

9 NEW STORIES

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AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES



Published for the first time

HARLAN ELLISON'S

**"Run, Spot, Run", sequel to
"A Boy & His Dog"**

Illos by Richard Corben

ROBERT SILVERBERG'S

**25th Anniversary Story,
"Hole in the Air"**

Illos by Steve Fabian

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IN THIS ISSUE

IF YOU ARE into economic Armageddon, you may want to tuck this issue of *Amazing/Fantastic* away with your krugerands and other buried treasure. Besides being packed with truly artful fiction, there is a golden nugget . . . "Run, Spot, Run", sequel to the famous story "A Boy and His Dog" by the eloquent Harlan Ellison. *He promised us his next story . . . and story came there one . . . one to knock your socks off.* The message in his newest tale about Vic and Blood is powerful, brutal and poignant, and the author's afterword reveals why the sequel. This is one that moves and shakes us — there was much more to be said. Watch for the full length novel, "BLOOD'S A ROVER", being published by Ace Books this fall, in which both "Run, Spot, Run" and "A Boy and His Dog" appear.

Beginning with this issue is our newest feature, "The Amazing Hall of Fame," which will serve to honor the great writers of *Amazing/Fantastic* past and to offer you another look at some of science fiction's most memorable stories from earlier days. Each piece will be accompanied by some new thoughts from its author, lending an intriguing perspective. And it seems most fitting to open by presenting our first "Hall of Famer," Robert Silverberg, with the Silver Anniversary appearance of "Hole in the Air", which first was published in the January, 1956 *Amazing*.

Four stories in this issue deal with death: Wayne Wightman's "Love Among the Flowers" is a colorfully gloomy yarn, laced with gentle humor and a terrifying admonition. (How like him to beat us violently over the head . . . with a flower!); Alan Ryan delivers a touching view of one man's reaffirmation in "Give Us This Day Our Daily Death"; Lawrence Connolly introduces the chill of horror in "Buckeye and Spitball"; and Ellison's "Run, Spot, Run" poses wrenching choices in a quest for survival.

Five other beautifully crafted stories offer a molluskian adventure, a time warp war, a toy for the man who has everything else, a light-hearted spoof and a tasty dash of symbolism. Who can resist?

Columns include J. Ray Dettling's second in the series, "FUTURES FANTASTIC", enticing us with the possibilities of travel to the stars; L. W. Michaelson's interview with famous, reclusive Polish SF writer Stanislaw Lem; Tom Staicar's excellent rundown on the best in SF reading; and Steve Fahnstalk's scoop on the latest doings in the Land of the Fan.

We think the artistry displayed by the following talented illustrators in this issue will rank it among the best of any science fiction magazine: Richard Corben; Gary Freeman; Steve Fabian; Canadians Gene Day and Dan Day; and English artist Melvyn Grant. Grant's cover painting, "Space Vikings", is from the magnificent collection of SF and fantasy illustrations in *The Flights of Icarus* by Donald Lehmkuhl, edited by Roger Dean and originally published by Dragon's World Ltd./Paper Tiger. It is available in the U.S. from A & W Publishing, Inc. in New York.

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AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES



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Cover painting by Melvyn Grant, reprinted from *The Flights of Icarus* with permission of Dragon's World, Ltd./Paper Tiger (original publisher) and available in U.S. from A & W Publishing, Inc., New York.

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Futures Fantastic

A Science Series Feature

The Quest for Interstellar Transport

J. RAY DETTLING

Tomorrow's cosmologist
may show that space it-
self consists of an infinite
number of dimensions . . .
and we may have a billion
suns right in our own
back yard.

PERHAPS THE most significant discovery in history would be that of an extraterrestrial intelligent civilization. For millennia, man's ethnocentricity helped establish his place of residence as the center of the Universe; however since Copernicus, this self-esteem has constantly been shattered. The first blow came with the realization that the Earth revolved about the Sun, but man recovered and walked proud again when he established the Sun, our star, as the center of the Universe. The second major blow came when it was discovered that the Sun was nothing more than an insignificant element in some remote corner of a galaxy of 100 billion suns, which itself represented only a mere speck in the Universe.

Although it was rather ego-shattering to admit that the Earth was located "out in the sticks" relative to everything else, most "Earthians" still considered their home as the most interesting exception in the universe, because it alone flourished with intelligent life. The discovery of extraterrestrial intelligences will undoubtedly be followed by a new dimension of humility.

Recent studies have indicated that extraterrestrial life is not only possible but highly probable in literally trillions of places. Given that a planet possesses conditions favorable for life, then time itself will be the major condition for evolution of intelligent life. Since the Earth is a relatively young planet, it seems reasonable, then, that on the cosmic intelligence scale the Earth would probably be rated somewhat less than class average. In other words, among the billions of cultures scattered throughout the Universe, it is expected that over half of them have reached the technological level of color TV — and air pollution.

The most interesting extraterrestrial cultures would probably be those technologically and sociologically superior to the Earth. It is these cultures that have the greatest potential benefit for mankind, since they possess the political and social structures that allowed them to survive thus far. They also possess the solutions to countless problems in the medical, social, and physical sciences that would otherwise require a multi-billion dollar effort lasting for centuries. If we believe in the existence of these cultures, then a first-order priority should be given to contacting them.

WE MAY define two general types of extraterrestrial contact: direct and indirect. Direct contact shall refer to an actual physical meeting with a member of an extraterrestrial society. Indirect contact shall refer to a remote meeting in which some form of communication occurs such as with radio telescopes. This article discusses the possibilities of attaining direct contact. In particular, it will deal with transport or propulsion schemes which may ultimately bridge the gap between the Earth and the stars. For this reason, conventional or state-of-the-art chemical propulsion systems will be briefly mentioned only for their academic value and will not be seriously considered as an interstellar transport mechanism. There simply is not enough energy available in conventional chemical propellants.

PROPULSION IN the broad sense is the act of changing the motion of a body. There are essentially two mechanisms in any propulsion scheme: an energy source and an energy conversion device to transform the energy into some form of suitable propulsion. The energy source may be part of the system undergoing propulsion or it may be outside the system as in the case of solar-powered spacecraft. The following propulsion systems will be divided into three categories: (1) those that contain their own supply of energy and propellant, (2) those that receive their energy or propellant or both from the environment, and (3) those that operate on the fringes or outside the realm of contemporary physics.

1. Propulsion systems that contain both their propellant and energy.

If one is considering interstellar flight within reasonable (less than one century) time spans, then after a quick analysis he can readily reject any form of chemical propulsion. There simply is not enough energy per pound of propellant available in any conceivable combination of chemical elements to supply a spaceship with the necessary velocity increment. Even for interplanetary flights within the solar system, the self-contained chemical energy approach requires large and expensive spacecraft with more than 99 percent of the spacecraft mass being chemical fuel. If we decided to launch an Apollo type payload to the nearest star using the Saturn V rocket, it would take

well over 100,000 years.

The next step beyond chemical energy in rocket propulsion is generally considered to be nuclear energy. There is approximately 100,000 to 1,000,000 times more energy per pound available from conventional nuclear fuels than that available from the best chemical fuels; consequently, nuclear powered spacecraft are of great interest today, and indeed many proposals have been submitted. It will be instructive to examine the best possible nuclear rocket system based on present-day technology to see how close it comes to meeting the interstellar transport requirements.

In terms of energy output per pound, the best nuclear reaction known to man is that involving conversion of hydrogen to helium. In this reaction approximately 0.8% of the reacting mass is converted to energy. If all this energy is reabsorbed by the products of fusion in a combustion chamber, which in turn will impart thrust to the spacecraft, we can easily determine the velocity acquired after expending a given amount of fuel (the combustion chamber would be bounded by intense magnetic fields which in turn would contain the fusion products).

Under the best of conditions, where all the hydrogen is converted to helium, we have the relation that

$$E = mc^2 = .008 \text{ mH}c^2 = \frac{1}{2} \text{ mHe}Ve^2$$

where mH = mass of hydrogen

mHe = mass of helium

c = velocity of light (3.0×10^{10} cm/sec)

and Ve = rocket exhaust velocity

which yields an exhaust velocity of

$$Ve = 1.9 \times 10^9 \text{ cm/sec}$$

If the mass (Me) of the spacecraft and payload without fuel is equal to the mass of the fuel (Mf) we have the following relation:

$$\Delta V = Ve \ln \frac{Me + Mf}{Mf} = Ve \ln 2$$

$$\Delta V = 1.32 \times 10^9 \text{ cm/sec}$$

or

$$\Delta V = 8202 \text{ miles/sec} \approx .04c$$

where V represents the change in velocity given to the spacecraft.

While the above velocity is impressive, it would still take a little more than a century to reach Proxima Centauri, the nearest star. Note that this assumes only a one way flyby mission since additional propellant would be required for a return trip, and if a landing or an orbital mission about one of the planets in the Centauri system was also contemplated, still more propellant would be necessary. Higher velocities are attainable by using more fuel thus increasing the mass ratio, however relativistic effects quickly come into play which make it increasingly more difficult to accelerate the spacecraft. Harvard physicist Dr. Edward Purcell showed that in order to propel a fusion powered spacecraft to 99 percent of light speed and make a round trip to Proxima Centauri, the propellant mass would have to be 1 billion times the payload mass. The fusion rocket, therefore, is a candidate, but not a very exciting one for a starship.

Suppose future technologists develop a scheme to convert not just a measly 0.8% but 100% of their fuel to energy as in a matter/antimatter annihilation process. In this case the exhaust velocity (Ve) would be the velocity of light. Even for this ideal condition, a round trip to Proxima Centauri at .99c would still require a mass ratio of about 40,000. For slower speeds the mass ratio can be reduced substantially. Unfortunately, production and storage of antimatter in sufficient quantities is beyond the capabilities of present day technology, nevertheless, there is no theoretical argument that prevents such a spaceship from being operational in the future.

Other forms of propulsion which utilize nuclear energy, such as electric or electromagnetic propulsion, will have performance characteristics below those of the nuclear propulsion systems described above.¹

2. Propulsion systems that utilize free energy or propellant from its environment.

In the above discussion, the performance of spacecraft was based on the best

possible utilization of the available energy, however in each case the spacecraft contained the source of energy, which therefore limited its performance. Is there any other way? Yes. There is free energy and matter existing in space and it is virtually unlimited. The difficulty lies in developing the mechanisms for extracting this energy. Any vehicle that can interact with its environment in such a way that both propulsion and energy are freely provided, must be the ultimate system. The following represents a partial listing of the more interesting approaches that have been studied.

LASER PROPULSION — In this system, the spacecraft only contains the working fluid. The energy is supplied to the working fluid through a laser beam originating from a source located on the Earth or a space station. The laser beam can heat the working fluid directly in the nozzle, or it can heat an array of conductive heat pipes which, in turn, could transfer this energy to the working fluid. Calculations show that with today's state-of-the-art in lasers, this propulsion scheme would yield performance approximately three times better than conventional chemical rockets.² Still this value falls far short for starflight.

ELECTRIC PROPULSION — Electric propulsion in the broad sense will include schemes in which electric, magnetic, or electromagnetic fields are utilized to accelerate charged particles through a nozzle, thereby imparting thrust to the spacecraft. In these systems, the spacecraft usually carries the particles in an uncharged form. An external source of energy, such as solar energy, is collected by the ship and used to ionize and accelerate these particles. The major shortcoming of electric propulsion lies in inherent low thrust level. Thrust to weight ratios are much less than one*, consequently the spaceship could never lift itself off the ground. For interstellar missions, they may be launched from an Earth orbit, but the trip would take several centuries.

* *thrust to weight ratio is the thrust or propulsive force of a spacecraft engine divided by the total spacecraft weight.*

SOLAR SAIL — This concept uses pho-

ton pressure or radiation pressure exerted by sunlight to propel a spacecraft. Its major attribute is that the ship requires no fuel and no energy since they are both supplied by the Sun. The major disadvantage of this approach lies in its inherent low thrust level which is limited by the available solar radiation. If most of the spacecraft mass is in the solar sail, a thrust to weight ratio of approximately 10^{-3} is possible in near Earth space. After one year of continuous acceleration under these conditions, the spacecraft will have attained a velocity of 200 miles per second, however the solar radiation intensity, and consequently the thrust level, decreases rapidly as the ship leaves the solar system and only a fraction of the 200 miles/second would be reached. It has been suggested that a large aperture sun pumped laser be set up in orbit around the Sun with its beam directed at the spacecraft solar sail to avoid the reduced intensity problem. Nevertheless, 200 miles/second is still far too slow for a starship. We must look further.

SPACE SCOOP - This concept utilizes free energy from the Sun as well as free interstellar matter. The system would consist of an extensive electrostatic or magnetostatic field acting as a "large funnel" to capture interstellar matter, which in turn is ionized then accelerated electromagnetically to induce thrust. The faster the spacecraft moves, the more matter it intercepts and the greater its ability to provide thrust. Analysis has revealed that thrust levels of several pounds are possible at a spacecraft velocity of 10 km/sec.

INTERSTELLAR RAMJET - Also known as the Bussard Ramjet after its originator Dr. Robert Bussard. This concept also uses a space scoop to collect interstellar matter; however, since interstellar matter is composed primarily of hydrogen, it can be utilized to sustain a nuclear fusion reaction. The output of the fusion reaction provides thrust as well as the energy needed to collect and compress additional interstellar matter.

Some scientists have argued that the Bussard Ramjet's velocity would be limited to a few percent of the velocity of light, because only a small fraction (less than 1%) of the interstellar hydrogen is of the right

type to be in the fusion reaction. The rest would only contribute to drag. On the other hand, the more common type of hydrogen can still be used in higher energy fusion reactions. It is just more difficult to initiate. In this case, barring countless other technical difficulties, not the least of which is the ability of the machinery to cope with the large influx of matter, the starship could approach the velocity of light. Poul Anderson speculates, rather lightly, on the technical aspects of such a mission in his novel, "Tau Zero."

3. *Propulsion systems beyond the realm of contemporary physics.*

All of the above propulsion systems, with the exception of the matter/antimatter annihilation rocket, an advanced Bussard Ramjet, and possibly a high mass ratio nuclear fusion rocket, represent round trip interstellar mission times in excess of one century. Is there any hope for interstellar visits requiring short time spans measured in years or perhaps even months? The answer is yes. It is the height of naivete to assume that contemporary physics is aware of all fundamental laws of nature that govern and limit all possible propulsion schemes. It may also be naive to assume that *all* motion in the universe is governed exclusively by one or more of the four basic forces uncovered by physicists; namely, gravity, electromagnetism, nuclear and weak interactions. Are there yet still other forces in nature? Might the speed of light be just another "impassable" sound barrier?

The following represents areas which propulsion technologists might examine before ruling out the possibility of practical interstellar transport.

GRAVITY CONTROL — Although gravity is the oldest recognizable physical force, any attempt to control gravity in any shape or form has been totally unsuccessful. Thus we have found no way to shield against gravity, turn it off or reverse its direction. If any method of gravity control can be implemented in a spacecraft, the ship would be capable of velocities approaching the velocity of light with very little expenditure of energy (depending on the nature of the gravity drive). At these high velocities, relativistic time dilation effects would be experienced, thus reducing the effective flight time to the

stars. It must be pointed out that many roads are open, within the framework of modern theoretical physics, which lead to anti-gravity. Dr. Robert Forward gave an excellent speech to the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1974 which was later published in *Analog*³, in which he discussed 6 different methods of achieving anti-gravity. Unfortunately, his methods involve utilization of existing black holes, binary stars or the compression of enormous amounts of matter to super high densities and the acceleration of this mass to velocities near that of light — a problem as difficult as star travel itself. Nevertheless, a glimmer of hope exists, and a better understanding of gravity may drastically change this picture for the better.

TACHYON PHYSICS — Particle physicists are currently looking for hypothetical particles called tachyons that travel faster than light without violating the theory of relativity. Remember, relativity theory says nothing about traveling faster than light, it simply states that we cannot travel *at the speed of light*.⁴ Therefore, it is conceivable that particles (tachyons) may exist that normally move above the velocity of light. In fact, if these tachyons really do exist, their minimum energy state would be at infinite velocity (that's right! Across the galaxy in less than a microsecond). The more energy one supplies, the slower the tachyons would move, and it would require an infinite supply of energy to slow them down to the velocity of light⁴. The discovery of these particles may therefore "open the door" to faster than light travel and/or instantaneous interstellar communication. For example, as we approach the speed of light, it may be possible (and this is pure speculation) to tunnel quantum mechanically across the light barrier into a tachyon universe, zip across the galaxy, then tunnel back across the light barrier to normal space. So here is a way to go faster than light without ever moving at the speed of light. The concept is not far fetched when we consider that similar types of transitions occur every day at the quantum physics level.

PSYCHOKINESIS — In the realms of psychic phenomena and metaphysics, there are shreds of evidence that indicate the existence of forces beyond those

explained by modern physics. For example, several experiments have been conducted, allegedly under very strict laboratory conditions, in which a subject was able to move inanimate objects by thought⁵. How is this done? To date there has been no satisfactory explanation, however, several research facilities, such as SRI in Menlo Park, California, have investigated this phenomena. In 1928 the Russians had conducted a five-year study to investigate the physical factors associated with this so-called "psychic energy." They concluded that psychokinesis is not based on electromagnetic forces. This conclusion is generally accepted today by parapsychologists throughout the world⁶. If these forces really do exist and they are not electromagnetic, what are they? There are only three candidates left: nuclear, weak interactions, and gravitational. It seems unlikely that weak interactions or nuclear forces are involved simply because large amounts of energy are required to release them. Could they be gravitational? Perhaps. Gravitational forces are difficult to measure on a small scale, nevertheless a system of tests could be devised with sensitive instruments, to determine if psychic forces are gravitational in nature. More than likely the answer lies in some yet undiscovered force in nature. If so, its discovery may have applications beyond our wildest dreams — including star flight. Understanding its mechanisms will yield a quantum jump in man's knowledge of the Universe.

HYPERSPACE — If space is made up of more than three mutually orthogonal directions, commonly known as length, width and height, then under certain conditions one may "tunnel through" via a four, five or an n -dimensional geodesic to the stars. A geodesic in an n -dimensional space is the shortest distance between two points. A good example would be a two-dimensional shadow attempting to reach the other side of a wall. If he is limited to travel in two dimensions, the shortest distance would be around the wall. It is obvious to us, however, that the shortest distance would be *through* the wall (a three dimensional geodesic). Since our shadow is only a two-dimensional creature it would be difficult for him to imagine the three-dimensional shortcut. With this little

bit of insight we three-dimensional creatures should have less difficulty in imagining a four-dimensional shortcut in a four-dimensional space.

Interstellar transport based on this concept requires first of all that the universe is in fact made up of more than three dimensions and secondly that there exists a mechanism by which one can make use of these hyperspace geodesics.

Albert Einstein has shown that space and time are intimately related and together form a complex four-dimensional space-time geometry. From this cosmology, shortcuts to the stars are already available through time dilation effects. Perhaps tomorrow's cosmologist will show that space itself consists of an infinite number of dimensions. If this proves to be true, no less than a billion suns will be right in our own backyard.

WARPED SPACETIME — General Relativity predicts that both space and time become distorted in the vicinity of a large high density mass such as a neutron star or a black hole. Moreover, the equations of General Relativity allow for one way time travel or quantum leaps across the cosmos if one enters the warped space in the proper manner. This is the so-called Collapsar Jump used in science fiction. The "Catch-22" is that we first have to get to the dense object.

UFO'S — The phenomena of unidentified objects have baffled creatures of Earth for centuries and their explanation is still inconclusive. The possibility that UFO's represent extraterrestrial spacecraft is still open. One approach to interstellar transport then would be to study case histories of UFO's with the hope of gaining insight to their propulsion mechanism. This may be a long shot, but if there is any chance at all that UFO's are products of an extraterrestrial civilization, it would warrant some study.

AN ANALYSIS of the potential energy available in chemical propellants indicates that chemical propulsion systems are hopelessly inadequate for interstellar flight times of less than one century. Advanced nuclear and matter/antimatter annihilation rockets have some promise, however they involve advancing the state-of-the-art in many areas before such spacecraft can be constructed.

All propulsion schemes envisioned thus far, with the exception of an advanced Bussard Ramjet, that tap their environment for free energy and propellant, have extremely low thrust levels, therefore mission times in excess of one century.

Beyond nuclear rockets there appears to be some hope in technical areas that transcend or put us on the fringe of contemporary physics. These areas should receive some attention.

The problem of interstellar transportation and possible extraterrestrial contact may indeed be the most challenging problem in history, but if we accept the challenge and win, we will have won the most valuable prize in history — the Universe and all its accumulated knowledge.

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J. Ray Detting is a physicist currently working on the Space Shuttle Program three days a week. The rest of his time is spent writing and lecturing on science fiction and speculative fact. One of his sf stories, "Tutor", is presented in this issue. FUTURES FANTASTIC is based on a book currently in progress.

The Interstellar Connection

Book Reviews

Tom Staicar

Songs From the Stars By Norman Spinrad. Simon and Schuster, \$11.95.

There is a large contingent of the SF reading audience which is not at all familiar with the work of Norman Spinrad. The fact that this is true says much about the lack of acumen on the part of our SF audience and says nothing about Spinrad's considerable amount of talent. It is my hope that his new novel *Songs From the Stars* will receive just acclaim as one of the finest books to be published in the field in quite some time, and this will help focus attention on the body of work produced by this writer.

Before being elected President of the Science Fiction Writers of America, Norman Spinrad wrote a Hugo-winning episode of *Star Trek* ("The Doomsday Machine," which also happens to be my personal favorite), and received a Nebula nomination for his novelette "The Big Flash." Until his 1980 nomination for the American Book Award for his story collection *The Star-Spangled Future* (Ace Books, \$2.25 — buy it!), he actually was better known in France, where his books have sold like wine. There, he was awarded the Prix Apollo for *Bug Jack Barron*, an unjustly overlooked novel he wrote in 1969.

If *Songs From the Stars* doesn't make the final ballot of the Hugo and Nebula awards, then perhaps we don't deserve talents like Norman Spinrad in our midst. Like Alfred Bester, Barry N. Malzberg and others, he might decide to wander off somewhere else to a literary milieu where one is appreciated for distinctive efforts.

What precisely makes this novel so special? If the average SF books jamming the shelves were Pintos, *Songs From the Stars* would be a Lincoln Continental. From the first paragraphs we are drawn

into the story, which takes place in post-smash Aquaria (the name for the isolated regions of California which are still inhabited after a horrible nuclear war). Science and technology are now called black sorcery. The better a person's karma is the whiter it is. The more a person uses some form of technology or petroleum or nuclear energy device, the blacker they are. Everything and everyone between those extremes is a shade of gray.

Spinrad, as usual, manipulates the reader into rooting for a certain side of an issue, and then startles the same reader with an abrupt change of mind as new facts show the opposite side to be apparently better. We see the world of pyramid powers, hot tubs, natural foods, hallucinogenic drugs (called rex and mind food) and astrology, and we feel smug about how funny and quaint it all sounds, especially loaded down as it all is with hip jargon.

A short time later we see a view of the war-scorched, wounded planet Earth, which politicians and the military have turned into a nightmarish place where billions have died at the end of a nuclear war. The pollution which poisoned the air, the deadly chemicals which turned the waters into sewers, and the ideological climate which allowed vicious hatred to result in a war which no one really won are all evidence that the scientists and government leaders are pretty low in

comparison with the Aquarians who live the natural way. A few chapters later, we are rooting for the Aquarians to use technology again, so the two characters Sunshine Sue and Clear Blue Lou can gain support for a renewed effort to reach space in league with the scientists. As the book ends, no side is flawlessly perfect or exactly right in its assessment of the true situation. This is a mature attitude for a writer to take, so refreshing in place of soapbox sermons and political tracts we find elsewhere.

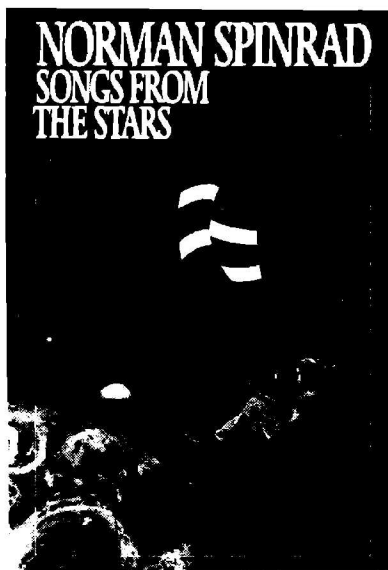
The best part of the book, in my opinion, is the first confrontation between Sunshine Sue and Clear Blue Lou, each of whom has reason to believe the other is going to seduce them. Each tries to avoid looking like the loser in the verbal battle of wits and mind-games going on, and even the reader is not certain about which has come out better in the encounter.

I hope to see this book become a big seller and an award finalist.

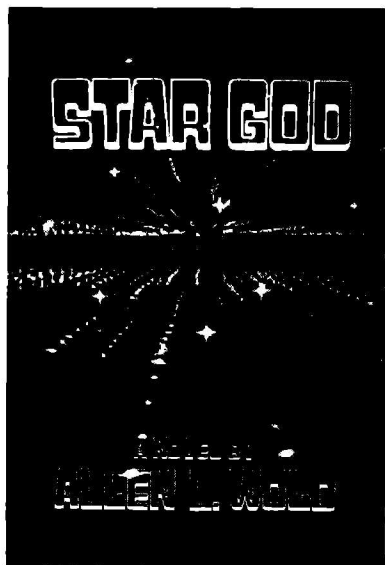
Star God By Allen L. Wold. St Martin's Press, \$9.95.

The book jacket blurb praises this novel for displaying a "penchant for philosophy on the levels of Heinlein and Bradbury" combined with "good old-fashioned fantasy in the tradition of Asimov and Clarke." Wold didn't ask for that hyperbole and it won't do him or St. Martin's any good, of course. His novel is competent, he has unmistakable writing talent, and he is a literate man who has some knowledge of science. However, *Star God* is a disappointment in most respects, and a rather shallow book.

