longer paying attention to him. Instead, his suddenly kindly eyes, one green and one blue, were gazing sadly at poor little Ellen's body. Tears spilled from his eyes and he blinked them away.

Withered hands reached out for Ellen, and for an instant, Terry almost pulled her out of reach. But this was his only hope, and he let the old man take her, grateful for how gentle he was with his little girl. Already, the old man was whispering a tune to her beneath his breath.

Terry didn't move as the Bird Man turned away and ponderously moved to the far side of the cul-de-sac, slowly and carefully wrapping the grey rain coat around the tiny body in his ancient hands.

The tune he whispered soon became a song but Terry couldn't make out the words no matter how hard he strained to hear them.

The old man turned around three times and each time Terry could see that he was openly weeping. Terry began to blubber himself, blinking a wiping away his tears, and in that instant the song ceased and the man was no longer there, only the coat and hat, now empty, slowly billowing to the ground.

Terry gasped and threw himself to his feet, stumbling towards the bundle, cursing himself for coming here.



Then he stopped cold. There was movement in the coat. A white pigeon struggled out of the grey folds of cloth and took flight. Then, a starling worked its way out and hopped once towards Terry before opening its wings to the sky. These two were followed by bird after bird and soon a steady stream was spiraling upwards. Terry watched them disappear into the sky, strange feeling rising up in his chest.

Undeniable hope.

He saw that there was still movement in the dirty old coat. He waited for more birds but no more came forth. Approaching cautiously, he carefully began to unfold the stained grey material. His face lit up with joy as, exposed to the cool morning air, Ellen began to wail loudly for her breakfast and shake her tiny fists.

## weeding the garden

### by karen verba

a darwinist/ the sphinx patrols the highway taking tolls  
she plays w/ her food. a bad habit.

but hey. at least she was honorable  
about it: asking questions first.

digestive juices flowing/ fast talking  
might save this boy's life  
or so he thinks.

the sphinx just laughs  
& launches herself  
into the air.

no meaty bones here.



"Three" by Cathy Duburux

October 9, 1994







# TRANS VERSIONS