Satinas, a special agent for the Seven Worlds, is surgically altered by space aliens in order to become a demigod. He tries to make contact with the mysterious Visitor who has been tearing the societies of the Seven Worlds apart by psychic presence in the minds of their people. The nature of the Visitor is the key to the book, and we are supposed to feel a sense of grandeur at the idea that this visitor might be God, or an alien force, or a mass-mind. The problem is, we have all done some imagining from childhood on about the nature of God and what space aliens might be like. In addition, the great classics of A. E. van Vogt have provided detailed excursions into the worlds of human supermen who have gone on to meet



super-intelligent beings. There are dozens of DAW paperbacks which provide as much entertainment as this \$9.95 hardcover. I feel certain that someday when Allen L. Wold has established his name as an important SF writer with a distinguished list of novels to his credit, he will agree that *Star God* was an early effort which could have been handled in a better manner.



Fantasy Literature. A Core Collection and Reference Guide. By Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer. R.R. Bowker Company \$14.95

Fantasy Literature deserves a place of honor next to Neil Barron's *Anatomy of a Wonder* (Bowker, \$17.50; \$9.50 paperback) as an indispensable reference work. This serious, scholarly book will appeal to a wide range of people. The average fantasy reader will find it enormously interesting for browsing, looking up authors and seeking out new books of the same type as favorite works they have read. The fantasy book collector will use it to look up publishers' addresses, fantasy society addresses, and publication data on books in the field. Librarians and book

selectors for libraries will appreciate the carefully chosen core collection of 240 fantasy books which provide a well-balanced selection of titles from all sub-categories of fantasy.

There are brief synopses of the novels and descriptions of the collections and a section of reference and research tools. *Fantasy Literature* includes works by C.J. Cherryh, Ursula K. LeGuin, Tanith Lee and Katherine Kurtz, along with earlier classics by Lord Dunsany, E.R. Eddison, William Morris and H. Rider Haggard. The 35 page essay "On Fantasy" is an objectively written overview of fantasy, explaining the nuances involved in categories such as heroic fantasy, supernatural horror, Gothic fantasy and science fantasy, among others, as well as providing a history of the field in brief form.

This is well worth buying in hardcover and will be an invaluable part of anyone's collection of fantasy books.

Galaxy: Thirty Years of Innovative Science Fiction. Edited By Frederik Pohl, Martin H. Greenberg, and Joseph D. Olander. Playboy Press, \$10.95. Also Science Fiction Book Club Edition.

You can't go wrong in buying this collection of good stories from *Galaxy*, with names like Fritz Leiber, Cordwainer Smith, Algis Budrys, William Tenn, Damon Knight, and Philip K. Dick on the contents page. Several of the writers have contributed memoirs of a page or so, recalling H.L. Gold and the early years of the pioneering magazine.

Poor Horace L. Gold comes in for a verbal drubbing in most of the memoirs, and he deserved every word of it. Any editor who would delete scenes, add scenes, add characters and change happy to sad endings and the reverse is playing with fire as far as popularity with writers is concerned. On the other hand, Mr. Gold (who is still alive, by the way, although no longer associated with SF editing) suffered from a case of agoraphobia which made it necessary for him to live and work in his apartment, never leaving for long periods of weeks or months. He notes in his own introduction: . . . "I was wide open to every thought and feeling that everyone else had, being so high on anxiety and Seconal

— and having agonizing back pains that weren't diagnosed until twenty-one years after the incident as a broken spine. My mind was in a constant fog." Any man with problems like those deserves a dose of sympathy especially when the same man



brings out the first magazine to truly challenge Campbell's *Astounding* and give F & SF some competition. *Galaxy* gave contributors a chance to market stories and novels which were not acceptable to Campbell but which were to become classics like *The Space Merchants*, *The Demolished Man*, and the stories of Niven, Pohl, Sheckley, Silverberg, and many others.

The choice of stories for this book was not based on a "best of" philosophy at all. The selection was made from hundreds of tales which do not get anthologized often and some not at all.

For some reason, James Baen is not mentioned and his strong contribution to *Galaxy* for more than four years is not noted.

Galaxy: The Best of My Years. Edited by James Baen. Ace Books \$2.25.

This one is a bargain no matter what competition it is pitted against. Baen was editor in the late 1970's, nurturing the careers of Spider Robinson, John Varley, Arsen Darnay, Charles Sheffield, and others at the early stages of their writing careers. He chose covers by Steve Fabian and wrote editorials which exuded an unblushing optimism about the future — if we could only get the U.S. space program back on track to the stars.

Optimism, based on realism and scientific extrapolation, was the underlying feeling of James Baen's *Galaxy*. His selection of stories was always rooted in optimism as opposed to the plethora of dystopian visions he saw in books and magazines around him. As he mentions in the introduction of his book: "Even the many new readers (long may they prosper!) are mostly interested in what science fiction has been, not what it is becoming. And who can blame them? What little there is in the way of originality in modern science fiction consists in the main of variations on the theme of human misery ... Is it any wonder, then, that the latest re-issue of *The City and the Stars* is selling like hotcakes? Or that the *Foundation Trilogy* is in its umpteenth printing? Hardly. People — even intelligent people — can be told only so many times that life by definition is a bucket of sewage with the handle inside, firmly affixed to the bottom of the bucket, before they wander off to look for the latest Asimov or Heinlein reissue ..."

Galaxy: The Best of My Years is Baen's attempt to create the perfect issue of *Galaxy*. He has blended a Jerry Pournelle science column, an article by Isaac Asimov, and two of his own editorials, with a potpourri of science fiction by LeGuin, Niven, Zelazny, Varley, Anderson and more, displaying some of the best wares to be showcased in his magazine during his tenure as editor. I wish he had reprinted one of the fine book review columns by the inimitable Spider Robinson, who was always my favorite element of *Galaxy's* feature mix.

Don't miss this chance to capture some of the flavor of the *Galaxy* of the late 70's.



Illustrated by Richard Corben

HARLAN ELLISON

Run, Spot, Run

Sequel to "A Boy and His Dog"

World War III lasted from 25 June 1950 when the Republic of Korea was invaded by 60,000 screaming North Korean troops spearheaded by something in excess of one hundred Russian-built tanks . . . to January 1993 when the Vatican Entente Cordiale was signed between the Eastern and Western blocs. World War III — hot and cold — lasted forty-three years, though nobody seemed smart enough to realize it was all one continuing conflict. But as the New Year dawned in 1993 it was all over; peace and tranquility reigned, la-de-da.

For two years and six months and three days.

World War IV broke out on American Independence Day, 4 July 1995. World War IV lasted five days; until the few remaining missiles that had jammed in their release phase cleared the various silos beneath the Painted Desert and the Urals and the Gobi Altay; but by then there wasn't much of anything left to fight over. Five days.

Then what was left belonged to anybody

who wanted it; anybody with a taste for radiation and rubble. But it was a very different world the survivors claimed. The "good folks" sank their caisson cities, their sterile downunders, deep in the earth. And the snaggle-toothed remnants of the aboveground were abandoned to the new masters of desolation: vicious roverpaks of parentless young boys . . . and their telepathic dogs.

— From the History of
the World, as Blood
tells it.

This section of the novel **BLOOD'S A ROVER** follows immediately in time and location the ending of the previously-published novella "A Boy and His Dog." In the preceding section Vic and Blood, after escaping the city where Fellini's roverpak holds sway, have been separated when Vic follows Quilla June into the downunder city of Topeka. Finally escaping with her, Vic returns to find Blood — his chief link with survival — starving and wounded. Making the only decision he can, Vic kills the girl and uses the meat to save Blood's life.

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WE KEPT going west and I'd have tried to use Freud to cheer him up, but it doesn't pay to be too cerebral with a fifteen-year-old boy who has done something he can't live with.

"It's mostly my fault," I said one day, about a week later. He looked miserable. He wasn't sleeping much, and when he did sleep he hummed and moaned. I didn't mind the moaning as much as the humming: an eerie, continuous tone without apparent break for breathing. How he did it I don't know. It worried me. He was losing his edge.

He didn't stop walking, and he didn't even look at me.

"It is not unappreciated," I said.

Answer came there none.

I hustled to keep up with him, even though he wasn't going at that trail pace he can adopt for an hour or two at a time when we're trying to get past some long danger zone. He was doing a zombie walk, actually; without any spring, without any bounce. But it was exhausting, just one foot in front of the other: through mud, through ash, sometimes through rubble. Just one foot in front of the other, hour after hour.

I was afraid to say anything about food.

He was still remembering that special meal I'd had. And the leftovers.

I never said I was hungry. I wasn't worried that he'd get rankled . . . I was worried he wouldn't answer.

Maybe more than an edge had been dulled by my special meal.

I caught a purple and pink lizard and ate it. My head ached and my stomach bubbled all the next day, but it kept me going. Whatever it had been before the Third War, whatever normal species it had taken three hundred million years from the Pennsylvanian Period to become, that vile purple and pink thing had gone through an inordinate amount of mutation in just thirty-nine years. It gave me hallucinations.

Like the night of the day after I ate it, when we were still on a stretch of what a rusty sign said had been the Ohio Turnpike, when I started seeing ghosts . . . and they were all wearing frilly pink dresses.

It had been incredibly hot all day, humid under a low, thick, mean-looking cover of thunderhead clouds that packed in the air and sent up waves of shimmer from the unruptured slabs of roadway. Just before sunset the storm broke and it didn't bring any relief from the clutching heat. It was a boiling rain that hit the Turnpike and just sizzled. The pads of my paws were raw, but I didn't ask Vic to slow down or stop.

He just kept pacing off the miles, heading west.

The storm stopped after darkness fell, but the clouds outdistanced us and kept building up behind. If there was a moon riding above them, I couldn't see it.

There were sounds from the woods that flanked the Turnpike. Some of the sounds were words, but they weren't from throats I recognized.

Vic didn't seem to hear. He stared straight ahead, seeing nothing; and we kept moving. I didn't like traveling at night in this kind of country. My head ached, my stomach bubbled.

And then I saw the ghost.

It oozed up through a fissure in the roadway, the first one in a pink dress. It came up like a fog, like the smoke of a genie from a bottle. Vaporous, transparent, it skimmed out of the fractured Turnpike and hung there before me, swaying.

Vic walked right through it.

I could see him going away beyond the swaying shape. I drew back and the

fur bristled all along my back. My lips skinned back over my muzzle and I heard myself beginning that growl deep in my throat that was a combination of terror and murder. My hindquarters trembled with contained energy, the preparation to spring or bolt.

Because it was making the most terrible sound I'd ever heard. A pitiful, pleading sound that held in its undertones the vision of painful death and loneliness. *The sound cut straight through my brain.*

It was a girl in a pink dress, a frilly pink dress; a dress that had been ripped and torn, as if to make bandages. There were pieces missing from the dress. There were pieces missing from her face.

And it swayed there like some hideous underwater growth, anchored deep in the broken roadway, its stalk a softly hissing vapor, its stem a moist pink fall of torn cloth, its flower only part of a face, one cheek torn away as if by fangs, as if by a wild beast. And the eyes . . .

It swayed toward me, and away, toward me, and away . . .

I howled.

I was getting the vision from Vic's subconscious!

Then I ran. I dodged sidewise and around it as it swayed toward me, the eyes, those awful eyes filled with anguish and death, rolling in the sockets to track me as I dodged past.

Then I ran. Scampering sloppily as I turned my head to look behind me. It had revolved; it was facing toward me, still anchored in the macadam, still floating like a plume of seaweed. My claws made little ratcheting sounds on the pike as my feet went out from under me and I slid on my belly.

Then I ran. Up again and howling like my ancestors, chasing Vic and *trying to get his mind out of that pit!*

As bad as it had ever been for us, this could be the worst; because there wasn't any way to fight it. Something had happened to him with that girl, that Quilla June Holmes, that frilly pink dress. Something different from what he knew of women out here in the deadlands where it was *make it or die*, that simply, survival first and last and all the crannies in-between. No time for soft and sweet and Tom Sawyer walking Becky Thatcher's picket fence. He'd had a demonstration of what wetbrain could do: she'd coshed him over the head and lured him downunder. But something had been born in him, some human emotion like love. And I couldn't resist it or pillory him for it because I'd been trying to instill something like that in him since we'd come together.

But not like this. Not in a way that would collapse his grip on reality. *That* I couldn't permit. He was my boy and each of us was the only thing that stood between the other and getting wasted.

But now he hated me. Inside him, way down in his little kid's brain — because that's all he was, a fifteen year old *kid* — he had done something he thought was awful, and he'd got his guilt all twisted up in there and he blamed me. What the hell, why not? Wasn't it good old Blood who'd eaten his fill?

Another ghost came out of the roadway.

Right in front of me.

I could barely stop.

I put my ass down and skidded, trying to scabble my claws into the blacktop, but that was a waste of time. I slid along tearing up good meat and tried to get my feet under me, and went around and around like a crab on ice . . .

. . . and I went right through it!

Another little girl in a pink dress. With more rips and more parts missing and a bloody stub hanging off the left shoulder where an arm should have been. And

this time it reached for me. And *this* time I felt it. An icicle right through my hind-quarters. The chill steel of it reaching into my skin and trying to pull me out of myself. I screamed with pain and howled with fear and kept right on going.

And Vic was still walking. Still heading west and hating me deep inside himself for killing his love and then eating it. And I couldn't even catch up with him.

"Vic! Vic, for the love of God, Vic, stop!"

Nothing. Didn't even turn around to see what was making me deranged. He'd settled into some awful fugue state, self-hypnotized, just walking because it was automatic action, one foot in front of the other. How long he'd been like that, and me not doing anything about it because I wanted to let him work it out himself, not realizing he was paralyzing himself, I don't know. Maybe it had been a day, or two days. And I was half-insane myself from eating that lizard and there must have been something in its bloodstream, maybe some crazy psychedelic or psilocybin fraction that reacted with the chains of amino acids forming the peptide molecules in my brain that stimulated the telepathic ability in me — stimulated what the Third War neurophysiologists who mutated my ancestors called "psychoendorphins" — so I was picking up not just Vic's thoughts, but his buried fears and fantasies, his unconscious guilt and hatred. And that lizard meat had fucked up my psychoendorphins so I was seeing and feeling and maybe dying from fright of nothing but phantoms from Vic's mind swamp.

Three chewed ghosts, ectoplasmic blood oozing from lips and tears in their flesh, slithered out of the Turnpike around me. They had me surrounded. I felt my eyeballs popping out of my head and my skin crawling and I went straight through the one directly in front of me.

My heart stopped.

The stuff in my veins and arteries just quit flowing to my heart, it froze solid, turned to rime, and everything went dead white and I crashed onto my face and died. I lay there. Ghosts came for me.

IT WAS raining again. It was still dark. I was dead and it was raining on me. *Pretty ratty*, I thought. *Least he could've done was get my carcass out of the wet. After all, it's been over three years, and it's not as if we were strangers. When I wanted to be left alone, to relieve myself against some salubrious stand-pipe or nifty bush, there he always was, just staring at me. "Do I gawk at you when you're squatting and grunting?" I used to say. So what happens when I need him to schlep me into the dry? He's gone and left me.*

I called him an ingrate a few times, and then I opened my eyes.

Well, imagine my surprise to find I wasn't dead!

I had rolled over, apparently, and I was still alive. The ghosts of shredded little girls were gone.

It was, no doubt, something I ate . . . I thought. Like a purple and pink yecchhhh that I'll never again so help me *never* masticate. Plays unquestioned hell with my psychoendorphins.

I turned my head and there was Vic, sitting all crouched up at the side of the pike, hunkered down on his haunches with his arms wrapped around his knees, just staring off across nothing with unblinking eyes. I had a cataleptic boy on my paws. The warrior solo who would defend my sensitive self had gone all the way around the bend and down the road. Eyes wide open, he was stunned and silent, soaking wet and shivering even in the warm, sticky rain.

Every inch of my body hurt. Whatever energy pool had been tapped by radioactive or psychedelically altered psychoendorphins, it had unleashed enough power not only to conjure up those demons from Vic's unconscious, but had freighted them with actual killing ability. I was hurt. Every nerve in my

body had been shorted and fused. And I hadn't recovered from the wounds I'd sustained in the YMCA fight or the deprivation I'd suffered waiting for lovesick Vic to come back from the downunder. Sometimes I marvel at my stamina in the face of adversity. A noble nature is the answer, of course.

Thinking just that . . . and also wondering how the hell I was going to jolt my nearly catatonic buddy Vic out of his potentially suicidal fugue state . . . I tried to get up. It was beyond my not inconsiderable abilities. I lay there whimpering.

The Noble Canine's Burden — A.K.A. Vic A.K.A. Albert — paid no attention. *Hey, dipstick!* I yelled, mind-to-mind.

Which brought his unconscious back to an awareness that I was still in the world. And the programmer of hate in there got right back on the job. Another ghost started to ooze out of the crumbled Turnpike about six feet in front of me. It had one eye and its lower jaw was ripped away; blood was pumping out of the neck, all over the sweet little pink dress.

I knew it was curtains this time. I couldn't move.

And then, when everything was as black as it could get, when troubles were greater than any one poor dog ought to have to contend with, when the darkness before the dawn was so utterly ebony that one could vomit at the thought of how shitty it all was . . . things got *much* worse.

That ratbastard killer Fellini and his slave-wagon came thundering down the Ohio Turnpike straight for us.

I started picking up random bits of thought formations long before I saw that batch of cuties in the flesh. Flesh is the operative term when speaking about Fellini. Loves his widdle boys, him does! Catamite is the exact word. Finds the poor little beggars starving in the ruins, coddles and squeezes them, pinches their cheeks and feeds them canned peaches to fill out their little butts and then turns them hind-end-to.

It is with difficulty that I think about Fellini and his gigantic roverpak of disgusts. My lunch repeats on me when I can't sweep the image out of my head.

And as for love of Vic and me, Fellini has about as much as I have for screamers. We'd managed to steal enough food from him that he had us on his list as A-#1 removables.

Vic out of it. Miserable rain. Mean things in the woods. Darkness. Out in the open. No protection. A ghost coming for me. And Fellini's bunch hurtling down on us.

Death where is thy sting?

I'm coming, Blood, just be patient.

Then it dawned on me: what the hell was Fellini doing way out here? He practically owned the city. He'd whipped every other roverpak into subjugation; he wouldn't have left the city unless something catastrophic had happened back there.

It was logical they'd be on this route: it was the only main trail west we'd been able to discover, the lane of least resistance. So I understood *that*. But what was behind Fellini, what was back in the city that drove him away . . . that *had* to be something neither Vic nor I could cope with.

I had to get Vic out of the way. Off the road. Into the woods. If Fellini saw him or me it would be a long and less-than-classy death he'd program for us.

I willed myself to move. Not much, and not very well, but I moved. A little bit to the side . . . and the ghost swayed in my direction. A little bit to the other side . . . and the ghost followed my lead.

Come on, lady, I thought, I'm sorry about dining alfresco but, like right now, I was dying. So give me a break here.

But break came there none.

So okay, so no more Mr. Compromise, no more Mr. Rational, no more Mr. Sweet Personality. Now we do what we do best — which is purely, simply staying *alive*!

And I found it in me somewhere, don't ask where, and I was up like the sprinter of old, and I *ran*! Hyaah! Eat confusion, noncorporeal wraith! Left, right, left again, and I was past her, empty eyesocket, shredded jaw, pumping carotid and all . . . past her like a shot, skidding forward and hitting Vic so damned hard he went over on his back.

Then I jumped on his goddam chest and I *bit him in the ear*!

And let me tell you, *that* woke him up.

"Fellini!" I said, mind-to-mind.

He did a terrific huh-what? And I said again, very slowly (noticing the ghost had vanished when the psychotic glaze left his eyes), "We are about to be run down by Fellini's slave-wagon, massuh. We are about to be found by the warm and wonderful Fellini who will cut your balls off and stuff them in your teen-aged mouth. What say we get in the wind, Albert?"

"You bit my ear off."

"Not off. Just nibbled it a little."

"Why'd you do that, you little asshole?"

"Fit of pique. Imminent death does that to me."

"Jesus Christ, dog, I'm bleeding all over the place."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer place."

He kept putting his filthy hand up to his chewed ear and then taking it away to see the blood. Wasn't that much blood. Couldn't see it without moonlight, anyhow. Just making a big thing of nothing. I didn't even clamp my jaws. Just gummed him a trifle.

"I'll probably get tetanus and die."

"Not before Fellini throws some meat to your ass, I'll betcha."

That caught his attention. That, and the sound of the drivers cracking their whips over the slaves harnessed into Fellini's cart. You could hear it now. I could hear it now.

Vic could hear it now. "Jesus," he whispered.

"The same," I said. "Shall we go?"

And he was up off his butt, and we were running.

Naturally, that was a stretch of Turnpike where the fence flanking the road hadn't gone down. So we had to run straight ahead down the blacktop. And then there he was, coming down the straightaway behind us . . .

Fellini, that king sleazo, and about a hundred rovers, all slaving and screaming and spotting us in the dark.

How?

Well, I'm not the only pooch who can read minds, if the truth be known. Call it bad luck. Call it caprice. Stick it in your hat and call it macaroni, for all I care; the point was that *we were seen*. And one of those little punk-stickers yelled, "It's that solo and the dog!" and I heard the whiskey voice of Fellini bellow, "Git'm! Git me thet boy!"

And a wave of skirmishers detached itself from the pak and came after us full-buck and slaving.

"You just seem to make friends wherever you go," I said to Vic, running, running, running.

Somebody got off a shot that may have outraged a tree back in the woods, but didn't even come close to the blurs we had become vamoosing outta there. Trouble was, it gave the other rovers an idea and, unaccustomed as they were

to actually thinking, they began plinking at us. Now if one crosseyed sonofabitch is shooting at you, only random chance can cause you angst, but when it's about fifty loonies all firing at once, the air gets filled with bad luck.

"Over here!" Vic yelled out loud.

He cut right toward the fence, but I didn't know how he was going to go over it, with or without me. As it turned out he didn't. We went under. Storms had washed away a gully under a stretch of the chain-link and we slid under in the mud and came up on the other side and broke for the woods as fast as we could, our feet sucking up slop at every step. Ten seconds more and we'd made it. Right into the trees and thick underbrush, my coat full of nasty little foxtails that worked their way in and would have to be removed one by one later by Vic. If we lived that long.

The rain was getting heavier, and that was good. It would slow our pursuers. Nothing could slow us . . . not even the thick spiderwebs that hung like festoons from every tree. They clung and tore as we smashed through them. A sudden break in the swollen storm clouds overhead revealed the waning moon skidding along high above the overcast; and in that fleeting moment of aluminum light the forest was lit like a carnival midway.

Spiderwebs, as big as the topsails of frigates hung necklaced with raindrops, silver and exquisite, everywhere. Incredibly complex territorial imperatives of master spinners, bough to bough, bole to bole, vanishing into the topmost branches; orb-webs and safety lines hung everywhere, thick as snowflakes and intricate beyond belief. We ran deeper into the forest, smashing through the veils of silk, destroying the ornate fretwork like barbarians in a cathedral.

Behind us we could hear the fifty rovers of Fellini's pak slamming through; the sound of their boots slapping against the carpet of slippery leaves and mud, spread out behind us, made it seem we were being chased by a legion of angry ducks.

We ran up a mudbank and Vic slipped, sliding back down on his stomach. As he floundered to his feet he caught his right foot in the protruding root of a rotted-out stump. I saw him catch it, started to teep a caution, but he moved before I could get the thought off. I heard the pop of ligaments and he screamed.

The ducks stopped slapping and listened.

"This way!" one of them yelled, and then they altered course and were right on our trail again.

Vic had sat down again. His face was a withered potato of pain. "Oh, Jesus Jesus Jesus, oh, Christ that hurts!"

There are no atheists in foxholes.

"How bad is it?" I said.

"Can't tell. Heard something rip. Oh shit it *hurts!*"

He was nursing the foot, holding the muddy boot with both hands. I started thinking very fast. Doing what I do best.

"Can you pull yourself up a little bit?"

He nodded, knowing I had something in mind.

"The stump. It's hollow. Crawl up in there, in the side. There's a big hole."

"They'll see it, too. They'll find us."

"Do it."

He did it. He sculled backward on hands and buttocks and managed to slip inside the short pillar of the tree stump. I Turned my ass to him and began scrabbling, throwing mud in a thick spatter. I dug in and worked fast, not even stopping when the pain in my hind legs made me feel as if everything inside, so recently frozen, was on fire. I covered him with mud and leaves and bits of mulch until the hole was packed and he was safe inside. Then I limped off to a

low depression between two thick bushes, burrowed under the foliage and into a cover of leaves packed solid with rain.

It was dark, it was wet, it was tough going through this stretch of the forest with the spiderwebs and the branches sweeping the ground. With a little luck they'd get up that mudbank and keep going. With a dash of decency on the part of the uncaring universe, we'd make it.

THREE HOURS later they'd gone, and we were safe.

For a long time I didn't think they'd give up. Fellini was obviously completely crazy with hatred for me and Vic by this time. But finally, long before sunrise, they gave up, the last straggling skirmisher beat his way back to the pak, and though I couldn't hear the slave-wagon rolling west on the Turnpike, I knew they were gone. The air was clear of thoughts.

But I stayed put for another hour, just to be sure.

Lying in the cold like that, with the rain that had turned very cold at last when it would do the most harm, after having been speared by ghosts, after having opened wounds only minimally healed, weary and frightened, with foxtails that had worked their way through my matted fur into my skin . . . I was barely able to drag myself out of the covering protection of the moldy leaves.

I slipped in the downspill runoff of mud from the high bank, and in the emerging light of day I could just barely make out the stump where Vic had been immured with mud.

There was movement around the stump.

The light wasn't good enough to see what it was . . .

Not ants . . .

No, it was something bigger. Black. Big and black and moving. I moved forward slowly . . .

My teeth clacked together as my lips skinned back over my muzzle. I heard the growl of fear and loathing.

The spiders had him.

Not many people ever knew this, in the time before the Third War, when the dogs were altered for telepathy, but we hate spiders worse than humans. No matter how much Aunt Tillie shrieked and hid in the toilet from the baby spider on the draperies, it didn't approach by one one-millionth the natural disgust and fear dogs felt for the stinking slimy things. All hairy little legs and nasty pincers and staring eyes.

And those fuckers weren't three feet wide around the body, with unshaved legs as tough as hawser ropes, with jaws that could snap a pup's back. And they didn't spin cocoons as strong and white and fast-setting as concrete.

But that was before the Third War, when nature went insane and lizards grew in pink and purple and their blood carried madness and water rats pullulated like maggots and came in green and ochre with eyes that glowed in the dark and they traveled in killer packs that could bring down a horse or a man, not to mention a low-slung dog, without even pausing to find out what they were ripping apart. Big, everything got big these days. Like spiders that lived in forests and waited for food to come to them.

I leaped. I scabbled up the mudbank and barked as mean as I could, and some of them scattered, swinging away on their escape lines. But the biggest of them was still squatting on the open top of the stump, spitting out its cocoon, swaddling the helpless meat inside, trapped by hardened mud.

One spider leg was dangling off the side, and I bit it with all my strength, feeling the nausea rising up in me merely at the touch of the foul thing. I clamped my

jaws and locked them and then ripped up. Something snapped and the scream of the spider went through me like needles through an eyeball. The thing swung around and with silk still dripping, it thrust down, snapping.

I went for the eyes.

My claws sank in, slime spattered all over me, and the thing shrieked again like fingernails down a blackboard. Then it broke off and crutched away into the forest.

I sat on top of the stump and looked down inside.

All that showed of Vic was part of his head and face.

His eyes were open, but he was off in that hellish place where the ghosts of dinners in pink dresses hobbled across the landscape.

"Vic!" I yelled, pouring all my power into the thought. "Vic, wake up, man! Come on! Get out of there!"

I tried to lower my forequarters into the rotted opening, but he was too far beneath me; and I knew if I fell in there I wouldn't be able to get out. The mud, the narrowness of the hollow, the stickiness of the cocoon silk . . .

And then a spider dropped on my back. I howled with horror and arched up and snapped at it. It drew back up on its line, a line as thick as bridge cable, and it shot out a stream of slimy white fluid that slopped into my eyes and stung, very nearly blinding me. Then more, and it drew out fine and tight and the thing was dragging me into its jaws.

I snapped the line with my fangs and skipped off the stump. I drew back waiting for it to attack, but it settled like a disgusting carrion bird over the mouth of the stump and took up where its brother or sister had left off, winding Vic up in a shroud that would never be parted till what lay wrapped within had died and rotted and could be taken out bit by bit for a later meal.

Everything was dining! Everything in the world!

And I stood there thinking at Vic as hard as I could, "Vic, please please buddy, hear me! Come back from in there, come out and fight it. You can get loose. Please, please, Vic! I'm all alone out here! Come on partner, come on out!!"

And I kept screaming until the thing had finished and it looked around, and it saw me; and its work done, it looked for new pleasures.

So I ran.

I ran as hard and as fast as pain would let me. I ran away and left him there with whatever air was still in his lungs. I left him off somewhere in a land where his first love held him prisoner.

And I ran and ran. Until I was gone from the forest, and I continued west, foraging as best I could.

And I was never again troubled by the ghosts of little girls in shredded frilly pink dresses.

No ghosts of little girls: just one ghost . . . a fifteen-year-old ghost that stared up at me from a hollow stump with eyes that no longer cared what happened to Man's Best Friend. ●

WHY I WROTE THIS STORY:

When "A Boy and His Dog" won the Nebula for best novella in 1969, I had no intention of expanding the work into a full

length novel. Every idea dictates its own length. I consider the common practice in the sf genre of pumping air into a short story or novelette, to make of it a "novel" as ungainly and wallowing as a super-tanker, one of the most meretricious acts of exploitation of which a writer is capable. "A Boy and His Dog" had its length, and

that length was 18,000 words.

And while I have seen other writers over the years turning diamond-perfect short stories into acromegalic books, I resisted the blandishments of publishers whose conception of bold innovation was a stretched-out novel based on "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" or "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman." True, there were stories like "The Region Between" and teleplays such as my *Outer Limits* segment, "Demon With a Glass Hand," that had always been intended as merely sections of a longer work, but those were special cases and were originally plotted at the longer length; and I had put the writing of those full-length efforts in abeyance.

The sequel, the easy reworking of already tilled fields, was something I avoided with punctiliousness.

Yet there was an aspect of "A Boy and His Dog" that I had not explored, that grew more troublesome for me over the years since 1969, that I knew inevitably I would have to deal with.

And it was this:

As time and social conscience alter the audience's perceptions about themselves and interpersonal relationships, sometimes a writer finds an unexpected freighting of bogus values dumped on a work that previously bore no such interpretation. That happened with "A Boy and His Dog."

With the rise of feminism in America — in the top ten of significant social awakenings of the past quarter-century — a superimposed perception that the story was misogynistic began to be laid on the exploits of Vic and Blood. (In all fairness to the story's critics, as well as its advocates, this wholly irrational interpretation emerged from the minds and mouths of *nouveau-liberated* trend-groupies apparently trying to assuage their guilt at having spent years as pom-pom girls or vacuous Tri-Delts by invidious attacks on everything interpretable as anti-female, whether justifiably so or not.)

When, at college lectures, I would respond to this sort of accusation with the information that the story had never been intended as a comment on male-female relations, but was in fact a paradigm of the generation gap in this country during the political upheavals of the sixties and seventies, I was greeted with stares of incomprehension.

Nonetheless, that is the truth.

The fact that Quilla June Holmes becomes a victim of cannibalism in the original novella has *nothing* to do with her being female. Cannibalism is referred to elsewhere in that story as a fairly common practice. It is, after all, a purely survival society; and Vic does what he has to do to save Blood's life. Because Blood means survival, and Quilla June doesn't.

But the movie version of "A Boy and His Dog" only made matters worse. I didn't write the movie. L.Q. Jones did. And even though he followed the story with a devotion that has never ceased to please me, notwithstanding the alterations in plot demanded by a production budget, a somewhat sexist tone crept into the cinematic adaptation. And so, confusing the written version with the filmed version, the snipers continued to take potshots at the work and its author.

Over the years I came to realize that the novella had only been part of the story; that to tell the adventures of Vic and Blood properly, a larger body of writing would have to continue the narrative.

And so the character of Spike developed. She is a female solo, meaner than Vic, and her relationship with Blood is at once similar to, and quite different from, the one between Blood and Vic.

When, in 1977, NBC proposed doing a series for television based on the characters, I took it as an opportunity to plot out the balance of what I then realized was a full-length novel, being paid handsomely by the network for the opportunity.

Thus did I write "Blood's A Rover," the continuation of the story of Vic and Blood and Spike.

NBC passed on the project, of course. Always expected them to. But at least I now had my novel ready to be written.

Over the next few years I wrote the "prequel" to the original novella — "Egg-sucker" — and considered what was required as a linking section between "A Boy and His Dog" and "Blood's A Rover." But nothing seemed right.

Finally, it occurred to me that the attacks on the original story were not wholly unjustified. Because of the callousness of the last line of the movie version (cold, cheap and sexist) as opposed to the last line as proffered in the story, women who were being angered by the work had just cause.

Quilla June was Vic's first contact with love, however ill-conceived it might have been. He could not have sacrificed her without being torn up by it. The story, for all its fantastic aspects, is not an amoral tv segment in which someone is murdered and then other players stand around paying no attention to the body, carrying on a conversation. The death of someone who matters leaves indelible marks on all those who knew him or her. And so it was important to show the effect on both Vic and Blood of Quilla June's terrible death.

For that reason, and to make a gesture of recognition to all the women who were smart enough to know there was an aspect of human conflict I had not addressed, I have written this linking section — complete in itself — to bridge the two major sections of the novel **BLOOD'S A ROVER**, which Ace Books will publish in October, 1980.

I still abhor sequels; but I detest even more violently leaving a story unfinished. With this piece, and the novel, I go content to my twilight that the story of Vic and Blood and Spike (whom you will meet in the novel) is complete.

— Harlan Ellison



Harlan Ellison

A Phenomenon. What else can you call a man who commands so broad a spectrum of literary accomplishment in such high style and with such elan — and who still has energy to spare for championing causes, fighting industry giants, marrying lots of women, appearing on television talk shows, traveling all over the globe, collecting fine art, helping hosts of friends, dealing with the not-so-friendly in his own direct, Ellisonian manner — and probably a number of other things as well. One gets the impression early on that here is a formidable personality to tangle with and that you'd better not idly or otherwise attack or misuse him or his friends. This is clearly a man who grabs life by the neck and takes control where possible since he is supremely aware of the dystopian ways of the world, as reflected in his literature. His work is highly thought-provoking, heavily symbolic and more easily fits into what is known as speculative fiction than sf. For short story collections look for "Ellison Wonderland", "Deathbird Stories", "I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream", "Alone Against Tomorrow" and "The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World". If you want Ellison editing, delve into the "Dangerous Visions" volumes (five of them) or Pyramid Books, Harlan: Ellison Discovery Series. Journalism? Read his collected columns on television (from the Los Angeles Free Press) in "The Glass Teat" and "The Other Glass Teat". Ellison has also written novels and screenplays for television and motion pictures.—*Editor*

the **Amazing Hall of Fame**

presents:

ROBERT SILVERBERG'S

Hole in the Air

Amazing Stories has been around since 1926. That's a lot of years . . . years during which hundreds of stories penned by writers unknown then and hailed today expanded the imaginative horizons of that special breed of bookworm, the science fiction fan. Issues from the first several decades represent a treasure trove of early Silverberg, Ellison, Benford, Sheckley, Heinlein, Bradbury, Malzberg, Simak, Williamson, Bloch, Gunn . . . to name just a few. To leave such a wealth of material buried in the background seems uncon-

scionable, so we have been contacting these authors and asking them to reintroduce their stories from the pages of *Amazing/Fantastic* past for the readers of *Amazing/Fantastic* today. Also, for writers of *Amazing/Fantastic* today, who now have the same opportunity as *Hall of Famers*, herewith a hoard of nostalgic inspiration. Launching our trip back in time is the prolific Robert Silverberg with "Hole in the Air", a piece that appeared in *Amazing* exactly a quarter of a century ago.



Illustrated by Steve Fabian

Foreword

I was twenty years old — this was the spring of 1955 — and trying to get myself launched as a professional science fiction writer. My first sales had come in the autumn of 1953, and over the next eighteen months I had managed to place a story every now and then. My total earnings had been \$382.60 during that time, which even in nice fat 1955 dollars didn't go a very long way. But I had reason to hope that better days were coming, and in whatever time I could steal from my studies (I was a junior in college) I turned out short stories.

From a line in an e.e. cummings poem — “there's a hell of a good universe next door — let's go” — I took a story idea that seemed to work, and at the end of the semester I sent my agent (yes, I had acquired an agent already) a 4000-worder called *Next Door*. He sent it back a few days later, calling it too thin and elementary to be salable. Stubbornly, I rewrote it; and stubbornly he returned to me again, recommending on July 18, 1955, that I “put this idea aside, since it hasn't jelled too well, nor does it have strong story possibilities.”

One difference between young writers who are destined to have successful careers and those who are going to fall by the wayside is that the ones who are going

to make it won't take no for an answer. Dismayed and discouraged by my agent's reaction to the story, I nevertheless went back and hammered at it some more. But this time, instead of letting the agent see it a third time, I simply took it to the office of an editor — Howard Browne of *Amazing Stories* — who had shown some interest in this fledgling pro. And behold: Howard accepted the story, paid me a lovely \$40 for it on September 6, and published it under the prosaic title of “Hole in the Air” in the January, 1956 issue of *Amazing*. It was the first of I know not how many stories I would sell to Howard Browne — for a time, I was having three or four published every issue, under all varieties of pseudonyms.

And now to my amazement, twenty-five years have gone by since the day that Howard bought my little story. A masterpiece of Hugo-winning quality it is not; but it does at least show the traces and foreshadowings of the writer I would become, and apart from whatever historical interest it may have it still strikes me as a competent bit of minor entertainment. I'm pleased to be celebrating my twenty-fifth anniversary as an *Amazing Stories* author by bringing it back into print again.

—Robert Silverberg

IT HAD been a bad day for Derke Berish. First had come Kanner's memorandum, implying in veiled terms that Berish was doing a pretty feeble job these days, and immediately after that Production Chief Sunetaro had rejected Berish's sphincter fountain-pen design on the grounds that it was cumbersome and had little sales appeal.

Berish slouched glumly behind his black, shabby designing desk and idly toyed with two slips of paper: Kanner's harsh white one, Sunetaro's gentler green. Kanner's with its sedate message typed in dark brown, neat inch-wide margins all around, and Sunetaro's scribbled in the Production Chief's near-cunieforn. They both added up to the same thing: Berish was in a slump, and unless he could regain the touch that had brought forth gadget after gadget for years, Amalgamated Technologicals would have a new design chief and Berish would be scouting the employment shysters again.

His gaze wandered over the busy little office. His three assistants were all bent over their designing-boards, munching on their stylos and concentrating fiercely. Berish wondered which of them would eventually replace him — little rumpled Rodriguez, or Condon, or Hellman? They were all clever, eager, bright-eyed, just as Berish had been when he first came to work for Amalgamated Technologicals.

As he sickly surveyed the office, he saw Condon leave his desk and move toward him. "Thought you might be interested in this," said Condon, putting a large marble down before him. Even in his gloom, Berish admired the marble's beauty. It gleamed with a soft soothing light, and right in its heart burnt a hard, bright little flame. It seemed almost like a precious gem.

"My boy found it yesterday," Condon said, with that too-eager smile of the underling who wants to move up. "Really interesting gimmick, sir."

Berish fondled the marble for a moment and looked up slowly at Condon. He felt terribly tired; all the weight of the world seemed to have been lowered onto his thin shoulders this bleak morning.

"It's very pretty, Mr. Condon," Berish said. "I admire your taste in marbles." He yawned. "But just why should I —"

Bag-eyed has been!

Abruptly Berish awoke. "What was that, Mr Condon?"

"What, sir?" said Condon, turning fish-white.

"Repeat what you just said to me, Condon."

"But I didn't say anything sir. This marble —"

Berish slumped back in the chair. Now I'm starting to come apart at the seams, he thought. Hearing things is just about the end. I'll cashier out at 1700.

"Go ahead," Berish snapped. "Tell me about the marble."

I would if you'd let me.

"Didn't you just say, 'I would if you'd let me?'" Berish asked.

"No, sir, but it was in my mind," Condon said. "That's the thing about this marble. It transmits thought."

Berish let the marble drop as if it were a glowing coal, and it rolled along the desk. It came to rest next to Sunetaro's note. He looked at it, entranced by its glowing radiance.

"Just where did you get this thing, Mr. Condon?" Berish asked after he had calmed down.

"You may not believe this, Mr. Berish," Condon began, "but my son claims he found it in another dimension."

It had been a bad day for Berish, all right. First Kanner, then Sunetaro, now a telepathic marble from another dimension. He stared blankly at the balding head of Hellman, still bent over his designing-board, and then turned his gaze up coldly at Condon. The young design assistant looked back at him calmly.

"You say your boy got it from another dimension, Condon? He didn't merely fly to Mars for it?"

"Please, Mr. Berish," Condon said, a trifle wearily. "I know it sounds fantastic. But where he got it doesn't matter does it? The fact remains that we have it, and it has definite commercial possibilities."

Berish's eye flickered toward Kanner's polite note still before him, and at that marble. Yes, yes, of course, Berish thought, picking up the marble again and watching the hypnotic dancing of the dot of fire in its heart. Definite commercial possibilities. He felt the bleakness starting to lift.

"Think something at me, Mr. Condon."

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog?"

Condon nodded.

Berish weighed the marble in the palm of his hand. "This could be something exciting," he said, thinking of Kanner and Sunetaro and the whole faceless management of Amalgamated Technologicals to whom he was nothing more

than a machine for designing gadgets, to be cast off and replaced when worn out. This is quite a gadget, all right. And perhaps there would be more where this one came from. With a little shrewdness —

"I didn't know what to say at first," Condon said. "Nine-year-old boys have a way of vanishing at mealtimes, and when I went out to get him I couldn't find him. Yesterday, around 1800. My wife doesn't like dinner time to be too late. But I looked all over for Ronnie, and there was no sign of him. He always tells us if he's leaving the block. I started over next door to see if he was playing indoors, when suddenly he tumbled out of what I can only describe, sir, as a hole in the air —"

"— and he was holding this marble clutched in his grimy little paw. I see the picture, Mr. Condon." Berish looked down at the marble, then querulously up at Condon. "Think something at me, Mr. Condon." He grasped the marble.

This is the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"Is it, Condon?"

"All I can tell you is what Ronnie said," replied Condon. "He said he had walked into a hole in the air and came across some alien monsters playing marbles. He sat right down and won this marble."

Berish smiled. "And you believe this? That a small boy would play marbles so fearlessly with alien monsters? If I'd been there —or you, or anyone — I'd have run away."

"But not Ronnie," Condon said. "He's been raised on TV: I can't keep him away from the set. He's more at home in outer space and alien dimensions than he is in his own house."

"Ah then. What we have here is nothing but the workings of a young man's fertile imagination."

"Quite possibly," said Condon. "But that still doesn't account for this," he said, reaching out and tapping the marble.

"No," said Berish. "It doesn't," he added reflectively. "I think I'll come home with you tonight, if you don't mind. I'd like to have a chat with your son. This may prove to be very, very profitable for us all, Condon."

Four hours later Berish was comfortably enfolded by an immense armchair in Condon's neat little suburban home, facing a wiry, brownhaired, freckle-faced little boy.

"Let's go over this slowly, Ronnie," Berish said, struggling to calm his frayed nerves. "You say you saw a hole in the air."

"That's right," Ronnie said. "I twisted myself around and *scrunched* and I went through."

"I see," said Berish. "You *scrunched*. I've got the idea of it. Have a popstick?"

"Not before supper," broke in Condon, as Ronnie reached eagerly for the proffered sweet. Berish shook his head and put the popstick back in its wrapper.

"Tell me what you saw there, Ronnie."

The boy's eyes widened. "When I got there I was by a big tree and there were five aliens around a ring and they were about so high, with lots of arms and purple and green scales, and they live in a big world with nothing but trees and white concrete and no houses or cars or grownups or anything, and I got there through this hole in the air next door. They were playing marbles, just like we do here, except there wasn't anyone to play with the other morning or I wouldn't have gone through the hole in the air." Ronnie caught in his breath sharply.

Berish closed his eyes for a moment and gathered in his thoughts. No matter

how much fibbing Ronnie was doing, the marble did come from someplace. And if Ronnie's story were true, if there were a universe next door overflowing with wonders, he, Derke Berish held the key.

The key was a small boy's curiosity. A nine-year-old is curious about all things: about frogs and eels and stunball averages and rocket ships and certainly doubly curious about a strange world on the other side of a hole in the air. If Ronnie could be persuaded to back through, again and again —

"You got the marble over there?" Berish asked.

"Yessir. I made contact with them the way Captain Space does, and they let me join their game when they saw I was a peaceful —uh— entity, and I won a marble and brought it back and gave it to Dad and I was late for supper."

Berish glanced at Condon, who sat to one side, impassively. "How would you like to take me outside and show me where the hole in the air is, Ronnie?" Berish asked.

"Why don't you wait until after supper?" Condon said. "My wife will have things ready in a minute."

"Tell her to wait a moment, will you, Condon? This is pretty important. Come on, Ronnie." *Here I come*, Berish thought.

Berish muffled Condon's protest with a gesture of a hand. Ronnie led Berish outside into the alleyway that separated the Condon house from the one next to it. Berish watched anxiously as Ronnie wandered up and down the alleyway, searching in the gathering dusk. Abruptly he brightened. "Here it is, Mr. Berish!" he called. He pointed up. "There."

Berish squinted. "I don't see anything," he said, and got the sickly suspicion that he was a victim of a wild purposeless hoax. "Show me."

Ronnie outlined a space about three feet high. "It shimmers, like. It's hard to tell in the dark, but this is the place."

Berish contemplated it for a moment. "Ronnie?"

"Yessir?"

"Your father's not looking. Here's the popstick."

"But he said —"

"Never mind. Would you show me how you go through the hole in the air?"

"You mean you want me to go through? Right now?"

"Yes," Berish said, trying to look like a kindly uncle. "And when you go through — I'd like you to try to find the aliens again, and make them give you some other toy of theirs."

"You mean you want another marble, Mr. Berish?"

"Yes — no," he said patiently. "Not just another marble, just yet. Any other kind of toy. All right? He gave Ronnie what he hoped was a jolly nudge. The boy peered into the dimness for a moment, then bent down — *scrunched* — and slowly straightening from his contorted position, stepped through. Berish thought he caught a glimpse of a wide, spreading ocean of white sand, broken here and there by a few tall, grotesque trees outlined against a lemon-yellow sky, and then Ronnie vanished and the gateway closed over.

"Where's Ronnie?" Condon demanded, bursting out of the house.

"It was true," Berish said, ignoring him.

"What was true? Do you mean you sent him back again? Why, we don't know what might be back there. Ferocious alien monsters, anything at all — and you let him go through!"

Berish ignored Condon's anxious exclamations. He was dreamily

contemplating the hole in the air, wondering what marvels would come forth to be placed before the astonished eyes of Kanner and Sunetaro and the high forces of Amalgamated Technologicals.

"Berish!" Condon finally shouted. The shout reminded Berish both that Condon was present and that he was an underling who had no business shouting, and he turned to face him.

"Please, Condon. Your boy won't be in any danger, and he'll be right back. This may mean great things for us, Condon."

"Great things! What about my son?"

"Here he is," Berish said. Ronnie stepped back through the hole and tumbled down at Berish's feet. Berish lifted him up.

He had brought back a top — a child's spinning top, off-green with dark blue dots. Berish wondered wildly if the aliens had used polkadot paint to paint it, and then he seized the toy from Ronnie and examined it with a frantic curiosity.

He put it on the ground and spun it, gently. It wobbled around and keeled over.

"No, Mr. Berish. You've got to give it a good twist," Ronnie said, bending down in the growing dusk. He took the top, his small dirty fingers barely able to grip it, and started it off with a flick of his wrist.

It rose about five feet off the ground and hovered there, floating lightly and easily.

It was inevitable, Berish thought, that Condon would try to monkey-wrench the whole thing. Miracles never happened smoothly.

"Look here," Berish said. "We have a whole alien universe opening up before us — a complete immense new technology. The first two things we've brought back from there have given us telepathic contact and now antigravity. There's no telling what further treasures can come through the gateway."

"Exactly," said Condon. "And that's why we should turn the whole business over to the government and let them explore this other universe."

"Why can't you understand?" said Berish, mustering his patience. "You and I are employees of Amalgamated Technologicals. And there is money in these two gadgets for Amalgamated Technologicals, and that means there's money for us. If we turn this over to the government, they'll grab the antigrav top and the marble and turn them into federal monopolies. Just watch. You want to earn seventy credits a week for the rest of your life?"

"Mr. Berish is right, Ralph," said Condon's wife. Startled at aid coming from an unexpected quarter, Berish whirled to look at her, seeing her almost for the first time. "We could let Ronnie go through a couple of more times, and that'll be enough. We'll all be rich."

"And suppose something happens to him?" Condon said.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Ronnie. "They're very nice, even if they're so funny-looking with all those arms and that one big eye. And they use those marbles to speak. The one I spoke to gave me the top and said something about exchanging."

"Exchange?"

"Uh-huh," Ronnie said. "I forget what he told me — something about being very anxious to exchange."

"There you are," exclaimed Berish triumphantly. "We've opened negotiations already!" He cleared his throat nervously, and plunged on. "I don't think there's need for any further discussion. It's established that Ronnie's the only one who can fit through that hole — or even find it, for that matter — and it

is established that the aliens are friendly and anxious to exchange important things with us, through the medium of Ronnie. It would be an act of criminal negligence to fail to take advantage of this opportunity for contact with another race."

"And why let the federal government take all the profit when we can use the money?" demanded Mrs. Condon happily.

"But suppose — what if —"

"Those people are nice, Dad."

"Might I add, Mr. Condon, that should you insist on turning this discovery over to the government, Amalgamated Technologicals might not appreciate such an action?"

Condon nodded weakly, and Berish smiled. It was a smile of victory. He could almost hear the trumpets in the background.

"Are you ready for your trip — ah, next door, Ronnie?"

Ronnie had a small portable generator firmly in both hands. Berish had been quite pleased with himself for making the suggestion that perhaps the aliens might never have discovered electricity. Perhaps, Berish hazarded, they have made use of some other power source from the start — mental power, perhaps — and had never been provoked into controlling electricity. The generator might open up new worlds of technological advance for the aliens, and who knew what they might give in their gratitude?

Berish had gone over Ronnie's instructions patiently. "You want me to find an alien and explain that this is an exchange sent by Earth and get something from him in return."

"Exactly!" Berish said. "You have a very intelligent son, do you know?" he said, turning to Condon, who stood by nervously.

"Come back quickly," Condon said. "I wish you wouldn't make him do this."

"We've been through this before," Berish said coldly.

"Suppose something happens to him? You're letting a youngster go exploring an unknown universe —"

"Will you be quiet?" Berish snapped. "I've had enough of your worries, Condon. Go inside. I'll call you when Ronnie comes back."

Berish waited anxiously for fifteen minutes, and found himself getting a little worried too. Ronnie was certainly a bright, attractive, little boy, and he couldn't blame Condon for worrying about him. He paced up and down the alleyway.

At last Ronnie returned. Berish stared, wondering what he had brought back.

Ronnie had a small globe in which a bizarre black fishlike animal paddled sedately back and forth in a green, brackish-looking liquid.

"How nice," Berish said, concealing his sharp disappointment. "A pet." Inwardly he raged; an animal was of no use to him.

Condon appeared, and looked at the animal. "Doesn't seem we've profited much this time," he said. "I guess you'll send him back for something else."

Berish stood quietly in thought. "Ronnie," he said, "go back. Tell your friend to widen the gateway, if he can. Big enough for a grown-up."

Ronnie turned *scrunched*, went through. A moment later he stepped out. "It's all right, Mr. Berish," he said. "Lennid widened it. And they're looking forward to an exchange."

Berish's eyes brightened. Here, he thought, here's the chance to go through and handle things myself. No more clumsy dealing through a little boy; I'll go straight to the source and pick out the best they've got.

He let his mind dwell on the possible treasures of the world next door. Time travel? Transmutation? Teleportation? Whatever they had, he'd figure out some sort of exchange and get it from them, without manipulating at long range through Ronnie. That was too inefficient, he thought, looking at the fish bowl.

If they have anti-gravity and telepathy, Berish reflected, they can have anything else. And I'll get it from them. I'll exchange. For the mutual benefit of the world next door and Earth. For the mutual benefit of Amalgamated Technologicals and Derke Berish.

"I'm going through," he said, and did.

Ronnie and Condon waited patiently in the alleyway for Berish's return, as an hour passed, then two. They kept a constant vigil for the rest of the day and finally, late in the evening, a figure stepped through the gateway.

"Here he is!" cried Ronnie. But it was not Berish. It was purple-green in color, had a dozen undulating arms, a single big eye at the top of its body, and a tight slit of a mouth under the eye. In one arm it held outstretched one of the otherworld marbles.

Greetings, came its thought.

Condon stared at the alien in horror.

I am your exchange, the alien projected. We have received your specimen and we joy in his complexity. He has been an object of much interest. I have been selected in reciprocation.

"Welcome," Condon said, backing up a bit, wondering what had happened to Berish. "You're in exchange? For Berish?"

Yes. And I am, like him, an exceptionally curious person. For this reason, I ask that you grant me the same favor which my people granted him.

"What's that?" Condon said.

The single big eye of the alien gleamed. *That, before you dissect me, you allow me to see some of your world,* the thought came. ●

Robert Silverberg

A full-time, freelance writer since age 18, Robert Silverberg has created some 28 science fiction novels and countless short stories. He has grown up with the genre, his work evolving from robust adventure yarns into highly complex character studies of people in unique social, emotional and technological circumstances. Silverberg has a strong sense of self-involvement with the rise of science fiction from its pulp-oriented heyday to its literature-oriented present-day level of achievement. Also, he seems to respect both the genre and himself at each step along the way. When asked if he would like to amend anything in "Hole in the Air", written 25 years ago, he replied, "I wouldn't want to make any revisions in the story . . . it's got no really unsightly blemishes; besides, I don't

think it would be fair to my younger self to force a collaboration with me on him". His Nebula award winners are: "Passengers" (1970, Best Short Story); "A Time of Changes" (1971, Best Novel); "Good News from the Vatican" (1972, Best Short Story); "Born with the Dead" (1974, Best Novella). His Hugo award winner: "Nightwings" (1968, Best Novella). Some of his own favorites: "Son of Man", "Thorns", "The Masks of Time" and "The Man in the Maze", all novels.—Editor

Excerpt from "Anomolies of War," an article by Kate Ingersoll:

... The first case of Lang Concurrence was diagnosed ten months into the war. A young ensign, Peter Lang, was killed when a sublight torpedo hit his gunnery turret. He had died of shock and exposure. Since his suit suffered only minor damage, revival procedures were instituted upon the recovery of his body, five hours later.

Ten minutes after the bio-pac was strapped to his chest and the tubes implanted under his skin, he was up and staring blankly at his rescuers. During this time, he described a post World War I period in Switzerland and claimed to have been there for a time period of four days. He constantly begged to be returned to Switzerland during his disjointed interrogation. The use of psychomatician/analyzers proved ineffectual.

Thirty days after the incident, Peter Lang was officially declared insane. One week later, when confronted with the reality outside his quiet room, he became catatonic. His condition is not expected to improve, though he is hooked into the Standard Life Support and Exerciser Systems.

Over the following year, six additional cases were reported. All had died under similar circumstances with no damage to body tissue. After revival, two men suicided when they found they could not return to the hallucinary state they regarded as reality. In all reported cases, the time displacements were a minimum of a century, the furthest one being 24 centuries, always to a peaceful period following a war.

Three of the six followed Lang's pattern and have been transferred to the security area with Lang in hopes of recovery. The last, a female, developed selective amnesia which allowed her to entirely forget the events and function normally. She is currently serving as a Lieutenant in the war zone.

The LANG CONCURRENCE

Ron Montana and Susan Coon

The Medical Board of Inquiry formed to investigate the occurrences rendered its findings sometime later: A string of hallucinatory coincidences based upon the death shock and the patient's need to escape the rigors of battle. The books were closed on the matter with no provisions for further investigation.

Research spanning the past fifteen years of the war have turned up an additional eighty-nine cases, unrelated and symptomatic of the seven cited.

Coincidence? I think not. Eventually someone will return with faculties intact and shed light upon Peter Lang's fate, as well as those lining the security rooms kept alive with life support systems...

SCARLET O'HARA hovered five hundred meters above the surface of planet one. She rode with her screens down and basked in the radiation that emitted from the glassy plain that had been the enemy base. Out to her starboard and port hung eighty drone ships spread in a triangle that ended at her stern. Each drone was a miniature sending station; not much bigger than a spacesuited man, but capable of transmitting radio, radar and sensor beams on a broad band and wide scale. Bubbles of plastic, vulnerable, somewhat unstable in the radiation, but with luck they could pour forth such a stream of probing rays that the enemy fleet, fast approaching its base, would take them for a formidable task group.

Captain Pollard on the bridge of *Scarlet O'Hara* sighed and opened communication to his flag ship.

"Yankee General, this is the Rebel Band. We are in position and awaiting your attack flash."

The voice that came back at Pollard from his helmet speaker was firm and metallic. The radiation would not allow ship-to-ship visual and Pollard would have to read his boss's voice for any sign of hesitation.

There was none. "I can't say I would have picked that call sign myself, Ernie, but to each his own. Enemy vessels approaching east and nadir. ETA twelve minutes and thirty-four seconds to planet curve. If they hold true to form, they won't break without a visible threat, but as soon as they detect the elimination of their base we can expect a fast back-off maneuver in several unpredictable directions. You'll get your flash just before they make their turn. Then I want you up and out on full power. Copy?"

Pollard's brow knitted. "Just how in hell are you going to know when they're going to run before they do?"

"My mother was a crystal ball and my father a magician."

"Funny you should mention that. I was just contemplating your ancestry."

The helmet transceiver chuckled then spat back. "Stand-by, Rebel Band. I'm leaving my cabin for the bridge now. And, Ernie..."

"Yes, sir?"

The voice was a whisper, but rock hard. "*I depend on you.*"

THE WAGON bumped over ruts and potholes in the road threading north through the valley. Two men sat side by side on the hard seat. The passenger chewed on an apricot provided by the driver. Finishing his breakfast, he motioned to the rifle that rode in a boot on the wagon's side and said, "That's quite a lethal looking weapon you got there. Ever have to use it?" He did not remember seeing it when he climbed in. Nor did he remember much before the ditch he woke up in. The weapon fascinated him, acting as a catalyst which pulled the threads of his shattered past into a fabric.

"Time or two. There's a few of Pickett's boys fertilizing a meadow jus' south



Illustrated by Gary Freeman

of a stone wall at Gettysburg could attest to that, iffen the dead could talk."

Silence dominated for a while, and trees; tall walnuts that shaded the dirt path with a blanket of softness. Some farmer's kids in straw hats and dungarees kicked rocks and shouted to each other. Peace. Breathing room.

"Yep. Damned johnny runners could sure fight, but no match for Meades' boys that day. Looks of yer duds, mayant you served, too?"

The question stirred him into full cognizance. He bolted upright on the seat. "W—what..."

"No need to get jumpy. Jus' asked if you were in the war, too?"

"Yes," he answered slowly, nauseated by the memory that scorched all his senses. "I was in a war, too."

"Can't say as I ever seen that there uniform before, but no matter." The driver leaned forward on the seat and extended his right hand, large as a boat oar, and said, "Luke Crighton, 72nd Pennsylvania and pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Ingersol. David Ingersol. Sometime navy."

"ADMIRAL INGERSOL to the bridge. Admiral Ingersol to the bridge."

The ship's comm screamed from every bulkhead as Ingersol stepped off the jumptube and onto the bridge of the Flag Ship *Harry S. Truman*. He strode across the wide expanse of polished deck until he was in front of the communications center.

"Report, Ensign."

"Scarlet O'Hara is joining up now, sir. Bringing her in on the center screen."

Ingersol winced, as he did each time the most formidable battleship in the Navy was called by her adopted name. Damn Pollard and his obsessions! Ernie Pollard was a gut fighter, and men like Ernie had their idiosyncracies. But, the whole Civil War?

The young face of Captain Pollard grinned across the screen as one of his old eyes winked a brotherly greeting. Strains of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" leaked into the transmission. "Hey there, Yankee, pretty far from Annapolis, ain't ya?"

Ingersol cleared his throat and swallowed a smile. "Captain Pollard, please confine yourself to established protocol when addressing your Fleet Admiral on his bridge."

"Shore will, David. Where the hell is it? The fleet, I mean. I count six ships. Of course, my sensors may be failing. Come to think of it, this old tub is due for an overhaul." Snapping to rigid attention, Pollard saluted without smiling and glazed his eyes like a recruit too long in the sun. "Sir! Request permission to retreat for necessary repairs."

"The only things in need of overhaul are your misplaced sense of humor and your lack of proper respect when addressing superiors." He leaned back in the command chair. "I'm sending a Lighter for you, Captain Pollard. You will present yourself to my quarters in thirty minutes and deliver the Liberty Packet. That's an order. End trans." The image on the screen disappeared, leaving only a quiet memory of good times, the old days with Ernie — before the awesome burden of command.

"Two vessels coming out of the sun, Admiral. Screen seven. Identifier codes indicate the *Michael Lawrence* and the *San Francisco*."

He swiveled the chair. The dull glare of L-234 reflected off two pinpoints of light growing steadily on the screen. "Last two, Ensign?"

"Affirmative, Admiral. Shall I open a beam?"

He nodded slightly, watching the ships bud against the blackness.

SAN FRANCISCO marched its frame and brick houses up from Market Street, up the towering hills and down toward the Pacific, like fetal skyscrapers waiting their time to be born. Shadows stalked the city now, from the wooden schooners in the harbor to the tops of the massive mansions on Nob Hill.

The wagon rode higher, its load of goods sold to the vendors at the foot of Fisherman's Wharf. The crusty driver jingled coins in his pocket with a wide grin on his tanned face. "It's the tavern for myself, laddie. Some whiskey and a good woman for the night and I'll be rights with the world for another week behind these foul smelling fly catchers. Join me and we'll make a week-end of it, from the Gold Dollar to the Bosen's Mate, aptly named I might add, and you can pour out yer troubles to a raven-haired vixen that as soon cut your purse strings as bed ya! What say you, David Ingersol?"

The sound of his name, both familiar and at the same time strange without a title, brought him back from the new world of sights and sounds he had just discovered.

"It would be a pleasure to drink with you, Luke, but first there's somewhere I have to go. I want to see the ocean and beach to the west." He paused, meeting the driver's eyes. "It's important."

Luke shrugged indifferently. "Well, I'm guessing I've got the time for a small sojourn 'fore I die of thirst. Since I owe you a half day's honest work unloading this wagon, where away?"

Ingersol motioned toward the setting sun. "Due west to Seal Rocks and then south a couple of miles to where I was born. Shouldn't take long."

The fog was creeping in as they wound down the beach front road from Seal Rocks toward the yet to be thought of Playland and the zoo. Hard left and east, the horse's hooves kicked up sand on what might have been Noriega Street, traversing the invisible ways until David called a halt at a point that, from the position of the dunes and the distance from the ocean, could have been 33rd Avenue.

The two men climbed down from the wagon and stood amidst the sand and low scrub brush that dotted the landscape. Ingersol knelt and scooped up a handful of sand, then stared at the rows and rows of brightly colored stucco houses that marched over the horizon, touching each other, as if for protection against the oncoming night,

Crighton kicked at the ground and growled, "Damned sand. Nothing can grow in this."

The rows of houses vanished from David's mind and he looked up at his companion. "Dragon's Teeth."

"What?"

The kneeling man tilted his hand and the gray-gold grains of sand spilled out in a tumbling arc of light as they rushed to join the ground that gave them birth. "Dragon's Teeth. They'll grow anywhere."

INGERSOL ROLLED off his bunk and greeted the tall man in the white and orange flight suit. Pollard extended both hands, his left grasping the Liberty Packet by the bottle neck. Above the suit seal on the left cuff a Confederate flag clashed with the orange trim.

"Hell-o, Davey. Thirsty?"

The Admiral squeezed his old friend's hand and threw his arm around his shoulders. "Never touch the stuff. You know how I am." Checking the brand, "Just brought one bottle, huh?"

Pollard laughed the old familiar laugh that Ingersol associated with pleasant days and comfortable friendships. Suddenly he wanted to know about Jean and the kids, and what happened to Kate? Jean would know. Did she mention him anymore? Christ, was the price of being Fleet Admiral really worth the loss of Kate?

Pollard's lanky form stretched across a chair in front of the Admiral's desk. Ingersol managed a smile and poured two healthy rations over ice. The smile faded before he leaned against the desk edge. "A toast. To those who have gone before us, as Omar said."

"To those who may yet go, Admiral — as SectComAltair says."

"Same old Ernie. Here I thought Altair Sector duty would've hardened you. But, you still approach every challenge with the open-minded innocence of a new born babe."

"Your sarcasm is wasted, David. I'm getting the feeling I'd rather not approach this particular challenge at all." Ice cubes clinked. Pollard's skeptical blue eyes posed their own challenge at the Admiral for several seconds before his gaze shifted to a 3-D globe of System L-234 resting on its gimbaled base behind the desk.

Ingersol's eyes followed his friend's. "Now Ernie, you know I wouldn't commit you or your ship to anything that wasn't a piece of cake."

"Bullshit! . . . Sir!"

"Am I that transparent, old buddy?"

Pollard lifted his glass to the overhead lighting.

It cast a shadow on the desk top. "About as transparent as that, Admiral."

"My compliments for your eagle eye and your adequate brandy, Captain Pollard."

"Adequate, hell. You've been away too long, Davey. What, ten years? Eleven?"

"Fifteen." Ingersol put his glass down and sighed. "Oh, I refitted at Greentree last year. Didn't have much time, but I managed a shuttle with the tourists down to Tranquility Monument and gawked a lot. At the time . . . I wondered if it had all been worth it. I'm still wondering, Ernie."

"Never thought I'd hear David Ingersol, hardest Battle Admiral in the history of the navy, mouth an unmilitary thought."

Ingersol catapulted a paperclip at his subordinate's head. Both men came to their feet, chuckling to ease the tension.

"David, you look like you could use some down time. Why don't you request it when this action is over? Altair Sector can survive for thirty days without you, y'know."

"How is it? Home I mean."

"It hasn't changed much. Buildings get a little taller each time I touch down at T.I. — Pacific's still blue — fog still rolls in every night like clockwork. How does one describe a Van Gogh to . . ." Ernie shook his head and sipped his drink.

"Finish it."

"To a blind man, Davey."

"I've been called a lot of things since my first walk across the bridge, but not that, Ernie. Maybe you're right. Maybe I do need a rest. God knows . . ." How damn sickening it is when a little blip disappears off a screen and another 1500 men and women move in to replace it, only to blink out like little blobs of incandescent vapor. How damn hard it is to make the right decision over and over, knowing you could be wrong, doubt eating at you like a malignant ulcer, and the cost — the lives — the nightmares of haunting voices of how many

casualties? Thousands? Tens of thousands? Out loud, "Look, you and I go back a long way, mind if I ask you something straight?"

Pollard's fingers grated over a two day stubble on his chin. "You're top Yankee."

Ingersol took another pull on his drink. His shoulders sagged, revealing the bone tired weariness gnawing at him day after day. "When I was a young Ensign with both hands on fire, I had the glory hallelujah, God save the universe attitude." Ingersol smiled half-heartedly. "Every time I see Colin Christopher on the bridge of *San Francisco*, I see myself in retrospect. I look at him and all the others and wonder if it's worth it." He stared at the ice diluting the brandy. "Maybe it's despair wrought from maturity, or just goddamn senility."

"The council wouldn't have given you a Fleet Command if they thought you were over the hill."

Ingersol snorted. "They wouldn't know a hill from Everest unless it was accompanied by a T.O. spelling it out in small, single syllable words in large print."

Pollard cocked his head. "Could be a grain of truth in that."

"You could've had a fleet command a long time ago, Ernie. Lord knows you're qualified. Why the hell didn't you take one?"

Pollard winced. "I've got fourteen-hundred Rebel souls to shepherd. That's all the responsibility these broad shoulder can bear and still support this handsome head."

"If I wanted a tap dance, Captain, I would have had Tri-D background piped through — in color."

"And if you'd wanted a psychomatician/analyzer, I wouldn't have brought a bottle," Pollard replied, smiling.

"Touche. Excuse me if I don't laugh."

"Fine. But don't look to me to tell you what to do. You want someone to sympathize with you and say you're right with the yessiradmiralsir bullshit, go meet with your execs in the slusher. You sure as hell won't get it from me now, anymore than you ever have. It's your job — do it. If you've got a bitch — take it to Montclair or call the chaplain. We got four quadrants and six sectors crawling with those alien bastards. It's rough all over. Don't belly-ache to me, 'cause I'm just the hired help. And my damn glass is empty — sir!"

Ingersol leaned forward to pour his friend another drink. Both men's eyes locked for a second. "You're right, of course. You're not here for me to purge myself. Hell, this is supposed to be a briefing."

"So, let's brief. What's the drill?"

Ingersol rose, walked to the globe and motioned to the planet nearest L-234. The other man followed. "We hit the enemy's base on the first planet ten days ago. We sat out topside orbit and washed them off with nukes."

Pollard's eyebrows raised a fraction. Ingersol caught the questioning look. "Couldn't risk them getting off a warning outsystem. Intelligence has solid information that they're going to reinforce this sector within the next few days and attempt to link forces in A-168 in forty-eight hours with two hundred ships. He hopes to catch them before they're in position and force a rout and general retreat eastward in our direction. Naturally, Standard Pursuit Orders apply."

"Naturally. And we ride into the valley of the carnivores with nine ships and the jawbone of an ass."

"No . . . Not we. One ship. The meanest ass in the valley."

Pollard recoiled. "Now wait one damn minute, David. If you . . ."

"No. You wait a minute, Ernie. Tell me, with the benefit of your experience and the knowledge of the enemy's capabilities, what in hell the outcome would

be if we met them head on, even with *Scarlet*. You're commanding the heaviest battleship in the fleet because of your abilities, not in spite of them."

Pollard looked pained as he calculated. "We could expect to inflict upwards of forty percent kills, before they totally destroyed us."

"Optimist. I would have said thirty percent. But, you're right on the final outcome. Do you think SectComAltair sent us out here to lose nine ships and thousands of lives just to stage a holding action that'll buy them a few less enemy and a couple more pursuit hours?"

"No comment."

"Right again. But in this case we may be able to accomplish our goal with the plan I've worked out. The whole thing is going to hinge on you and your — your Rebels. I've got to have your total confidence, Ernie. Do I?"

Pollard nodded slowly. "You know the answer to that, Admiral. What history molding feat does *Scarlet* perform tomorrow?"

THE SALOON was not much more than a covered alley lodged between two old, wooden buildings near the docks. The smells of wet timbers, gulls, ships and the streets melted into the crowd of seamen and townspeople looking for a little escape on a Saturday night. Perfect place for me, Ingersol thought as he followed Luke through the open plank doors, around the clusters of humanity and sought a small, empty table across the sawdust floor near the long bar.

As they passed an old whisper of a Chinese man sweeping the sawdust, Ingersol met his eyes and nearly stumbled. A flicker of recognition, not clear or solid kept him from speaking. The Chinese gave an almost imperceptible nod, looked away and continued sweeping. Before he could rest his unease, Luke grabbed his arm and maneuvered him through a course of chairs.

Ingersol settled into his niche, unable to see the Chinese. Immediately an aging barmaid with a missing tooth and large pudgy hands greeted them. She set a bottle of rye whiskey and two glasses on the center of the table and scooped up the coin Luke spun in her general direction.

Must be the specialty of the house, thought Ingersol, downing the drink in cadence with his companion. "Ugh! That tastes like high grade machinery lubricant. Is that the best this place can do?" The fire in his stomach commanded all his attention.

"Well, it ain't the Palace Bar, but you git used to that after the first bottle, my friend."

Coughing, Ingersol replied, "I'll bet you do. I'll just bet you do." He sipped the second drink slowly, hoping what the hostler said was true. The fire mellowed into a warm hand grasping his insides. He relaxed to allow the liquor to do its work.

Luke was talking now, the rye loosening his tongue and unplugging the tide of war stories he had locked up inside. Ingersol sat back and listened intently while he drank, wondering how this man who had obviously killed so many men at close range could be so calmly reminiscent. Was it easier to accept the responsibility of death when the enemy was a tangible entity? Did proximity and familiarity absolve the terror and guilt a wrong decision carried? Certainly the pressures of Luke's kind of war were less than the ones threatening to obliterate all of humanity if the war was lost.

As he wondered if the time exposure to war was a factor, Luke continued. "Webb caught those bastards a good one when he ordered us up to the wall. But I swear, them Rebs looked like water out of a sluice when the 71st broke. Damned canister so thick in the air you'd have thought it was rain. Then we cut loose a volley that near tore their heads off and the mother's sons yelped like

short changed whores. Which reminds me . . ." He gestured to the waddling barmaid and yelled over the noise. "Pandora! Another bottle for my partner and me, and quick about it!"

"Pandora?" The question faded in the cacophony of the bar. "How the hell did she get named Pandora?"

Crichton told him, sparing no detail and elaborating at some length. Ingersol laughed so hard he almost slipped out of his chair. With great effort and the realization that time changes fewer things than most thought, he managed to compose himself before she arrived with the bottle. The laughter set the full effects of the liquor into motion. Neither man felt any pain.

"Nough a my long-winded yarns, David. Your turn to spin one for my entertainment. But mind you, stay within the limits of reality. There's nothin' I hate more than man who can't hold his liquor and bores his friends with tall tales." This time they both laughed until tears filled their eyes and steadied themselves only after two additional rounds.

Then David Ingersol, Admiral, Terran Space Authority, downed another round and launched into his tale of war where the true horrors were alien, unseen and bent upon total disintegration of the human race. His speech was a bit slurred and his eyes glazed, but then he had been there, or still was. And who can tell a war story better than a man who has been in command?

"LARGE GROUP of vessels going sublight six minutes outsystem, sir. Probes registering eighty-plus ships moving eastward on maximum drive. No engagement formations evident, they're coming in a loose cone formation with the heavy stuff near the rear. Visual pick-up on screen one in two minutes." The sensor officer's voice remained steady as his hands danced over the row of boards in front of him.

"Re-verify your figures every thirty seconds, Ensign. I want the slightest deviation from track path the instant it occurs."

"Yes, sir."

"Communications."

"Yes, sir!" The young lieutenant turned from his console and looked up at Ingersol who had swiveled the command chair in his direction.

"Open the attack channel to *Scarlet O'Hara* and tie me in on a separate channel to the rest of the ships. I want *Scarlet* visual as soon as she's out of atmosphere and I want you to maintain each of the other ships on individual screens as soon as we engage so I can monitor battle damage or losses. I don't want to be told what's happening. I want to see it as it happens."

"Consider it done, sir."

Wish I had your confidence, boy, Ingersol mused. The low monotonous tone of the sensor officer's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Enemy vessels ranging visual now, sir. No formation change." His strained professionalism slipped for an instant. "They're coming in the front door, Admiral."

Ingersol studied the black panorama spread across the main screen. L-234's rays were breaking past horizon point over planet one's north pole and the golden rim of light made it difficult to pick out the small pinpoints he was seeking. Maybe my eyes are getting too old, he thought. No! There they are! Bunched and tight and unsuspecting, they moved in silently, glowing brighter on the screen as the sun's light bounced off their polished hulls. He hit the comm button in the arm rest and spoke into the air. "*Scarlet O'Hara*, this is Admiral Ingersol. Stand by for attack flash."

"Gotcha, Yankee," was the terse reply.

Ingersol's tired eyes watched and waited.

"Computer shows twenty-two point four seconds until they register *Scarlet* and break away." The pinpoint became identifiable shapes, growing larger at a rapidly increasing rate. David thought of his borderline non-conformist friend and the Standard Pursuit Orders.

"Twelve seconds till computed break point, sir. Standing by."

Has to be right on the money, Ernie. No margin for error here.

"Two. One. Minus one. Sir. Past breakpoint and still moving in formation."

"Stand by. Just a little more, and . . . hold . . . Now! *Scarlet O'Hara*, this is Ingersol with your attack flash! Go get 'em, Rhett, you're ridin' the meanest ass in the valley!"

Scarlet rose, an unbridled comet with her hair made of eighty drones bobbing like seagulls in a high breeze. The enemy squadron ranged her as a large group of hostile fighter craft and broke zenith at full speed — too late. *Scarlet* hit like a stalking shark into the exposed underbelly of the escaping ships and blasted a path almost halfway through the cone before they returned her fire.

The drones, unshielded and defenseless, vanished as one amidst the first salvo from the remaining seventy percent of the ships Pollard had not yet accounted for.

"She's in trouble now, sir. Returning fire, but taking repeated hits. Comm channel still open."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. *Scarlet*, this is Ingersol."

Static buzzed over Pollard's strained voice. "Read you . . . hitting us hard . . . starboard drive tubes . . . casualties . . ."

"Do what you have to, Ernie." He took a deep breath and let it out quickly. "I'd like to see that piece of cake sliced in half before you run, but you move out when you feel you have to . . . Understand?"

". . . hold on as long . . . can, Yankee."

Two minutes passed.

Scarlet had taken out the head of the cone which was composed of lighter, swifter craft, but the bigger ships moved in and surrounded her. Even her heavier armament and stronger screens could not long endure the combined firepower of the guns unloading against her. She ran.

"*Scarlet O'Hara* disengaging and moving out at flank speed, sir. They're regrouping in attack formation and taking the bait."

Pollard flew his crippled ship like the veteran he was, using what remaining maneuverability he had to dodge the steady fire of the approaching ships when possible. Sitting at the equator line of planet one, just inside planet curve, Ingersol watched the drama piped into his monitors from a single drone that floated like a piece of debris far out in space.

Scarlet O'Hara was now past the planet's meridian line and could be seen visually on direct line of sight transmission. She was moving slower, but was still able to maintain a flight attitude parallel to the planet's equator.

"She's past us, sir, and we'll have radar contact with the enemy in thirty-four seconds if we hold position."

"Admiral Ingersol to the Fleet. Phase two in effect in thirty seconds. Stand by."

The next move was critical. *Scarlet* would clear the hiding ships, the enemy group would range Ingersol's flight and Ingersol would move his ships out in battle formation to one side, pull up short, and wait.

A warning claxton howled and the bridge lights dimmed to a soft, red glow. "We're being scanned, Admiral. Full power and all wave lengths."

David held his breath for a second that seemed like an eon, then expelled it slowly in a deep sigh as the enemy ships held formation and continued to pursue their battle weary prey.

"They're going to buy it, sir! The bastards are going for it gift-wrapped."

"Lieutenant, any tactical or strategical comments you have to offer will be duly noted and welcomed. Please save the epitaphs for the mess deck."

The bastards were going to buy it, though. Fool me twice and I'm to blame. They were now reading his ships, powered down and drifting with no apparent defense screens. They had a choice of actions; break off and attack the mock fleet hanging to their starboard and abandon a sure kill, or, continue and finish what the *Scarlet O'Hara* started.

They kept going. David Ingersol smiled and issued orders to attack.

Armageddon followed. Ingersol's badly outnumbered and undergunned ships jumped forward, catching the enemy in a surprise broadside punch that tore their formation to shreds. Before they could re-group into defense units, Ingersol hit them again, and again.

Ships exploded and broke up, scattering fragments of living cargo into dead space. The westward run began. Twelve ships, damaged and beaten, tried to escape the devil-squadron relentlessly dogging them outsystem.

"Captain Christopher reporting minor screen damage to *San Francisco*, but all drives are operative and he's maintaining pursuit speed."

"*Glen Erie* has sustained casualties but is space worthy."

"*Scarlet O'Hara* is spinning and her momentum is sending her sunward. We're trying to effect communication." The sensor officer's voice dropped lower. "There is no visual or sensor evidence of *Stonehenge* on any of the boards."

Ingersol did not reply. Seven hundred men and women had just become victims of his latest decision. And how many more? "Yes, Kate, they speared our friends like fishes for their horrid feasts, and thus bore them away."

"Beg you pardon, sir?"

His reply was terse. "I said, flash pursuit and destroy, and bear on the *Truman*. We're moving out. Dammit! Raise *Scarlet O'Hara* now!"

The comm officer stiffened in his chair and signaled again to the wounded ship that was fusion bound.

"Damned Yankee, this is the Busted Ass," was the unexpected reply.

Ingersol froze, staring at the blip on the main screen.

"David, my instruments show your group moving away. I am in Black Mode. Repeat, Black Mode. Half our systems have failed. Are you receiving me?"

Softly now, a small tremor in his tone. "I hear you, Ernie." Standard Pursuit Orders — pursue and finish — it's older than Caesar and the Roman army — the road to victory. Every remaining ship has fire power. Every remaining ship is necessary to obliterate the enemy and end this ugly monstrosity of war in the entire quadrant.

He glanced around.

Open stares and sideways glances found him, all accusing him of abandoning the ravaged *Scarlet* and her heroic Rhett who bought their lives. All knowing of the long friendship between him and the "Busted Ass." Would they be so willing to go into battle with him at the helm, knowing they'd be left to die a hideous, lingering death such as the one facing the Rebels?

"... all drives are out. Hanger decks and life boats are gone. Casualties — two hundred dead twice as many dying. Last computations show six hours before burn. Request assistance to disembark personnel."

There was nothing.

"Yankee? Are you receiving?"

Ingersol rested his forehead in his hand, brushing at the moisture below his eyes with his thumb. "Loud and clear, Captain Pollard. Standard Pursuit Orders are in effect. Request denied." He cleared his throat. "We'll come back for you, Ernie . . . as soon as we can."

"I see . . ." A fizzling sound cut off the visual. Seconds later, Pollard's voice came through again. Some of the members of his hand selected crew sang "Dixie" at a dirge tempo in the background. "David? Catch 'em fast, 'cause we'll be waiting for you. I, ah . . ." The transmission sputtered and died.

The voice of his friend and the strains of the Old South battle hymn echoed in Ingersol's mind and tore at his soul. He felt his world cracking down the middle, the jagged sides crumbling into the many drops of blood that represented the countless lives he had been responsible for. The dismal failure to preserve, or even try to aid his closest friend, his only friend, and the hardest misfits ever put on a ship closed in on him. *Scarlet*. His world turned scarlet and crimson. The battlefield of his mind evolved into the quagmire left after Sherman's march. The wasted dregs were steeped in fatigue. An explosion deep in his brain ran across his body. He could not lift a finger to stop it. The roar filled his ears and engulfed his body, only to reach out and touch the gleaming floors of the bridge. They continued to travel at a faster-than-light speed which seemed slow to Ingersol. It kept moving, and moving, and moving . . . blossoming away from him, casting him into isolation.

Reality tired and slept. Over and over the strains of "Dixie" ran through the barrage shaking his body. Never had he been so tired. Tired of everything. Wanting to go home where it was quiet, where Kate once waited . . . In the land of . . . Peace . . . Far away . . . Look away . . .

Somewhere a light flickered, summoning him from oblivion. His crew were flying through the air, slamming into control panels.

The darkness returned, leaving him impotent in their time of need. A screeching sound, almost a laugh in the most grotesque of realities, tried to break "Dixie" from the never ending tape in his head.

A second blast rocked the *Harry S. Truman*. In that instant, Admiral Ingersol felt death step on his heart.

IN A daze, Ingersol stood and slammed his glass down on the table so hard that it shattered, bloodying his clenched fist. "Fourteen-hundred and sixty-seven men and women sentenced to burn to death and I can't do a damned thing about it." He was shouting and Crighton looked a little worried.

Ingersol stared down at the blood on his hands. The will that held back his pent-up fury collapsed. Screeching like a wounded animal, he grabbed the table with both hands and turned it over in a crash of glass and bottles. Crighton's half full tumbler of rye sailed through the air and landed squarely in the lap of a small, stocky seaman who sat at the next table with four drinking companions.

A hush fell over the saloon. The smaller man stood, brushed at the liquor beaded on his pea coat and shook his head. Each slow arc generated more of a smile. Suddenly a knife materialized out of what seemed to Ingersol to be thin air. Luke's hands fell onto the carbine resting across his now exposed legs. Slowly he pushed his chair back a few inches. "Watch it, David."

Ingersol half turned and the sailor came in low, holding the knife for an upwards lunge designed to slit from groin to chin. It seemed to his liquor dulled eyes that the other man was moving so slowly. The enemy was always very, very quick. But, here . . . here was something he could get his hands on. No chain of command between him and the killers now. He would be the only one

who suffered from his decision this time.

As the enemy closed, David Ingersol moved. Stinking, falling down, fighting goddam drunk, he brought his left hand up in a paralyzing chop that caught his attacker's right wrist and sent the knife flying across the room. Before it impaled the opposite wall, he lashed out his heavily booted left foot and shattered his opponent's kneecap. As he fell forward, Ingersol slashed the edge of his right hand across the seaman's adams apple and his destroyed enemy collapsed dead, at his feet.

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Crighton as the dead man's companions rose as one and started across the small space wielding empty bottles and knives. He came out of his chair and met the first man's chin with the carbine stock in a bone crunching whack that sounded like dried wood splintering. Without pausing, he brought the heavy barrel back down and laid it along side the skull of the next antagonist.

Ingersol just stood and stared as the saloon erupted into a bedlam of screams and motion. The bartender ducked behind the bar and remained there. The shrieking prostitutes scampered past the old Chinese who stood against the wall with his broom, and made for the back door. The Chinese glanced at Ingersol apprehensively.

Someone shouted "Police," as the tables and chairs overturned in the mad rush jammed at the front door.

Ingersol looked at the Chinese, trying to recall something to associate with him, then turned to watch as Luke bent to cock his carbine. A rat faced sailor brought his arm straight out and sailed a glinting blade through the air with deadly accuracy. The last thing David saw, before a bottle bounced off his temple, was his friend standing a few feet away, looking bewilderedly at the knife buried to its hilt in his chest.

INGERSOL LAY on his back staring at the dirty plaster ceiling for a long time before he decided his head would not explode if he moved a little. It didn't explode, but it hurt like hell and the noise from his stiffened bones was deafening.

It was daytime. Rays of sun managed to get past the slits in the boarded up hole in the wall trying to pass as a window. The room was small. It contained the rough cot he was sprawled on, a broken chest, and a single wooden chair beside a shaky looking table. On the table rested a pan of water and some damp, blood soaked rags. The chair was occupied.

"Good morning, Admiral Ingersol. Please, drink this. It will help. The old Chinese extended a shriveled hand which held a small porcelain cup of steaming liquid.

Ingersol raised a few inches from the cot and found that he did have the power to sit up, though it felt as if it would be the last action in his life. He took the cup with both hands to steady it and sipped the tea.

"Drink it all. I have more brewing. Later I will try to bring something to eat."

The events in the saloon slapped back at Ingersol so hard the cup almost fell from his shaking hands. "Crighton? Where is he? What happened?"

"He's fought his last battle. I'm sorry, Admiral." The old man's tone was sad as he continued. "He died well and quickly. The others ran, thinking you were also dead. They lost no time in removing themselves from having to answer the questions of the local authorities. I managed to bring you here during the confusion. I don't think anyone knows."

Elbows braced on his knees, inhaling the steam, Ingersol looked curiously at the Chinese through eyes which threatened to bleed to death if he blinked too

hard. "Why? And how do you know who I am?" He lowered the cup slightly. "Something about you tells me I should know you." After a painful half nod, "Maybe you remind me of someone I used to know. Probably dead, now." He sipped the tea feeling as though he had delivered a long speech.

The withered hands turned palms up. "I couldn't leave you there. There are levels in this society. You didn't belong on a saloon floor. As for your rank and name," a smile deepened the wrinkles and nearly closed his eyes. "I have a rare ability for a janitor. I read eight languages, most of which these people have never heard, nor will they for more than a century." Pointing at the plate above the left breast pouch on Ingersol's uniform, "You advertise. The rank on your shoulders is impressive, sir."

David stared blankly at the speaker, not sure whether he was dreaming, dead or insane.

The Chinese grinned with even white teeth. "You're not the first to pass through here. Two others have come. One returned. The other is still here, living about fifty miles south in a hacienda with his wife and family. As for myself, floor sweeping and the like hardly occupies my mind. I've had a great amount of time for speculation about survival techniques." The grin returned with a far away expression. "I was not always obsequious. That is a practiced trait. You, too, will have much to learn if you are not pulled back in a few days. Is your ship, suit or whatever you were in when the aliens hit you, still intact?"

The question confused David. He shrugged. It seemed the question was more for his benefit than general information.

The old gentleman leaned forward, locking his slanted eyes onto David's. "In any event, you must realize this is a reality, only the time reference has changed. It may be a device used by the aliens to break you. Be flexible. Adjust to what is ahead and trust yourself implicitly. Listen to the reality inside of you. It matters little what others think, but a great deal what you think about yourself. This I know to be true above all else."

The old man relaxed and sat back in the chair and continued. "I think there is a direct correlation between those who are sent to the past and a combination of battle fatigue, wish for escape, and a deep-rooted trauma. These are simultaneous occurrences, occupying the mind when the blast comes. It's not a general impact, but selective, or there would be thousands of us littering the world's past. We are the fortunate ones. The chemical alteration that depression causes in our bodies allows us survival. Consider it another chance." He stared off at one of the sun filled cracks. "I'm not sure if the aliens know that they can do this to us. I don't know . . ." His voice trailed as though recalling some ancient memory out of his past.

David touched the side of his head and winced. "I don't know either. I don't know why the hell anything is like it is, with one exception, Old Man. It would have been wiser for you to have left me in the saloon. Everyone I have anything to do with lately ends up dead. Very dead."

David put both legs over the edge of the cot and rubbed the back of his neck as he rested his feet on the hard dirt floor. "I'd better get the hell out of here before you're involved and end up the way Crighton did."

"Ah, I'm too old and have seen too much to fear death, but you seem obsessed with it. Sit down. Regain your strength. You may always leave — when you know where you're going." He shifted, commanding Ingersol into a sitting position with his eyes. "Tell me, how did you come to think of this time and place?"

"San Francisco? It was my home before I grew up and left to chase shadows between the stars." David coughed a sharp, dry laugh. "The time? I can thank

Ernie for that. Damned Ernie and the crew of the *Scarlet* . . . Falling into the sun because I didn't go get them. Dead like the thousands of others. All my fault." He buried his face in his hands.

"Does the rain, through its failure to fall upon a burning building, cause the death of a person trapped within?" asked the Chinese softly.

"There's no justification for my inaction. I have a mode of reasoning, a method of choice. Rain does not." Ingersol reflected, I'm sitting here arguing with a man who died before I was born. I'm really losing my grip.

"Does not a supreme power guide the rain, as the sun and even all mankind in their deeds and actions? You place too much blame on yourself."

Ingersol lowered his fingers and spread them to peer back at the Chinese. "You sure as hell don't sound like anyone from my time frame, but the words don't change a damn thing."

"Practice, and I thank you. The words do have meaning. Think about it." He rose and took the tea cup. "It could be that you are overrating yourself, Admiral."

The Chinese poured another cup of tea and fingered a pinch of white powder into it. "When I had my first command, a war command, the Fleet Admiral I served under taught me a great deal. The most important lesson was in humanity and how to skin a cat, as they say here; two ways." Handing the cup back to Ingersol. "There are always wars, followed by peaceful lulls. Perhaps, before I die, someone will intentionally pass this way to bring me news of a total peace and reconciliation. And if they do, I will know that the species has been preserved for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of my children."

Ingersol sipped the tea, feeling immediately drowsy. Through the fog he felt that the old man was from a time beyond his, that he knew the outcome of the battle still going on with Montclair. Desperately looking up, mouth moving without a sound, he tried to probe further.

The old gentleman straightened his sleeves and smiled. "Sleep now. The answers will come. We are what we make of ourselves and time stops for no man, no matter how often it changes reference points."

Ingersol plopped onto the cot, wide eyes staring at the light splattered wall. The sound of the tea cup shattering on the floor crashed in his head like the drums of a Dixie parade. "... old times there are not forgotten ..." Blips of light faded from the main screens. A confederate cannon boomed. Yankee buglers sounded the charge. A Rebel yell choked to an end in smoke. The old man's face grew out of the chaos. I know you, he thought, but who the hell are you? Who are you?

"ADMIRAL? CAN you hear me? Are you all right, sir?" An ensign helped him sit up and removed the bio-pac clamped to his chest.

"Always said if God wanted man to fly around in space he'd have given us more body armor," Ingersol muttered, glad to be in his own time frame with all the pressures. He glanced around, thinking that escape would have been too easy and too guilt ridden to enjoy.

The ensign looked at a large bruise beside an unfamiliar scar on Ingersol's forehead and said, "The Medical Officer will be back in a moment."

"I'm all right," Ingersol said, getting to his feet to assume command. "Damage report?"

"Sir, hit amidship, small suicide torp — faster than we thought them capable of — got through our screens before we knew it — five dead — twenty-two wounded — damage control parties have the situation under control."

"Battle status?"

"Enemy formation still on westerly course and making flank speed. Two ships went sublight eighteen minutes ago, probably forced to due to battle damage. We destroyed them as we passed."

"How long have I been out?"

"A little over a half hour, sir. We lost the dregs of communication with *Scarlet* shortly after we took the hit."

"Okay, son. Flash *San Francisco*. Admiral's compliments and would Captain Christopher signal the flag."

The intership comm screen showed the face of a young man with a somewhat quizzical look. Captain Christopher Lee, late twenties, shaven skull (probably to make him look older and meaner), eyes boring twin holes in the screen and wearing the what-the-hell-am-I-in-for-now expression.

Think about it, the old Chinese gentleman's words echoed, another chance. Listen to the inner voice. The words tumbled through Ingersol's mind. The inner voice of conscience, he thought, making the decision to let it take over, then ride the consequences out to the end. At least that way I can live with myself, he mused, nodding slowly at the screen.

"Captain Lee of the *San Francisco* reporting, sir."

"How are you, Chris?"

"Fine, sir, just fine. New orders, Admiral?"

He turned slightly. "Lieutenant Cisco, has SectComAltair flashed us anything since the hit?"

"Negative, sir."

"Nothing new on this end, Chris. Unless SectComAltair is routing my messages through your communications officer, you know as much as I do."

The young officer looked crestfallen and did not reply.

"No. I'm just calling you because I consider you a bright young officer and I'd like to get your opinion on something."

Captain Lee stood at attention, from the neck up, and said, "Yes, sir, anything I can help with!"

Ingersol did what he could to repress a laugh and surprised himself by being successful. "Just mulling over a theory, son, thought you might be able to help. What do you think would be the chances if I broke away — oh, say one of our faster ships — maybe something in the *San Francisco* class — what do you think would be the chance of such a ship breaking off and attempting to rescue the crew of *Scarlet* before they end up in that sun back there?"

Without the briefest hesitation, Lee replied, "Already computed and laid in, Admiral. I have been adjusting readouts for distance change over the past half hour."

Ingersol's eyebrows went up, as did his respect for this boy. Another chance. Lessons in humanity. Appease the inner voice and keep your life intact. The words raced with his heart beat against the time which stood still for no man.

"My figures show if I, ah, if a ship were to break away in the next twelve minutes, the probability of effectual disembarkation of all remaining crew on board *Scarlet O'Hara* at 92 percent.

"Just theorizing, son. Chalk it up to the ramblings of an old man . . . Purely hypothetical." He cleared his throat. "To get to the substance of my call, Captain, have you ever faced a wartime court martial board for failure to carry out orders in the face of the enemy?"

The bridge of both ships on battle alert turned quiet. The hum of computers and the buzz of interdeck status reports which usually made conversation a yelling match quelled into silence. The pin had dropped. It landed with the impact of a ten ton steel beam.

"Sir?" Lee's voice was barely a whisper. His high cheekbones slumped. Color drained from his oriental features and made his eyebrows visible.

"My sensors indicate that *San Francisco* has sustained heavy screen and drive damage and is holding this formation only by the grace of God and the tenacity of her commander. I would like to know by what authority you chose to jeopardize this entire action by driving your ship, and her crew, beyond any capacity to survive another confrontation with the enemy?"

Lee's slanted eyes became angry slits. His voice trembled. "Sir, I don't know what you're . . ."

Ingersol interrupted with a sharp, "I haven't finished yet, Captain! I'm afraid I can anticipate your reasoning and I find your actions, at best foolhardy, at worst treasonable. Your obvious bravery notwithstanding, my problem is whether to call a review board or recommend you for a medal of honor."

"B-but, Admiral, you must have the wrong . . ."

"I'm going to lean toward the former if you continue interrupting me, Captain."

"Yes, sir." Lee aged a quarter century in half a second and Ingersol smiled at the wizened face on the screen.

"That's better. Now then, you are to disengage from this action and layoff the formation to effect repairs and rebuild your damaged drives. When we come back for you, Captain Lee, I don't want to waste time looking all over hell for your ship. So, Captain . . ." He paused, feeling the spark of dream-like recognition flare into a golden flame.

"Yes, sir?"

". . . stay in the general vicinity, will you?"

Lee's eyes opened wide. "Yes sir!"

Admiral Ingersol rose from his chair and turned from the screen, feeling reborn, thinking of Ernie and the Colin Christopher of a couple of centuries past. As he moved, a cheer went up from the bridge crew that could have been heard as far away as the *Scarlet O'Hara*: possibly even through time. ●

Ron Montana

I went through an early mid-life crisis in 1975 when I wrote and sold two short stories, one of which, the first, appeared in *Fantastic*. Thinking I was God's gift to the literary world (since then God has advised me to the contrary on numerous occasions), I quit my fifteen-year job as a corporate executive and waded into 'The Writing Life' with a shovel in each hand.

Since that fateful day I have sold short magazine and anthology fiction and four novels. *SIGN OF THE THUNDERBIRD* was published in '77, *THE CATHEDRAL OPTION* in '78 and *ECHOES OF GLORY* will be out in '80. Scheduled for '81 from Doubleday is a collaboration with Craig Strete titled, *DEATH IN THE SPIRIT HOUSE*.

Between books I write film scripts — have optioned one and sold one in the last couple of years. My greatest accomplishment — one I dreamed about since I was old enough to read — finally materialized last May when I sold a joke to *Playboy*.

I live alone in Campbell, California, a suburb of metropolitan San Jose, write full-time and owe all my success to Craig Strete who told me to quit my high-paying job to be a writer.

Some day I'll get him for that.

Susan Coon

My home is in Cupertino, California, which is near the heart of Silicon Valley and flooded with technology. One of the side benefits of this has been the computer which has replaced the little portable that I started with in January of '76. My first novel, *RAHNE*, number one in the Living Planet Series, was released by Avon Books in January, '80. A second novel, *CASSILEE*, will come out in August of '80. *THE VIRGIN*, book number three and also by Avon, is scheduled for June of '81. A fourth, yet unscheduled, is titled *CHIY-UNE*.

When not writing, I'm usually gardening or involved in sports with my husband and two boys.

Lawrence C. Connolly

BUCKEYE and SPITBALL



Had Timmy Baker's dad not been transferred to West Fenton, Timmy might have spent his entire life in Carson, Pennsylvania; growing up, growing out and growing old in the shadow of the gray Davis and Dunlevy Coke Ovens. As it was, he was uprooted, hastily transplanted two-hundred-fifty miles away, and left to pick up the pieces of his six-year-old life in a strange town full of strange people who breathed clean air and thought coke was something you drank from a bottle. Had he stayed in Carson, he might never have learned how big the oblong Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was, or how many different people lived in it. He surely would never have met Buckeye, and, had he not, the current of his life would probably have run smoother in later years—perhaps shadows would have appeared less deep, night sounds less near, pain less ominous. It was a big season for Timmy, that first autumn in West Fenton, and it brought him first grade, first new home, and first best friend. The best friend, it turned out, was also a teacher.

Buckeye let Timmy know about monsters and ghosts that lived under the beds of the new house. He taught him about hands that touched little boys when they slept — and about things that slithered out of dresser drawers when they were left open after dark. He told Timmy about things that walked at night, things with big teeth and white faces, and...

One day he told him about Spitball.

"Is Sister looking?"

Timmy turned, the wind blowing his tie from under his jacket as he looked around the playground. Sister Peter Frances stood by the girls' playground, listening to the chatter from uniformed third graders.

"No," said Timmy.

"Keep checking to make sure," said Buckeye, unbuttoning his shirt, "and take a look at this."

The colors were so full they seemed to fall from his shirt and catch fire. The comicbook landed face up in Buckeye's hands, wiggly letters danced across the cover. The picture was of a horrid man with bloody teeth and black eyes.

"What's that?" asked Timmy.

"Vampire," Buckeye grinned, drawing his cheeks till his left eye became a dark beachball in a freckle sea. Buckeye wasn't his real name. Before the accident he's simply been called Sean O'Rourke. A forgotten rake, lying teeth up in the grass, had changed everything — turning his eye thick and brown like the kind in deer-head trophies. The nickname came as easy as learning had come hard. Buckeye was a second time first grader. That was how he knew so much.

Timmy looked at the picture, shivering. "Sure glad they don't live around here," he said.

Buckeye stuffed the comicbook back into his shirt. "They do," he said.

"Where?" asked Timmy, thinking of the houses on his street — wondering how close you could live to a thing with bloody teeth and not know it.

"Here," said Buckeye, "in the school."

Timmy considered that one. "Liar," he said. "Father Larkin wouldn't let them live in —"

Father Larkin doesn't know. No one does, just me and the vampires." Buckeye's grin grew bigger. "Meet me after school and I'll show you Spitball."

"Who's Spitball?"

"The vampire chief," said Buckeye. "Come over to my house after you eat. Say no and you're a scaredy."

Of all the things Timmy didn't want to be, a scaredy was number one.

Mrs. O'Rourke, may we speak frankly? There's something about Sean that's troubling me. No, the eye doesn't bother him as it used to. He seems to wear it as a badge, as if he's proud of it. I think being a year older than the others in his class helps. What bothers me is his imagination. I've been teaching sixteen years, Mrs. O'Rourke, and I've never seen anything like it.

That evening, after dinner, while Timmy's father headed downstairs to the woodshop to turn spinning wood into lamps that always came out looking the same, Timmy shot out the back door to meet Buckeye.

The school wasn't far. Timmy and Buckeye wouldn't have been bus riders if it hadn't been for the two lane highway most parents thought unsafe for walking. At the school, they eased out of the tangled undergrowth growing at the roadside, and ran across the two lane no-man's land. The school's far side was filling with shadow, bringing on an early night. They crouched by the back doors. Inside, someone was singing.

"That's a lady vampire," said Buckeye, looking down along the school's outer wall. There was a light on at the west end. "She's pretty far away. I don't think she'll hear this —" Buckeye pulled on the heavy glass and iron door. It groaned open.

Timmy peered beyond the door, bottomless darkness spilled out into the early night. "Buckeye," he said, "I think I believe you. Maybe we better go home."

"You a scaredy?"

"It's just that my dad said I had to be home before the street lights —"

"Come on. We'll be back home in fifteen minutes."

Three hours later, they would still be in the school.

The door slid shut behind them, its echo mingled with the singing. It was the kind of song people sang while doing house work. Timmy listened, but the words were vague sounds in the long dark. They walked, coming to stairs — one flight going up toward the singing; the other leading down into gray darkness. Their feet were making dry sounds on the hard floor.

"We better take these off," said Buckeye, pulling off his tired loafers. "We want to be quiet as —"

"These are new shoes," said Timmy. "I'd better keep —"

"You want Spitball to catch you and make you shitty?"

Timmy made a prune with his face. "What's shitty?"

"That's when a vampire sucks your blood and you die and get smelly and your eyes stick out — only you're not really dead, you're a vampire, like Spitball."

"Is Spitball shitty?"

"He's worse."

Timmy pulled off his shoes and socks, shoving them under the radiator next to Buckeye's ruined Buster Brown's. The iron under their feet was cold, and soft skin made clinging sounds as they walked. Darkness thickened, and a hint of stink grew stronger as the steps ran out below their feet. The voice overhead faded. Patterns swirled, making shapes in the black air. Timmy took hold of Buckeye's shirttail, and followed him into the cavern below the school. At the far end, an open door seeped yellow light. They paused before it, and Buckeye looked inside.

"He's not here," he said, walking into the room.

Timmy relaxed, following him.

"I don't understand this. He's always here."

The room was dirty. Weak yellow light dripped from a ceiling bulb onto a small table; the kind of table older people play cards on — the kind younger people eat on when there's company. A few folding chairs stood about — two set up by the table, one folded against a wall across from a gray locker row. The lockers smelled bad. Timmy couldn't place the stink with anything he'd ever smelled before. One locker stood open, showing its empty insides. The others were locked, and the locks hanging through their latches looked like the kind Timmy's dad used when locking the tool cabinet in the basement. The back wall was bare, except for a door and a big red sign. Timmy recognized one of the sign's two big words from the Dick and Jane book. The word was, "NO." He'd heard of a boiler room under the school. He wondering if this was it.

The room gave Timmy the creeps. "If he's not here," he said, "maybe we ought —"

They both heard it and froze. Buckeye was looking at Timmy, his good eye filling with horror.

Down the empty darkness, at hall's end, someone was coming down the stairs.

Buckeye looked into the locker. The footsteps were in the hall, coming closer. Buckeye squeezed into the locker, pulling the door partway shut after him, leaving Timmy alone in the room with the table, chairs, and big red sign that said, "NO."

He tried the door under the sign. It was locked.

The sounds in the hall were close, he could hear voices — there were two of them (two of what?).

The chair leaning against the one wall wasn't much, but he crawled behind it — seconds before the two men came into the room. Timmy looked through the chair slats. He'd seen these men before, sweeping halls and collecting wastecans. One was white, almost pale — the other was black as blackest night. The black man was swinging his right hand, a combination lock spun on his thick licorice-stick thumb.

Timmy's throat tightened, cutting his breath as the lock slid from the man's thumb and — Wham! — his balled fist hit the locker door, closing it all the way. The lock slid home; click.

Buckeye wouldn't be going anywhere for a long time.

The white man was carrying a brown bag and a long gray tool box. He set the box on the table, reached into the bag, and handed the other man a beer. The black man took it, cracked the top, and sucked the can dry while his snow-tire hand squeezed, balling the can into a wrinkled mess.

"Where'd you learn to drink like that, Al?" asked the white man.

"From sucking the old lady," said Al.

Both men laughed.

A shiver exploded down Timmy's back. The white man's face looked like the picture on Buckeye's comicbook, only there was no blood on his teeth — not yet.

The white man sat at the table, pulling cards from an overall pocket. Al asked to be dealt in, and the cards splattered. A cramp started in Timmy's neck, flowing down his back, spreading into his shoulders. His legs felt like his nose when it got soda-pop inside. Places that had never itched in his life started itching. He tried not thinking about it, wondering what it was like for Buckeye, trapped in the smelly locker with only a vent at the top to let in light and fresh air, locked in a space where the slightest move would rattle the locker row. He thought of his parents and the street lights that must surely be on. He wanted to cry, but the crumpled can that had fallen to the floor kept him quiet. *Sucking the old lady.*

His legs went numb. His neck, arms, and shoulders were cold; painfully wooden. And the two creatures continued throwing cards, sucking beer, laughing. . .

If they didn't leave soon, he was going to pass out.

He pictured himself blacking out, falling into the chair, hitting the floor while the two men got up from their game to catch him, stick a can opener into his head, lift him to their mouths and . . .

He closed his eyes, asking God to have the men gone when he opened them.

The white man set his cards on the table. "I'm getting thirsty, Al."

"Have a beer."

"Don't know how you can drink that stuff."

"Nothing wrong with beer. I admit that —"

"You still got that six year old Johnny Walker at home?"

Al's look got defensive. "Hey, I'm saving that."

"What for, the second coming? I'm ahead by eight. What say we move to your place, put that Johnny Walker on the table, and start over even?"

"Sometimes," said Al, "you really get over on me."

They left the room. Timmy stayed put, listening to their footfalls fade down the hall. Silence. They'd stopped walking. A metal cabinet opened. Darkness flooded in from the hall.

Feet shuffled up the metal stairs.

Timmy tried standing. The folded chair crashed to the floor, his knees buckled, and he landed, hard.

"Timmy?"

"They put a lock on —"

"Timmy, you've got to get me out before they come back. You heard what they said about Johnny Walker."

"They said he was six years old."

"He's probably seven by now. I was in first grade with him last year. He's been missing since summer. The police thought he drowned."

"Buckeye, I'm scared."

"I knew you were a scaredy."

But there was as much fear in Buckeye's voice. Timmy saw shapes in the darkness; wiggly things that squirmed through the air and touched him with little fingers that felt like itches on his arms and face. He knew the light switch was somewhere down the ink black hall — but he wasn't going down that maw alone. He walked through the ebony swirls to the locker.

Something poked him, invisible in the dark (a table corner?). He put out a hand. The table top was smooth, and his hand ran along it to something long, hard, and cold. In the darkness behind his eyes an idea flickered.

He found the latch, lifted the lid, and put his hand onto the familiar shapes inside. Dad had taught him about tools, and his hands found what he needed.

"Keep talking, Buckeye, so I know which locker you're in. I'm going to try something."

The thin blade found the lock — digging a notch in the hard metal. When at last the lock snapped and fell to the floor, Timmy pulled open the locker and ran with Buckeye from the small room, stuffing the small hacksaw blade in his back pocket, scampering down the hall up the first flight. Buckeye dove to the floor on the first level by the door, hands plunging under the radiator for . . .

The shoes were gone.

"My dad's going to strap me," said Timmy.

Buckeye stood by the door, looking up to the second rise. Timmy turned, and there were the shoes, on the bottom shelf of a gray cleaning cart. Timmy grabbed the banister.

"Where you going?" asked Buckeye.

Timmy looked over his shoulder. Buckeye had the back door open. One bare foot was already on the asphalt.

"I have to get my shoes," said Timmy.

"She knows we're here, Timmy." He looked ready to run alone if Timmy argued.

"It's only the cleaning lady," said Timmy.

Something moved in the shadows over the top banister, and a face rose over the cleaning cart, cheeks sunken with age, eyes blazing with light from the rising moon falling through the wire reinforced windows.

"Looking for something, boys?" The voice was old, creaking like rickety stairs.

They were out the door faster than silverfish under a hot spigot.

When they got home, each got the strapping of his life. Mother cried. It felt good to be home.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. O'Rourke,

I know we have spoken on this before, and, I am sorry to say, things have not improved. Sean is pretending the school is full of monsters, mostly vampires. He has the other children scared silly, and I'm worried because they all seem to be planning something.

This is something I can't handle alone. I need your help and advice before things get out of hand. Please call me at the convent.

Excepting this, we see a fine year ahead for Sean.

Yours In Christ,
Sister Peter Francis

Why's it so important, Tim? You never wanted a tent before.

"That was before I knew how to make one, Dad. Mom gave me this old sheet, and I can use a mop handle for the middle to hold the roof up. All I need are pegs — plain old wooden ones. You can make them on the lathe."

We'll see. But, you can forget about getting fourteen of them. Four should be enough.

Fourteen first graders walked together through the open doors, moving into the school's dark cinder block halls. Mother Damian Cosmas stood watching from her office door, growing larger as Timmy drew closer, her black habit alive with zephyrs from the open doors — but Timmy's mind was elsewhere, not thinking about...

"Good afternoon, Mother."

"It's morning, Timothy."

And they walked past her into the shadows, through long institutional green halls flanked by large windowless classroom doors, and into the room marked 112 where they set their heavy lunch boxes on a shelf under the empty coat rack. The other children kept safely distant. They wouldn't be going along. They knew what was up, but they'd sworn to silence. They were the scaredies.

Buckeye and Timmy had talked a lot since the night in the basement. Timmy and the other twelve never asked how Buckeye knew so much about Spitball and the vampires. Buckeye would turn seven in November. He was above question.

From Buckeye they'd learned how vampires sometimes save someone they'd caught, like they were saving poor Johnny Walker for a special occasion called *The Second Coming*. *The Second Coming* was the day all vampires would rise from the boiler room and take over the school. That would be the end of the world Sister always talked about. Buckeye said *The Second Coming* would be Thursday — tomorrow! The thought made Timmy's stomach feel like it had a toad in it.

Buckeye claimed he'd first heard of Spitball by accident. Sneaking around the water fountain one day he'd heard two lady vampires in the boys' room saying, "Darn fifth graders'll get it good this time. Look at that mirror. And, Spitball's on the ceiling again." Whatever the fifth graders had done to the mirror, they were going to get it good from Spitball — just as soon as Spitball woke up and came down off the ceiling.

At eleven-thirty, class broke and paraded double file through dark halls to the cafeteria. Timmy had never thought much of it before, but the school was a lot like a cave — blinds covered what windows there were, and sunlight in the halls was as rare as an "A" on a math test with fractions.

Timmy, Buckeye and their twelve apostles picked up milk at the milk table, scattered themselves around the first grade table, sitting between the scaredies, hoping no one would notice them not eating. Timmy sat between two small boys with glasses, sipping his milk atop his unopened lunch box, watching the clock — *Half a day to go*, he told himself. *Just half a day to go*.

Mother Damian Cosmas approached, her pushed in face scanning like a

radar dish, making sure all was in order. She looked at Timmy, glanced away, then turned back, stopping.

"No lunch today, Timothy?"

"Finished."

Mother's eyebrows shot upward; hawk wings diving on a sparrow. "Finished what, Mr. Baker?"

Oh, God, how could he have been so stupid. "Finished, Mother."

The eyebrows came down. "That's better. You're a dreamer, Timothy. You'll have to get that out of you if you want to make it to second grade."

"Yes, Mother."

She turned, and hidden rosary beads rattled in habit folds at her side as she left.

Timmy went back to watching the clock.

Just half a day to go.

His dad finally had made the pegs, and Timmy had had to spend all of one afternoon in the backyard playing in the stupid tent. He wasn't allowed to see Buckeye anymore, so he had sat alone in the autumn dusk — trying to look thrilled about having a tent. He had tried getting more pegs. No dice.

Good thing he still had the hacksaw blade.

The afternoon crept on, the clock above Sister's head cranking off seconds, minutes, hours.

The last half hour was the longest, the thick black minute hand arching against gravity toward four o'clock.

After the bell, they boarded the bus as usual — but at the first stop, where usually only the Casey twins got off, half the bus emptied. If the shrivel-faced bus driver noticed, he didn't let on. They walked back to the school, their lunch boxes still full, their stomachs emptier than school shoes on Saturday.

It was near dusk when they reached the school, and low sunlight reflected off the school's windows, sending yellow squares into the empty playground. Leaving the thicket, they crept through shadows to the school's dark side. Lights went on at the school's far end. The lady vampires always started cleaning there, working their way toward the stairs. Outside the back door, lunch boxes made a Conestoga circle on the asphalt. Timmy opened his and took out a mallet. In Buckeye's were the four wooden tent pegs. The other boxes were full of cutting tools.

That Monday Timmy's dad had gone out of town. That made it easy. Tuesday night, Timmy and his baby brother were visited by Mrs. McNulty, who watched them while their mom went shopping. That was also fortunate, for Mrs. McNulty, while being half deaf, loved Tuesday night television. So, while she sat in the den with the Zenith blaring, Timmy had thirteen friends in to play in the basement. The game was saw-off-the-lock. Half an hour later, while canned laughter roared through the house, thirteen friends left by the back door, carrying bags stuffed with awls, files, chisels, drills, drill bits, and hammers. Timmy put the lock back together with a heavy duty glue his dad had said would glue anything forever (even your fingers, Tim, so keep away from it) and then went upstairs to watch television with Mrs. McNulty.

Now, outside the school, they divided the tools and opened the back door, and scampered down the stairs. The same jaundice-yellow light spilled from the room at hall's end. Spitball's voice carried through the stale dark air. Someone answered. Cards splattered, and someone started dealing.

Spitball was taking his hand when they turned the bend, plowing into him, knocking him and the other off their chairs, bashing their heads against hard concrete. Awls and drill bits slashed, and blood ran over the small hands that

rained like summer hail; coming down, going up, coming down . . .

Timmy held the peg over Spitball's heaving rib-cage while the pale white lips moved at high gear. "Kids, listen to me. You . . ."

"Don't let him talk," screamed Buckeye. "Don't listen to him. He has powers . . ."

A boy rapped Spitball's mouth with a flat file. The file broke and clanged to the floor.

Buckeye gripped the mallet, looking at Timmy. A red drop was drying below his bad eye.

"Buckeye, I don't think . . ."

Chonk!

The peg slipped hard through Timmy's fingers, leaving splinters in his palms. Spitball screamed — studded tires breaking on wet gravel. There was blood in his mouth. His teeth were bloody.

Another scream from behind them — two down.

"Take his keys," said Buckeye. "The others are in the boiler room. They'll be waking up, so watch out. If they come for you, don't let them get your neck. If they bite in another place you can still fight them. If they get your neck you'll be empty in a minute."

Timmy was still squatting by Spitball, staring at the planted peg. Buckeye turned on him. "Timmy, give them your hacksaw. There aren't enough pegs, and the second best way to stop them is cutting off their heads."

Timmy looked up. The others already had Spitball's keys, fumbling with the door under the big red sign . . .

NO . . .

Timmy reached into his pocket. Buckeye took the blade, grabbing Timmy's hand. "We're going upstairs," he said, handing the hacksaw to a small boy by the door. "We'll take care of the ladies."

There was something about Buckeye. You had to follow, no matter what. They ran to the hall.

Something stopped Timmy halfway to the door.

Buckeye turned. Timmy was staring at the locker row. One locker was unlocked — open a crack. Timmy was staring inside, his face white as Father Larkin's collar.

"Timmy?"

Timmy plowed a scuffed shoe against the door, slamming it.

"Timmy," said Buckeye moving in from the hall. "What was in there?"

Timmy ran, catching Buckeye's arm, pulling toward the hall. "Don't look in there, Buckeye."

"What was in there?"

"Something shitty." They were in the hall now, Timmy still pulling toward the stairs. "Buckeye," he said, his face suddenly alive with something other than horror. "We got to get those ladies."

They dashed down the hall, then up the first flight, then the next, then around the corner and . . .

Two ladies stood blocking the way with cleaning carts. There wasn't time to stop. They skidded into them, spilling trash and soapy water down along the clean tile floor. Timmy's mallet slid away on soapy waves, out of reach. He rolled on his back.

"Buckeye!"

She had him. Her foaming mouth clamped over Buckeye's shoulder, shaking him as a dog shakes a kitten when it wants to kill. But, no dog ever made a sound like that.

The other came for Timmy, wrinkled white lips rolling over snake fangs. He pushed back, skidding away on the wet floor. He brought up his foot to kick her face, but the huge mouth opened like a catcher's mitt. The teeth went through shoe leather to his foot, and something like fire spilled into his blood. He stretched and found the hammer, bringing it down hard on the wrinkled forehead. He hit her again, and her arms flung like mad copperheads, trying to grab the hammer from him. He hit her harder. The hellish eyes went blank. The pointed chin hit the floor, and the hypodermic teeth slammed deeper. He tried pulling free, but the teeth had gone in up to the gums — trapping him like a beaver in a clamp trap.

Something grabbed him from behind. His head fell backward. He saw teeth coming down. *If they get your neck you'll be empty in a minute.* He rolled. The teeth came down hard on his shoulder.

From far away, school sounds flooded the halls; small feet clanging metal stairs, voices yelling, hands pushing...

Something yanked him free. Blood ran from his shoulder. He looked to see who had him. It was Buckeye, blood clotting on his torn sweater. All about them; clattering drill bits.

The first grade cavalry had arrived from the boiler room.

That was the night that changed Timmy Baker. The next morning he was in the hospital, suffering blood loss and deep puncture wounds in his shoulder and foot. There was something wrong with his blood, and the doctors put him through three total transfusions before it cleared up. Buckeye was in the same hospital, though Timmy never saw him again. When Timmy returned to school, it was to a private academy in Vermont. A year later his dad was transferred again — this time to Davenport, Iowa. By second grade, memories of West Fenton had crawled back in his mind with other half-remembered things — never fully forgotten, but always there; coiled like a copperhead, ready to bare fangs whenever nights were long and vague horrors woke him shivering between the sweat-soaked sheets.

Once, during that nondescript stage in life that is neither adulthood or adolescence, Timmy tried tracking down Buckeye, calling every O'Rourke in the Philadelphia and West Fenton phone books. But, no one knew a Sean O'Rourke, and, if they did, they weren't telling.

That night, after the children returned home, their clothes in rags, their bodies cut and bruised, the police descended on *Mother Of Christ Elementary School*. The janitorial staff was gone, and there were no adult bodies anywhere. There was blood, but there was no way of telling whose it was.

It would have been easy for Timmy to convince himself that the Wednesday night vampire hunt had resulted from overactive imagination, if it hadn't been for one thing: something the police found in a dented locker in the school's basement. The body had punctures in its neck, and its legs were bruised — as though huge hands had been lifting the body by the ankles.

The body was that of a six-year-old boy the police thought had drowned.

I was in New York last week, sitting at the end of a long table inside a Broadway restaurant. I'd arrived late and the closest familiar face was five plates away. The man and woman next to me wanted to know what I did. When I told them I wrote horror stories, the woman politely turned away and the man grew suddenly interested. He's just seen *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (or some such thing), and he thought it was great that I was into *that stuff*.

The problem is, you see, I'm not into *that stuff*; it just happens that when I write, it's what comes out of my typewriter. Actually, *that stuff* scares the hell out of me.

So here I am writing the afterword for another horror story. Why? Well, let's face it, fear is a magnet. There's something about us that makes us peek out the car window when passing something freshly dead on a dark country road, something that makes us wonder at our own mortality. It is basic human nature that causes many of my stories to turn to horror. I never start out stalking terror. Rather I begin with characters, people with stories to tell. Somewhere after that

horror slips in. Sometimes it's merely the seasoning, as with "Julie of the Shadows." (To appear in an upcoming issue of *Amazing*.) Other times, as in this case, it becomes the meat.

"Buckeye and Spitball" began as a story about friendship. I have been lucky in that department, lucky in finding a woman who understands a writer's ways, lucky to be born into a family whose individuals have never stopped achieving. They are as much a part of this tale as are the many Sean O'Rourkes I grew up with. May their horrors always be the invented kind.

"Buckeye and Spitball" is also a story of the dark ages — those years before adolescence when monsters really do exist.

Like Buckeye, I grew up in West Fenton (though that isn't its real name), the town just outside Philadelphia, and I published my first story in the local newspaper there when I was eight.

The dark ages are still very much with me.

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Welcome to Free Enterprise," said the speaker above Ben's head in the orbit-to-surface shuttle. "When you debark, please remain within the enclosed walkway. The rain on this planet is called acidrain, because that is exactly what it is. We hope that you have had a pleasant trip, and will have a profitable stay."

Ben walked the short distance to one of Capital City's automated tollgates, his blue eyes wide and missing nothing. CASH ONLY—NO CREDIT, said a sign. The entry fee was only a few cents, so he fished some coins from his pocket and paid it. On Free Enterprise, it was illegal for anything to be free.

ALONG WITH a few other hopeful prospectors, Ben had borrowed both passage money and a grubstake from the Free Enterprise Corporation. There was such wealth to be found in mining the heavy metals of the planet, that even at 18% interest he planned to be working for himself in a very short time. Many young people made the trip from Earth to Free Enterprise, but very few returned. Ben had left home to seek his fortune, and to see the universe. Being neither rich nor a politician, it had to come in that order.

Max, his contract-required mining partner, came to his dorm room early the next morning. The two couldn't have been less alike. Ben was a tall, thin, 24-year-old, beneath a wild tangle of curly black hair; Max was a short barrel of a 42-year-old, with only a fringe of sandy hair separating his red neck from his shiny dome. Ben smiled and stuck out his hand, but their temperaments were no more alike than their looks.

"Okay, here are the rules," Max said, ignoring the offered hand and definitely not smiling. "We have a joint account with the Corporation. Enough insurance to



L.A.P. Moore

Credit Where Credit is Due

double the account will be deducted for each of us. This goes up as the account gets bigger, which is one way the Corporation gets theirs. If one of us dies, the other gets the whole account plus insurance. If we both die, the Corporation gets it all. Each load of metal we send back increases our capital; expenses come out of it. At the end of the partnership, we split the account, and after the Corporation takes out what you owe them, you get yours. No use paying your dorm bill any longer than we have to. We leave now."

Ben wouldn't have bet that Max was as big around as he was tall, but he wouldn't have bet against it, either. They headed for the Corporation Store next to Capital City's east tollgate to pick up supplies.

"First thing we need is a mechanical Donkey," Max said, pointing toward a row of bright orange vehicles. "Sign us up for Hepsibah, and drive her over here. I'll order a few weeks' supplies and have them loaded. Get the lead out—time's money!"

Two hours later they had each paid the few-cent exit fee to the unseeing, uncaring tollgate, and were off across the barren surface of Free Enterprise.

"Max, what do we do when the supplies run out? Do we have to come all the way back to Capital City?"

"Don't you know anything? Hepsibah here refines the ore, hauls the metal back to Capital and deposits it to our account, picks up whatever we order and charges it, then returns to camp. Donkeys even have some rights that humans don't. They can enter and leave Capital City without paying the tollgate fee, which even the Chairman of the Board can't do."

TIME PASSED slowly as they covered the 200 kilometers to their mining claim. Unbroken, thirsty wasteland was the only scenery. Every so often a shower of acidrain would sweep over them, ending as unexpectedly as it had begun.

"You know how long you'd last out in that?" Max asked with an evil grin. "Less than a minute. That stuff comes from the factories, and it'll eat you before you know you've been had. That'd be a real shame, that would. I'd have to go back to Capital City a rich man! Don't worry, though. You're Corporation property until you get that loan paid off, and the Public Safety Department takes a very unkind view of anybody who destroys Corporation property."

"You ever lose a partner before?"

"Turned a few in, but that's because they weren't cooperative. Man's got to watch out for himself."

"Aren't we supposed to be watching out for each other?"

"That too, but don't expect me to risk my ass to save yours. I take care of Number One first. You're Number Two."

Hesibah slowed to a stop. "It ain't much," Max said, "but it's home." He stretched, yawned, and scratched his stomach.

Ben climbed out and looked around. As far as he could see in every direction, there was a great deal of not very much. Except for the two of them, there was not a living thing from horizon to horizon. Max sat at the control panel for a few minutes, programming Hepsibah.

"She'll dig us a sloping tunnel at the nearest likely site. We use the tunnel entrance as camp, and keep digging until we strike something or give up. When Hepsibah takes a load back to Capital City, that tunnel is all we've got between us and the acidrain."

In addition to the usual instructions, he added one that would have Hepsibah dig a small side tunnel when she was 100 meters in. Then he added one more that would have her stash, in that hidden treasury, 20% of all the metal that she refined.

"Okay, the vacation is over. There's money out there, and that's what life is all about!"

Hepsibah angled into the acidic soil, laying a small conveyor behind her to haul out the tailings. When she reached 100 meters she did as instructed, then moved on. The humans, working topside, would never see that place, but one of them would think about it often.

"Ben, you set up camp while I check in with Capital City."

"How's about we both set up camp, then you check in?"

"We may as well get this straight right away. I'm the boss here, and you're the grunt. You do what I tell you, or I'll report to the Corporation that you're refusing to work. They'll cancel your loan faster than acidrain could eat you, and let you work it off at slave wages in the factories. Now, you got anything to say?"

"What'll happen to you if this trip is aborted? You're not out here for the fun of it."

"Nothing'll happen to me. I'll just be assigned another sucker. A lot of people like you are working for the Corporation at slave wages, because they couldn't pay off their loan. You might say it's a way of life on Free Enterprise. If there weren't any wage slaves, who do you think would do the work?"

"Is that what you are? A wage slave?"

"Used to be. The work is nothing like this, though. Those poor slobes are down in the factories, and they'll never get free of the system. I'm a Boss now—I keep that human waste in line and out of trouble. Bosses get you new suckers as bonuses for getting the most work out of their sections. Trips like this are the only way we'll ever get a loan paid off. Most of my share will go to the Corporation, but that'll still leave a lot. If anything should happen to you, of course . . . Now get to work!"

Ben thought it over, then got to work, "The first few loads of metal should pay off my loan," he said. "Then we'll have this discussion again."

They put in long days, with Ben doing almost all of the work. Their first few strikes seemed minor, because Max was siphoning off 20%, but it was enough to keep Ben going and to send Hepsibah off with her first shipment. When she returned, she was loaded down.

"What the hell is all this stuff?"

"Just a few things to make life more endurable," Max said as he sorted through the supplies. "Ah, here are my cases of Old Ethanol!"

"Damn right they're yours, and you're going to pay for them! You're going to pay for all this stuff!"

"Too bad about that, sucker. Orders go against the joint account, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"How much did all this cost?"

"Not much more than the value of the metal we sent in."

"You son of a black hole, you're not going to get away with this! Only half that metal was yours, and you didn't work for that. This stuff, all of it, is going right back to Capital City."

"You don't know much, do you. They don't take returns, and even if they did, having Hepsibah go back with no metal would cost more than it's worth. Now lighten up a bit, and I might let you have some of my loot."

Ben saw his dream of exploring the universe replaced by the nightmare of lifelong wage slavery in a factory. He lunged at Max, and they fell in a tangle of arms and legs. Ben wasn't thinking about murder, but he wasn't far from it when Max's voice penetrated.

"You kill me, and the insurance is no good. You'll be in the factories for the rest of your life!"

Ben shook his head and stared down at the face below him. From wherever he had been he came back, the blood stopped pounding in his head, and the light of reason returned to his eyes. He got up like a drugged man, and headed for the tunnel.

"Don't get any smart ideas," Max shouted after him. "You're deeper in debt now than when you started. Unless you stay in line you'll never get out!"

MAX WAS drunk most of the next month, but it didn't really matter. He didn't work any more sober than he did drunk. Ben sent Hepsibah off with the next load while Max was out cold, so she came back with nothing but necessary supplies.

"You didn't have to do that," Max said. "There's nothing else I want, and besides, I have to make some money on this trip too."

"Try working for it."

"Don't need to—I've got you. Even when you think you've got your debt worked off, you won't give me any trouble. You came to Free Enterprise to get rich, and you won't let a little thing like injustice stand in your way. I know how you suckers think." Outside, a cloud passed over, washing the land with acidrain. "Why don't you go out and take a shower?"

"You're not my favorite smell either, Max."

"Here, have a drink."

"Why not. I paid for most of it."

"You want to play some cards to pass the time?"

"I'd sooner play with a land shark."

"I'll let you deal, and you can keep score."

"Why not."

Ben won the first few hands, then just enough to keep him playing. The more he drank the more he lost, but the less he noticed. Among the things he didn't notice were the marks on the cards. He kept the score himself, so he couldn't dispute it when the game was over. By then, he owed Max enough to take care of his entire share of the next load. He signed the I.O.U. that Max put in front of him after correcting a major error in Max's favor, then collapsed into sleep.

IT TOOK a lot of hard work to make up what he'd lost to Max. By refusing to gamble at anything, and by sending Hepsibah in when Max was asleep, Ben slowly built up the capital he needed to pay off the Corporation. Max's share was growing too, of course, but the amount of work he did wasn't. What seemed like a year later, Brad figured he had enough to pay both his debt and passage back to Earth.

"Max, the game is over. We're going in."

"The hell we are! What're you talking about? You'll be in the factories for the rest of your life!"

"Not only haven't you been working, Max, but you haven't been keeping track of Hepsibah's trips to Capital City. I've got enough in the account to pay off the Corporation, and to get home. I don't know how, but I know you'll steal it if I stick around, so we're heading back."

"Ben, you can't do this. I don't have near enough capital built up for what I want."

"It's your own fault, Max. The way you've got it set up, I do most of the work and you get most of the money. I'd be a fool to stay."

"Now listen Ben, we'll change all that. I'll do my part of the work, and we'll share the profits, same as always."

"It's too late, Max. I don't trust you anymore."

Max stared into space for a long time, deep in thought, then nodded to himself as he made a decision.

"Okay, Ben, you win. There's nothing I can do to stop you. But I'm not going back yet. There's more metal in this mine than you think there is, and I'm going to get it. You take Hepsibah in the morning with whatever load we've got, then send her back to me. You don't get a share of what I find after you leave, though. Agreed?"

"Agreed. I'm really glad you're taking this so well, Max. I was afraid you'd be mad."

"Don't worry about me, kid. I have an idea that I'll do better after you're gone. By the way, it'll only take you a few days to get back. Don't take any more food or water than you have to, because I'm going to need them here. Let's turn in now, so you can get an early start."

When Ben had fallen asleep, Max stealthed out of the tunnel. He went directly

to Hepsibah, and removed the dome covering her power cells. Pulling a handful of coins from his pocket, he forced them in among the terminals like a man who knew what he was doing. Then he replaced the dome and climbed inside Hepsibah's cabin. When he returned to the tunnel he was carrying something under his arm. Many hours later he woke to Ben's shaking his shoulder.

"Max, wake up. I'm leaving now."

"Thanks for waking me, Ben. I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but I want us to part friends. After all, we were partners."

As Ben headed for the Donkey, Max pulled out the score he'd been keeping on Hepsibah's trips back with metal. He ran the figures through his head for the hundredth time, smiled a wicked smile, and went back to sleep.

BEN WAS in high spirits as he rode across the wasteland. True, he hadn't made his fortune, and he'd have to return home to work instead of heading out into the universe. On the other hand, he *had* worked himself out of a trap which would have meant wage slavery for life. He'd also learned a lot over the past few months, and that was another thing he'd left home for. Never one to brood on the bad, he was whistling a jaunty tune as Hepsibah passed the halfway mark, just before her power cells gave out.

He checked the gauge first, but there was nothing wrong with it. Then he removed the inspection dome covering the power cells. Every one was drained, and some type of melted metal was running down from the terminals. The word "Max" popped into his mind, followed by a shadowy legion of suspicions, but he refused to believe that even Max would try to murder him. Seeing an acidrain shower heading his way, he dived back into the safety of Hepsibah. He opened the emergency radio flap—and found an empty compartment. The word "Max" came to mind again, and this time he didn't toss it out.

He was going to have to walk the rest of the way to Capital City. Without enough food or water to wait for rescue in Hepsibah, he had no choice. But that was only the first of his problems. There was no way he could carry the metal he was bringing in, and without it he wouldn't have the money to get home. He decided to borrow passage money from the starship company, and get a job to pay it off when he got to Earth. At least he wouldn't fall back into the clutches of the Free Enterprise Corporation.

The only *real* problem was acidrain. There didn't seem to be any answer to that one, so he decided to sleep on it. As he drifted off he thought again of Max. "He really is trying to kill me," Ben told Hepsibah, "and he may have done it." He went back over everything, trying to find some answer to the problem of acidrain. His mind stuck as he was remembering how he checked the power cells, and fluttered around that scene like a butterfly around a flower.

He woke to the sound of an acidrain shower, and burrowed back into his bag. "Maybe I could outrun them, or dodge when they headed my way?" he asked Hepsibah. He took silence as his answer. "You're right. They move several times as fast as I could." Still half asleep, he let his mind wander back down toward his last dream. "Eureka!" he shouted suddenly. Trying to jump off the shelf while he was still in his sleeping bag, he fell to the deck with a thud and an "Oomph!", looking like a sack of wrestling octopuses. He climbed out, threw on some clothes, made sure the sky was clear, then burst out the door and headed for the power cells. He took off the 1.5-meter inspection dome, and hefted it to feel the weight. Heavy it was, but it could be done.

"Hepsibah! That's it! I think I love you!"

It was a long, long walk back to Capital City, watching in all directions at the same time for approaching acidrain. Whenever he saw a threatening cloud

heading his way, he stooped under the cover of Hepsibah's inspection dome. The rain fell harmlessly on the acid-proof material, running down into the thirsty soil.

Nearly a week later, a stiff-necked, sore-muscled, bedraggled Ben stumbled up to Capital City's east tollgate, deposited the few cents for his entry fee, and collapsed just inside as the portal closed behind him.

Ben thought about pressing charges against Max, but he knew it would be useless. He had no proof, and it would be Max's word against an off-worlder's. With the small amount left from the metal in Hepsibah after towing charges had been subtracted, his half of the joint account paid off his debt to the Corporation, and left him enough to eat every couple of days until the next starship arrived. In exchange for doing the foulest work in the dorm, he was given a small cubicle in the hot, noisy basement. "It could be worse," he said to the darkness of his 2x3-meter home. "I'm alive, I'm free, and a few years' work back on Earth will pay off my passage. It could be worse."

AFTER BEN left, Max did nothing but sleep, stuff himself with gourmet food, and wash it down with off-world liquor. He allowed another week after he knew that the Donkey's power cells had drained, just to make sure that Ben was dead, then sent in an emergency call and a request for a replacement Donkey. Settling back against the tunnel wall, he raised a bottle in toast. "So long, sucker! You've made me a rich man. Let's see, now. My half of the metal, plus your half, plus all the metal I have hidden in the tunnel, minus a few percent for what you owe the Corporation — doubled by that lovely insurance! I'll have enough capital to pay off the Corporation, buy some wage slaves of my own, and settle back for life while they work for me. I'm rich, Rich, RICH!" He trailed off into a mangled version of "Singing in the Rain."

When Jezebel, the replacement Donkey, arrived, Max started loading his secret stash of precious metal. He still had about a quarter of it left when he reached the Donkey's load limit.

"Money's money," he said to Jezebel as he loaded the rest, "and nothing's more important. You're going to haul this in whether you like it or not."

Straining and overheating on the way back, Jezebel obviously didn't like it. She gave it her all, though, and they were within sight of Capital City when she finally died.

"Damn your hide!" Max said by way of thanks. He looked around the horizon, saw it was clear, and decided to make a run for it. He was already at the tollgate when he saw the first cloud, coming at him from the north. He reached in his pocket for the few cents he needed — and only then remembered what he'd done with his coins.

BEN WAS dragged out of sleep by a pounding on his door. Bleary-eyed, he opened it to a Peace Officer of the Department of Public Safety. It didn't matter that he hadn't done anything, because when They came for you, you went. He went, down to the offices of the Chairman of the Board of Free Enterprise.

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you," said the Sub-Assistant to some Vice Chairman's Third Secretary.

"Don't make me a wage slave!" Ben said with all the feeling he could muster. "I'm innocent!"

"I can easily believe that," the Sub-Assistant said without cracking a smile. "That, however, is not why you have been invited here. Your mining partner

has died. His assets, therefore, are now yours, along with a substantial load of metal he was bringing in. This is all doubled, of course, by his insurance. You are, sir, a very wealthy man."

Ben was stunned. He wasn't going to be a wage slave. He wouldn't have to give up his dream, and return home in debt. In fact, he wouldn't have to give it up at all.

"Did Max die at the mining site?"

"No, he made it all the way to the east gate. It was tragic, of course, but also ironic for a man with such a large credit balance."

"How did he die?"

"He didn't have the cents to come in out of the rain." ●

Biog L.A.P. Moore

"... He has sold articles and short stories to Cavalier, Elite (Canada), Big River News, The Argonaut, the U.S. Navy (movie scripts), Murray Publishers (Australia), Northwoods Journal, Animal Kingdom, Cavalier International Edition, OMNI, Magic Changes, Galaxy, Short Story International, and Fantastic."



A BEARD IN TIME

Back in time I went trippin'
for to see me dad's dad,
but first to a tavern
a drop to be had.

Came the late of the evenin'
an' the birth of Ideas,
I went to a market
an' bought me some shears.

Caught Himself in his slumber
bachelor sleepin', me kin,
cut off his chin whiskers
an' left with a grin.

Me grand-Ma would not have him
threw him out in a whirl,
"Be gone from here pervert
you look like a girl!"

To Today I came flyin'
with a fear for me lot,
an' suren bejesus
I'd not been begot.

—— L.A.P. Moore

ALAN RYAN **give us this day our daily death**

How to Save Your Own Life

AND THEN, to top it all off, when he finally arrived at the office — late — he tripped over the worn edge of the carpet — again — and banged his hip against the sharp corner of the old wooden desk. This jarred the wire basket that held the tumble of papers he had to get to sometime soon. The basket bounced to the floor, twisting even further its already distorted shape, and the loose papers scattered like startled birds around his feet.

He was past anger or even annoyance by now, as he looked down at his feet and the scattered papers. He could feel the dull stare in his own eyes.

Figures, he thought. It figures. He shook his head and sighed.

The intercom on his desk buzzed. God, not already, he thought.

He moved carefully around the desk, avoiding the other corner, and sank wearily into the battered leather chair. He took a deep breath and leaned back, being careful not to go too far. The damn whatsis under the seat was broken and the chair had spilled him before this. Then he sat up straight, took another deep breath, braced his forearms against the edge of the desk, and flicked the switch on the intercom.

"Yes?"

"We've got another one." Barbara Callahan's voice came through the speaker in a here-we-go-again sing-song.

Deiter's eyes closed and opened. He exhaled deeply before answering.

"Ready, aim, fire," he muttered toward the intercom.

Figures, he thought, and waited for Barbara to show in the first victim.

HIS NAME was Robert Timmins, he said, he was thirty-five years old, and he was scared shitless, but still determined. He laughed nervously, a breathless-choked-embarrassed little laugh.

"I never did anything like this before," he said.

Paul Deiter leaned back carefully in his chair. There was now a ponderous quality to his movements as he placed his elbows on the arms of the chair, joined his hands together, and rested his chin on his hands. He slumped his body a little deeper and let his head sink a little lower and thrust forward a little more. He tried not to blink as he studied Timmins.

There wasn't much to see. The man was slight, but apart from that there was little else to note. He looked to Deiter like the embodiment of the classic description of the murderer: about normal build, average height, sort of medium-colored hair, no distinguishing marks. The classic murderer.

Which in a way he is, Deiter thought. He kept his face composed, impassive, but a hard knot of indigestion from his hastily bolted breakfast was starting to form in his chest. His hip was beginning to ache where he had knocked it into the desk. His neck felt stiff but he held his position and made no attempt to hide the movement of his eyes as they played over Timmins.

The man was seated awkwardly on the edge of the straight chair provided for victims. It was placed almost in the middle of the room, facing the desk, so that anyone sitting there was isolated, distant, lonely in the middle of the room. Timmins was having difficulty figuring out what to do with his hands and finally just let them massage each other nervously in his lap. He probably wasn't even aware that he was doing it. His knuckles looked raw. He was squirming under Deiter's gaze and a beaded line of sweat was forming on his upper lip.

Deiter held out in silence as long as he could manage. It was obvious that Timmins, would not, could not, break the silence himself, so finally Deiter had to do it. He sighed, wearily, loudly, then leaned forward on the desk, head still thrust out toward Timmins.

"Well, then," he said. "Now, Mr. Timmins, I'm certain you've given a great deal of thought to this. After all, it's a big step you're about to take."

Timmins nodded, a bit too vigorously, and mumbled something Deiter did not catch. His hands were busy rubbing each other. He crossed one leg over the other, apparently trying to look composed, if not casual. He looked more uncomfortable than he had before and his hands did not stop moving.

"There are a few things I have to tell you," Deiter began. "You'll forgive me, I hope, if most of it is already familiar to you. I'm required to explain it before we can go any further." From here on, the words, long rehearsed and often repeated, came easily and monotonously from his lips. His fingers twisted an innocent paperclip as he spoke.

"Self-termination is a drastic step for a human being to take and while the Bureau has the responsibility for administering the program to individuals who request it, we neither encourage or endorse the action. Nor, of course, do we disapprove of it. Every citizen has a right to self-termination as guaranteed by the thirty-third amendment. It is our job to facilitate the exercise of that right for those persons who choose it. Do you understand that?"

Timmins nodded dumbly, his eyes fixed on Deiter's face. Deiter had to make an effort to keep from blinking. He took a deep breath and let the flow of words continue.

"However, there are other factors I must remind you of and ask that you keep in mind. If you should decide to go ahead and avail yourself of our services, it will be necessary to have you fill out some papers and provide us with some documents. We handle everything. If you decide not to go ahead, that is, you decide to *live*, we can cancel the process at any time. However, you must understand that you may not facilitate the termination process yourself. Under no circumstances may you do that. If you . . ."

"What if I do?" Timmins said with a rush of escaping breath.

"If you choose to . . ." Deiter let his voice trail off into silence for a moment. Almost all of the applicants, no matter how frightened they were, interrupted him at that point. And, of course, that showed the logical flaw in the whole structure of the amendment and the Bureau. No denying it. So Deiter and the other interviewers in the other offices along the corridor did not deny it. It was

part of standard Bureau procedure not to deny it.

Deiter waved one hand, the hand holding the twisted paperclip. "A wise man wouldn't do that," he said. "There have been cases . . ." and he let his voice fade away again. No applicant ever insisted beyond that. And of course not, Deiter thought. If they're sitting here in the first place, asking the Bureau to terminate their lives for them legally, they're not about to go home and slit their own throats. But then standard procedure sets up a pretty difficult tightrope for both of us to walk. Ah, well.

Deiter held the silence a little longer. Timmins had dropped his eyes and now was staring at the floor in front of his feet. Deiter waited for a silent count of twenty, then sat up smartly in his chair.

"Well, Mr. Timmins, if that's all clear, then I think we're ready to proceed."

Timmins raised his head and looked at Deiter. His eyes had an unfocused look, as if they were watching intently some personal and distant picture in his head, instead of seeing the office and the desk and Deiter's now smiling face. He nodded.

Abruptly, Deiter's manner changed. He was suddenly sitting up very straight, the heavy tiredness gone from his features, the mangled paperclip tossed from his hands. He was transformed into a picture of brusque and businesslike efficiency.

"So!" he said. Timmin's eyes, he thought, had grown a little wider. That usually happened at this point. God, it was amazing how they were all identical. Even when you knew from long experience and not just from psychological profiles that they were going to react identically, it was still a constant surprise. Just in time, Deiter kept himself from shaking his head in wonder.

He swung sharply around in the chair, the swivel mechanism groaning in pain beneath him, and reached toward a shelf that extended the length of the wall behind his desk. It was piled with neat stacks of papers.

"Family?" he tossed brusquely over his shoulder at Timmins.

"I . . . Yes, I . . ."

"Family," Deiter muttered and his left hand shot out for the first pile of papers and picked a four page form off the top.

"Religious affiliation?" He fired the words at Timmins, hand poised over the next stack of forms.

"I'm . . ."

"Uh, huh," Deiter grunted. His hand flicked up another form. "Got a job?" Hand poised over a third stack.

"I . . ."

"Umh." Deiter's right hand picked another form from the next pile and added it to those in his left hand.

"Debts?" he asked. He picked up that form too, without waiting for an answer. "Hell, we've all got debts. Assets?"

"Not . . . Not much."

The form was already in Deiter's hand.

"Military service?"

"Yes." Timmin's voice was little more than a whisper.

Another form added to the growing wad in Deiter's hand.

"Clubs, organizations, anything like that?" Deiter had to stretch his arm for that pile, but the papers were added to the others.

There were three more forms and Deiter had to get up from his chair to reach them. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Timmins' gaze fixed on the thick handful of papers he was holding. "And general information," he said, almost to himself, as he picked up the last one. It was twelve pages, the thickest

of them all.

Deiter turned back to his desk and stood beside it. Grasping the pile of papers in both hands, he rapped the bottom edge against the desk to straighten and align the forms. He did it a second time, this time producing a sharp crack, like a gunshot, against the wooden surface of the desk. He turned quickly and thrust the neat pile of papers at Timmins. The man's eyes followed the movement of his hand, like a snake mesmerized by the swaying of a flute.

"There you go," Deiter said in a friendly but businesslike tone. "All set."

Timmins took the papers in one hand and immediately had to grab at them with the other when they threatened to slip away.

"What . . . What do I . . . do with these?" he managed to gasp out.

Deiter had turned and was already moving back to his desk. He put one hand on the back of his chair, preparatory to pulling it out and sitting down.

"Just fill them out," he said, letting his tone suggest that should have been obvious. "Oh, wait a minute," he said suddenly. "Did I give you the list of documents you need? Here, I think I missed that. Sorry." And this has was extended, holding out still another piece of paper toward Timmins.

Timmins took it silently and added it to his pile. He had to shift the papers slightly and Deiter could see that the top page was already getting crinkled from the sweat on Timmins' hand.

"You'll have to get all those documents together before we can go any further," Deiter said. "You know, birth certificates, marriage license, army discharge, all the rest. If you're missing any, better send for them and get them. Have to have everything in order, you know," he said briskly. He was behind the desk again, holding the back of his chair. This time he pulled it out from the desk.

Timmins was standing uncertainly beside the straight chair, as if waiting for further instructions, unable to move without them.

"Okay, then?" Deiter said. It was clearly a dismissal.

Timmins nodded. "I . . . I'll let you know, then . . . when . . . when I have . . ."

"That's right," Deiter said, nodding his head in official approval. "That's right. We can't move until all the papers are in order. And don't worry, Mr. Timmins. We'll do our very best for you." He smiled briefly, then just as quickly turned off the smile and sat down at the desk. One hand reached for a folder.

His eyes stared at the piece of paper, not even seeing the words on it, until Timmins had somehow managed to get himself out the door. After a long while, he looked up. By now, Barbara would be giving Timmins instructions about what to do when he had all his papers in order. She might even suggest, unasked, a decent coffee shop in the neighborhood where he might want to have lunch. He had heard her do that a few times. Hardly standard Bureau procedure but a nice touch nevertheless.

Lunch. God, it almost lunchtime already. Right, he remembered, got a late start today. And suddenly he was aware of a dull ache in his hip. He had forgotten about it until now, but meanwhile the bruise had had time to flower and the soreness to sink deeper into the flesh.

He glanced at the clock on his desk. Lunch. A bubble of indigestion made his chest feel tight.

The door opened and Barbara Callahan came in. Deiter looked up at her as he let his body sink back into the leather chair. The fingers of his right hand were massaging his chest, trying ineffectually to ease the indigestion.

She stood beside the desk, near him but at a proper distance.

"That one didn't look too bad," she said quietly.

"Routine," he murmured.

She nodded agreement.

He raised his eyebrows inquiringly at her.

She shrugged. "You looked tired when you came in. A little frazzled."

"Umh." He moved his hand from his chest, made a vague gesture toward her.

"Want another one or would you rather go to lunch now?"

"Who can eat?" he muttered sourly, rubbing his chest again. He shifted his weight and the chair squeaked. "No," he said. "Let's go out to lunch. It's on me. You can eat mine for me."

He shifted his feet to stand up. The sudden movement strained the swivel mechanism under the chair. It slipped, gave a metallic snap, and almost spilled him over backwards. He caught the edge of the desk just in time.

"That does it," he said. "Get your coat." He stood up. "We're going to lunch."

She hesitated, watching him, lines of worry creasing her forehead.

"Go on," he said more gently. "Go on. Get whatever you need. We're going out to lunch." He came around the desk and shooed her toward the door.

"Only let's not go to the place you send the clients," he said as he reached the doorway. "That Timmins guy might be there. Who knows? And *him* I don't ever expect to see again, and I'm sure as hell not going looking for him. He's on his own now."

He took a step and winced as a throb of pain shot through his hip. As he followed Barbara toward the door, he was careful to avoid tripping over the worn spot on the carpet.

HIS HIP hurt less after sitting through lunch. He knew it would be sore again when he got up, so he ordered another cup of coffee and lingered over it. The tuna salad sandwich lay unfinished on his plate.

Barbara said little during the meal, leaving him with his thoughts. He didn't know if he was glad of that or not. She spent most of the time avoiding his eyes by staring out the window of the hotel coffee shop at the people passing on Seventh Avenue.

Deiter was thinking about Timmins and about the dull ache in his hip.

"Paul?"

Barbara's voice sounded tentative, groping for the right way to approach him.

Deiter indicated he was listening by raising his head from a dreary contemplation of his half-eaten sandwich. Barbara was looking at him. She didn't usually call him "Paul," had done so only once or twice in the three years he had known her. She had called him by his first name, he remembered, on the night — more than a year ago now — when he had taken her to a movie after work and fumbled awkwardly under her skirt, thinking while he was doing it, adults don't do things like this at the movies, only kids. She had said his name then softly, her lips close to his ear. Later, when he got home, he sat at the kitchen table and pressed his fingers to his nose and mouth, smelling her on his skin. The odor seemed disconnected from her, disembodied despite its origin, a rich heavy curtain of fog that filled his head and obscured the memory of the day. The evening had never been repeated and neither of them had ever referred to it again.

"Paul?"

"I'm okay," he said. He knew his voice sounded tired. Barbara shifted in her seat, maybe just crossed her legs under the table, he couldn't tell exactly what, but somehow her attitude, her posture, was closer, more intimate. Without

being told, he knew she would listen if he wanted to talk.

"I'm okay," he said again. "Really." She was watching him now so he went on, or heard himself going on. "They just add up sometimes. And the day started out rotten. You know." He shrugged. "There are days and there are days."

Barbara shifted again and looked out the window. Okay, he thought, I guess I don't want to talk about it after all. And what the hell is there to talk about? What? He snorted, a sharp exhalation of air through his nose. The sound startled him. He hadn't realized how close to the vocal surface his thoughts had been. Barbara looked back at him and Deiter wondered suddenly if he had said the words out loud or if he had only thought them.

"Paul, you . . ." Barbara's hand toyed with an empty ash tray on the table, gentle fingertips turning it slowly around and around.

She's going to reach out and touch my hand, he thought. And how will I feel when she does? But instead of reaching for his hand, Barbara continued to turn the ash tray. She looked out the window again.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Deiter felt a little better now, knowing that she was willing to listen if he wanted to talk. He wondered idly, just for something to do, how he knew that. Some way women have of communicating, some movement or angle of the body, some female, unmale, way of speaking a man's name. He let his eyes drift toward her face and come to rest examining her profile. She was close to the window, and the glass, with its blurred and hurrying background of people passing in the busy street, reflecting her face at him.

Suddenly her body, her shoulders, moved, stiffened. Her eyes, reflected in the window, opened wider. Before he could stop himself — something said, Don't look — he followed her gaze and looked out to the street.

Timmins. He was standing in the middle of the sidewalk. He looked as if he had paused, stopped, frozen, in mid-step. He was staring back at Deiter. His eyes seemed to take in the whole scene, Deiter with Barbara, the hotel coffee shop, the waitress flicking back and forth in her yellow uniform, the half-eaten sandwich, the ashtray now solid and still in Barbara's fingers, the cold coffee in the cup. Deiter felt himself staring back through the glass.

Then Timmins moved, an uncertain step forward, unsteady. A boy in dungarees, carrying a large flat package wrapped in brown paper — a painting? a graph demonstrating the upswing in some company's profits? a map that showed where the treasure was hidden? — bumped into him, stumbled, almost lost his grip on the painting-graph-map, said something, and went on. Timmins, distracted, looked after him for a moment, took another step as if to follow him, then halted.

Barbara looked quickly at Deiter, her face drawn, but he only noticed her out of the corner of his eye. He was watching Timmins, who had moved again, away, toward the edge of the sidewalk. He seemed to move as if unaware of the people passing him. At the curb, without breaking his slow pace, he stepped into the road between two taxis. And kept walking. The flat front of the bus seemed to scoop him up, then fling him away, like a doll, arms and legs loose, flapping.

Deiter's hand was clenched painfully on the edge of the table. Barbara gasped something with no words. Her hand, still holding the ashtray, waved aimlessly in the air. Outside, people were shouting and running. An elderly man, lips thin and pale, leaned against the glass just outside the table, blocking Deiter's view. Behind him, someone was sick.

His eyes locked on Barbara's. Then unconscious of his own sudden movement, he was standing.

"C'mon," he said. His voice sounded, felt, thick. "C'mon," he said again, more urgently.

Barbara slid across the seat and stood up. She was pale. He grabbed her hand, awkwardly so that he felt the hardness of her knuckles, he pulled her toward the exit into the hotel lobby. His eyes seemed to refocus, like a lens closed down to its narrowest angle of vision. Somewhere at the edge of the angle, the cashier gestured, opened her mouth, but then he was past her, out the door, with Barbara close behind.

In the lobby he stopped, moved toward the revolving door, stopped again. A faceless blue uniform ran past in the street. Deiter turned, still crunching Barbara's knuckles in his grip, moved back into the lobby, across the carpeted open space to the long desk.

The clerk behind the desk hesitated, looked at him oddly, Deiter knew without caring, and craned his neck to see out into the street.

"Paul, what are you doing?" Barbara's voice was half whispered, half choked, close to his ear. Paul. The sound of his name seemed to wash over him warmly, easing the pounding of his heart.

"Room," he said to the clerk. "I want a room. C'mon, I want a room." He was fumbling in his jacket. His hand was trembling as he brought out his wallet and groped with clumsy fingers for a credit card.

The clerk, making no effort to conceal his annoyance at being distracted or his leer at Deiter's haste, pushed a card and a pen across the counter. Deiter dropped the credit card in front of the clerk, scrawled his signature on the form.

"I'll get that later. Later." His fingers pushed the credit card toward the clerk. He felt Barbara's hand squeezing his arm.

The key was hard and cold in his hand. Barbara still said nothing as he pulled her toward the elevators at the side of the lobby. The only thing in his mind was getting to the room, getting there quickly. His head and eyes and fingers did automatically whatever was necessary to get him, them, to the elevator, push the button for the right floor, read the room numbers on the doors.

His throat felt tight and his heart was pounding as he pushed the door open, then shoved it closed behind them. His fingers, so cold before, immediately warmed in the silent stillness of the room. He didn't know where they were in the building. It didn't matter.

Behind him, Barbara sobbed quietly.

Deiter turned. His hands, suddenly fierce and strong, gripped her arms and pulled her close against him. Her body felt warm. He pressed one hand against the small of her back, pressing her to him tightly. The other stroked, fluttered, up and down the warmth of her body.

He wanted to tell her what to do, tell her to hurry, how to move. He didn't know the words.

But Barbara knew and in a measureless moment of time she was lying back on the bed, her body naked and open, her chest and stomach moving with sharp breaths. Her hands, lying beside her thighs, were open, fingers spread toward him.

All he could see was the whiteness and warmth of her body. Then her fingers touched him, drew him down to her. He felt the round soft pressure of her breasts as his chest touched hers.

She touched him with fingers like whispered hopes, and guided him into her. He wanted to say it some way, tell her in words, but the warmth of her body enveloped him, wrapped him safely, erased and blurred the words.

He moved, his body lunging to the depths of hers, then suddenly stiffened,

back muscles knotted, in a frozen single-minded moment.

With a long sigh, he came, body rigid, clasping her to him.

She held him locked in her arms, safe and alive.

"Paul," she whispered, his name like a gentle breath on tinder, nourishing a struggling flame.

Outside, the banshee wail of a siren curled past the window and away. ●

Alan Ryan

Alan Ryan began writing in 1977. Within six months, the NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW bought a humor feature and soon after assigned him to do book reviews. Since then he has sold both fiction and criticism and is now a contributing editor of KNAVE Magazine, for which he writes a monthly book review column.

He was born in 1943 in New York City. After attending Jesuit schools there, he was a Graduate Fellow in English at U.C.L.A. for two years. Following that, he spent nine years teaching English, drama, creative writing, and dance criticism. He has also been Director of Audience Development for an off-Broadway theatre.

His reviews of current fiction have appeared in the NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, the LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW, and other national publications. Reviews of new science fiction titles have appeared (or will soon appear) in GALILEO and in a guest book review column for the MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, and GALAXY.

He has sold stories to the MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, NEW DIMENSIONS, CHRYSALIS, OTHER WORLDS, SHADOWS, and a reprint in YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES (1980).

His first novel, PANTHER!, a mainstream thriller, will be published by NAL/Signet in late 1980. He is currently completing work on a science fiction novel, a suspense novel, and a series of fantasy stories.

He lives in New York City and is a member of the Authors Guild and the Science Fiction Writers of America.



Illustrated by Gary Freeman

**Joseph
Farnan**

THE POD

THE SPEED of Jack Daumier's rise almost defies description. He began as a young associate in a large Los Angeles law firm, but soon left to start his own firm, which grew and prospered (inevitably, or so it seemed) from the start.

He had then a beautiful blonde wife (Danielle), healthy twin boys, a townhouse in Beverly Hills, and money to spare.

One day a producer-friend came into his office. The producer suggested that Jack plow some of his surplus cash into the making of a low-budget film. Jack agreed and bought in for ten percent of the receipts.

The film grossed forty million dollars.

A sequel was quickly arranged. The sequel made more money than the original and Jack was rich as could be imagined. He signed an astounding co-production contract with Warner Brothers which gave him salary, incentives, bonuses, stocks, "points", and half the dark side of the moon.

He was all of twenty-nine years old.

The Daumiers moved from Beverly Hills out to Malibu, selecting as home a rambling Cape Cod-style house overlooking the Pacific. The house was a beauty, with windows everywhere and high-ceilinged rooms to be found where they were least expected. Despite his status in the industry, Jack deliberately bought a good distance north of the Malibu Colony. He had no use for jet-setters, and was bored by excess. As a reasonable man, he knew that immense wealth is often accompanied by problems of a corresponding size, and he was determined to shield his family from all possible harm.



To state it simply, he believed in the virtues of normal life. He refused to indulge himself with screening rooms, transvestite mistresses, private jets or subterranean flower-grotto jacuzzis. He was instead devoted to his family and honorable in meeting the terms of his WB contract. He also closely supervised the day-to-day doings of his law firm, somehow managing to accomplish all this without becoming a drudge.

What saved him was his sense of adventure. As a reasonable man he believed that life must be balanced. Since balance meant variety, the Daumiers vacationed often and well: they rafted the Colorado; explored Kashmir aboard a servanted houseboat; canoed the Indian rivers of Maine; island-hopped in the Aegean; came down the Mississippi on an old side-paddler; skied virgin powder in the Canadian Rockies; para-sailed high above the Acapulco beaches.

Jack used adventure as a counterpoint to work, but he always looked for controlled adventure — the adventure of the guided safari or the well-mapped archeological dig.

Given the extent of his resources, it was natural that the question eventually occurred to him: why not enjoy adventure at will? Closer to the office, so to speak, like a local racquetball court or putting green? He gave the idea a good deal of thought. Eventually it developed into a wish, and he was then put in touch with someone able to grant it.

This was a scientist who also happened to be a popular science fiction writer. A mutually convenient meeting was arranged. During their conference the scientist repeatedly relit his briar pipe, adjusted his horn-rims, made a few clever jokes, and arranged the pens in the pocket of his spotless white lab coat while Jack outlined his plan. The scientist allowed that it was within the realm of possibility. Jack wrote out a check in six figures, they shook hands, and a bargain was struck.

Supplies began arriving at Malibu within weeks. First to arrive were the crates filled with instruments, consoles and wiring panels. These were unloaded and carted up to the high-ceilinged room on the third floor which Jack had set aside for the purpose. The "space room", he called it.

A primitive voice computer was unpacked next and hoisted up to the room by means of a winch and cable. The dozens of plots were much easier to transport: they arrived in sheaves of forty, already coded for the computer. Each plot was dotted with numerous gaps. Into those gaps could be inserted any number of random reversals and complications, insuring that no plot would ever repeat itself. Jack had the staff at Warners break the plots down into scenes. The scenes were assigned in turn to the animation and special effects departments at the studio, with the overflow farmed out to talented animation students at the U.C.L.A. film school.

An exclusive car-customizing shop was hired to construct the lift system, the cabin and the shell. These components were then shipped by flatbed truck out to Malibu, where engineers from Warners supervised the final assembly.

The Owner's Manual was last to arrive. It took Jack a full half an hour to tear away the packaging and undo the intricate series of knots which protected the text. When he was finished he had before him a bulging, black-covered volume, the pages of which were overrun by confusing symbols and signs. He poured over the book, decoding and mastering what he could of it.

"WHERE IS this goddamn gizmo?" yelled Henry Burgess. "I demand you show me. Now!"

"A master of restraint," noted Jack.

"A regular Zen Buddhist," agreed Danielle.

"NOW!" yowled the massive sculptor.

Jack shrugged at his other dinner guests, the admired English film director Roger Occam, and Occam's wife, Shirley.

"Shirley?" he inquired. "Danielle?"

"Not us, Jack," replied Shirley Occam. "I'll stay down here with D. and we'll tidy up and then we'll chat a bit. You lads take Roger with you and have your fun."

"Hear that, you poof?" yelled Burgess. "Get on with it!"

Occam at last gave his cautious OK and the three men pushed off from the table, leaving behind the enclosed porch area where dinner had been served. As they trooped onward through the unlighted house, Burgess nonchalantly pinched a decanter of scotch from a nearby mantle.

"I hope to be brushed by the wings of the angel of inspiration," said Burgess, defending his action as he puffed up the stairs.

Jack led his guests through the dark third-floor hallway, making sure that the inside lighting was well-adjusted before ushering them into the "space room."

Exclaimed Burgess upon entering: "What in God's green hell is *that*?"

Sitting in the center of the spacious room, perched on a powerful hydraulic lift system, was a pearl-white globe some ten feet in diameter.

"A ride?" offered Occam. "Like the arcade at Brighton."

"Never seen a damned thing like it," admitted Burgess. He approached cautiously and patted the shellacked hull with his free hand. His reserve seemed to evaporate with the touch. "Of course," he continued, "Hef has some gadgets in the Manse that . . . well (to borrow from the old gag), since it looks, feels and smells like a ride, let's go for a goddamned ride!"

Jack boarded the 'ride' first, stepping up into the tight circular cabin and strapping himself into the pilot's chair. Burgess squeezed into the shotgun seat, cradling his decanter with care. Occam settled in nervously behind.

"Not bad," granted the sculptor, caressing his red leather seat.

Jack went about his pilot's duties. As he flattened several switches on the control panel the room outside the ship went black and the pod door automatically swung closed. The three friends then sat together watching the rush and play of instrument lights in the darkened cabin.

"A nice effect," acknowledged Occam.

Overhead, a neon sign calmly blinked in red: "Fasten Seatbelts."

"Can't get one around this gorgeously crafted Rupert's tumor," observed Burgess from the shadows.

Jack leaned over his computer terminal and punched in the liftoff code on the luminous green keys. The hydraulics gave a series of gentle shrugs, pressing the surprised guests against their seats for perhaps thirty seconds. The craft then stabilized itself while the metal sheet protecting the wraparound screen slowly drew back into the curved hull of the ship.

There were the night stars.

"I'm not seeing this," declared Burgess, "because it's impossible."

Jack responded by expertly rotating the ship until Earth came into view, flooding the cabin with its light.

"JMJ and Howdy Doody, too," muttered the sculptor.

"Excuse me, Jack, but how is it done?" asked Occam. "There must be a rear projection device involved."

"I've read the Manual and taken it on a few shakedown cruises," said Jack, "But to tell you the truth I still don't know how the damn thing works."

Occam gazed down from space upon his own planet. "Quite pleasant," he

admitted. "A sort of wish-fulfillment on your part, I should imagine."

"I usually play my cards close to the vest. This is my one indulgence."

"It must have cost —" began Burgess.

"Who cares?" said Jack. "It's the one unreasonable, stupid, useless toy I've allowed myself. And in this town — and especially in my business — that says a lot."

"Hear, hear!" toasted Burgess.

"But before we explore the Cosmos," continued the host, "I believe it's time for the pause that refreshes."

So saying, Jack produced a thick joint of Columbian from his shirt pocket.

"Excellent idea," agreed Occam. "Should aid the visuals."

"I'm afraid I'll have to abstain," announced Burgess. "On religious grounds."

"Whose religion — Baal's?"

"No, Jack," intoned Burgess, eyeing the number warily, "I just don't believe the good Lord intended us to smoke marijuana while we're flying. You and the British Bergman here go play Chineese junkie. All I ask is — let me handle this crate awhile. Let me get my hands on it!"

Jack acquiesced to his friend's request and shunted control over to Burgess's station. After a hurry-up course in piloting Burgess took the wheel and went puttering around in Earth-space, tugging at his scotch while jabbering and pointing out landmarks on the planet below. Jack and Occam meanwhile went about polishing off the Columbian.

On the last toke Jack announced 'Time to hit the void' and punched in the word MISSION on his terminal.

Purred the computer:

Your mission (should you choose to accept it) is to investigate Romulan incursions into Federation space.

Triordinates 4-CX-12. Those numbers again are : 4-CX-12.

"Hold on just one second," demanded Burgess. "What's this 'Federation'?"

"That's us," Jack told him. "We're a loose alliance of planets dedicated to keeping peace in the universe." This explanation struck him as totally lame, and he was forced to suppress a laugh. "Like a U.N. peace force," he ventured further, the Columbian beginning to seep in. "Or the marines."

"And what about these Romulans?"

"Definite villains. The bad guys with black stetsons. But don't lose any weight over it. I know they're patsies."

"How do you know that?"

"I've met them before," explained Jack. "Their weapons can't penetrate the force-field surrounding the ship."

"Force-field!" enthused Burgess. "Why didn't you say so? Let's go kick some Romulan ass!"

Jack typed in the figures suggested by the computer and the ship immediately adopted hyper-flow. Space and matter went rushing past, generating a high-intensity light show. Jack turned slowly around in his own slowly-gathering haze to steal a glance at Occam. The director was staring numbly at the screen, thoroughly caught up in the 'visuals'.

The ship emerged in a dull corner of the universe governed by a huge red sun. A single airless planet was revolving casually around the red giant; visible on the planet's surface was an artificial settlement of considerable size.

"Prepare for hostile contact," announced Jack.

"I really like the *Halls of Montezuma* lingo," declared Burgess.

"We're going down," Jack told him.

"Just what I need on a Friday night," crowed the sculptor. "A toe-to-toe shitkicker with some verminous Romulans."

"Wait one minute and you can make the pass."

Jack held the ship steady while he fished out a tightly rolled doob of Thai weed. He wanted to reinforce the Columbian before the action began. Inhaling and passing the number back to Occam, he then proceeded to explain the ship's firing mechanisms to his co-pilot, noticing at the same time that Burgess's complexion had shifted surprisingly to the red, due (he concluded) to the presence of the red sun:

"This is all automated. Everything. All of it. It's all automated."

"Is it all automated?"

"This here (demonstrating) is the automatic sight. Got it? Good. That's good. These switches (demonstrating) . . . no, not those, these, no, yes, (demonstrating). Those are electron torpedoes. They'll turn anything in the universe into ice-cream. Now, you lower the ship, keep her straight on course, then hit the sight (demo), hit the switches (demo) and that's your pass."

"That's my pass."

"Strafe the village."

"Strafe the village."

"A clear Geneva convention violation," interposed Occam.

"Relax, willya?" rebutted Burgess. "These are only cartoon characters here."

The earth-ship descended slowly into the airless planet's primary gravitational field. The Romulan colony, now clearly visible, consisted of several transparent silo-like structures, each as tall as a good-sized skyscraper. These structures were connected to one another by a maze of low-slung passageways. The ship began its run over the colony. Jack felt his heartbeat increase. A pair of white crosshairs appeared on the screen, courtesy of gunner Burgess. The crosshairs moved across the planet's surface, finally settling in on the center of the village. Burgess launched an insane barrage of torpedoes. He and Jack laughed as the silos below cracked, split open and exploded into flames. Burgess repeated the maneuver several times until there were no more structures left standing on the face of the planet.

"Fantastic!" he sputtered, pulling the ship back into space. "What a thrill! Just great!"

"I believe something's coming," mumbled Occam.

"Jesus H. Christ! Reminds me of my tail-gunning days!"

"Speak up, Roger. What's that?"

"Something's coming . . ."

"Where?"

"In the . . . what d'ye call it? . . . the penumbra . . ."

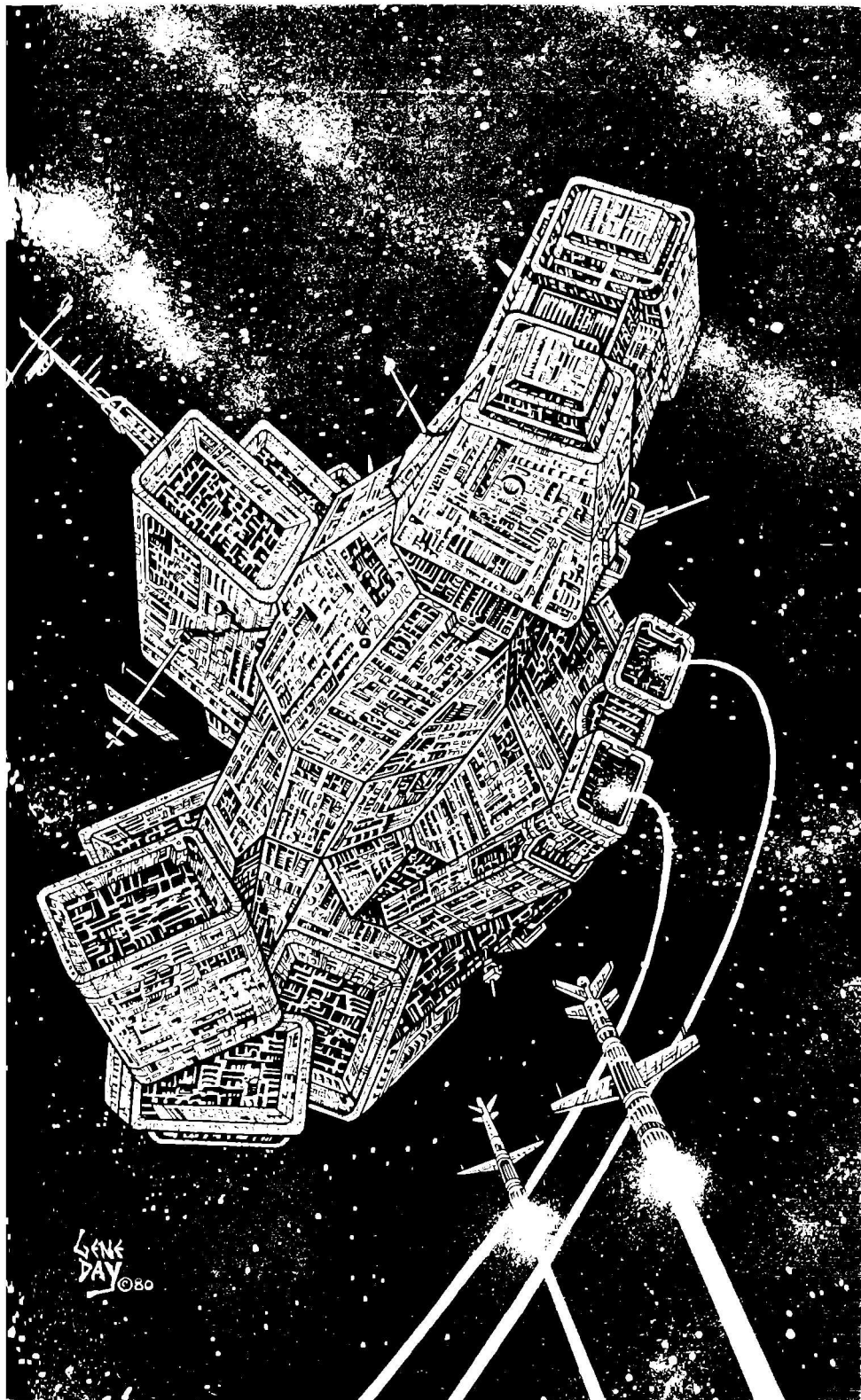
There was indeed a tiny red glint in the black ring surrounding the sun.

IDENTIFY

Romulan warship.

What else?

Jack grew more excited as he watched the approaching ship. "They can't touch us," he reminded his co-pilot. "Keep those force-fields up and stick it to them."



GENE
DAY ©80

The crosshairs again appeared on the screen. A string of torpedoes made its way toward the Romulan vessel.

"Eat vaccum, spacerats!" hooted Burgess.

The torpedoes exploded without affecting the approaching ship.

"That's odd," noted Jack, forgetting that plots are often inconveniently altered.

The Romulans responded by firing two erratic, slow-moving beams of light at the earth-ship.

"Better avoid those knuckleballs."

Burgess managed to duck the first beam, but his dulled reactions weren't up to two consecutive tests. He fumbled the wheel and the second beam hit deadon.

"Outrageous . . ." mumbled Occam.

The ship reared violently on its springs. Jack and Occam were restrained by their harnesses, but Burgess was catapulted from his seat. He collided face-first with the viewing screen like a tomato hitting a wall, then slid jerkily down the deck.

A highly-confused Jack threw the ship into hyper-flow, leaving the Romulans and the red sun far behind.

EXPLAIN, he demanded of the computer when they finally came to rest

The Romulans have made significant technological advances since your last encounter. You didn't expect them to stand still for you, did you?

LOCATE

Just a minute. Just a minute.

You've dumped us in a volatile area near the rim of the universe, one patrolled by the Guardians.

Whoever *they* are, thought Jack.

He bent down to look after his injured friend: Burgess was K.O.'d and bleeding slightly over the right eye. The reek of booze around the sculptor seemed surprisingly strong to Jack's weed-heightened sense of smell. He reached over and retrieved the decanter. A check of the waterline confirmed that Burgess had been deep in his cups.

Moral, thought Jack, don't drink and drive.

He cleansed Burgess's small wound with a few drops of scotch and dried the cut with his shirttail. His examination led him to conclude that the sculptor's mackerel-like state had been mainly caused by the booze, not the collision with the viewing screen. Burgess was drunk has a Lord, and the impact had only hastened his demise. There was no emergency here.

At that moment, a pre-programmed attraction went nova-red on the screen, distracting him from his hospital duties while he stared at the brilliant fallout.

"Going under . . ."

This from Occam.

"Stick around, Roger."

"Too stoned . . ."

"Hold on —"

"Too late . . . I'm gone . . ."

True to his word, and unaware of Burgess's condition, Occam was indeed gone, crashed out on the back seat.

Some crew, thought Jack.

The time had come to cancel the mission. Both of his guests were in obvious need of bedrest; the ship itself could not afford another hit. This much was clear even to his pleasantly-lit brain.

He stepped carefully over Burgess's body and pushed the pod door handle. It refused to give. This brought on a brief run of dope-caused confusion which froze him in a half-crouch. Then the next step prescribed by the Manual luckily came back to him: the automatic uncoupler. He reached up into the gap above the door and pressed the uncoupler lever, but received no response.

The impact's screwed up the whole door-release mechanism, he told himself.

Crossing back to his own chair, he flipped on the switches which put the ship's works on manual override. That was how to get past these mechanical foulups, he asserted, return control to the humans. He gave the pod door a hard shove. It remained unmoved.

He sank back into the pilot's chair and tried to collect this thoughts. He knew there was a safety valve somewhere, but was too confused to conjure up its location.

Then he remembered: there was a fail-safe box under his seat. Reaching into it, he shut off all the electrical power coming into the "space room".

The strange stars still threw their light into the cabin.

He leaned out over the wheel and punched the viewing screen. It was in there solid: no chance of punching it out.

I really am in space, he thought.

Hostile entity

Jack stopped embroidering upon his fears and forced himself to concentrate on the viewing screen. Another vessel was poking around the upper-left quadrant. He brought the quadrant into resolution twenty. The magnification revealed a long, sleek cruiser with a curious insignia on its bow: painted there was the face of a cherubic, fat-cheeked angel.

This was far too suggestive for Jack. He instantly decided that he wanted no part of whatever it was.

IDENTIFY

The Guardians, as advertised.

EXPLAIN

Throughout time, the Guardians have been the caretakers of all ongoing creation, which explains their presence out here in the tulies.

That doesn't explain why you called them 'hostile', complained Jack. He had no assurance that the Guardians would behave like angels, however, merely because they were toting around a picture of one, and he at once threw the ship into hyper-flow.

Nothing happened.

"Good evening," announced a well-bred voice.

Jack was too busy cursing to notice. His mood had swiftly jumped from apprehension to exaggerated rage. He swore at Burgess and Occam for deserting: he damned the ship's delapidated state: he threw curses at the scientist for unduly complicating the plot.

"Please be advised," continued the imperturbable voice, "That you are now on trial for the premature termination, with prejudice, of numerous protected life-forms on Romulan colony CX-12."

Jack paused in disbelief.

"What's that?"

"Evidence is being reviewed on rescan."

"We were on assignment."

"Evidence review complete. Verdict may be expected presently."

"What's this? What about a defense, goddamnit!"

"Verdict: guilty."

"Got to hell. It's a mockery of justice."

"Sentence to be imposed forthwith."

"A KANGAROO COURT!"

Jack again tried to coax the ship into hyper-flow. His efforts only confirmed that it had been stripped of its ability to bypass the space-time continuum. He was sure the Guardians were responsible. He glanced out at the angelic hull: no: no way to escape at conventional speeds.

"Sentence: gradual termination of all life-forms aboard Federation craft."

"That's carrying the joke too far!" he protested.

Then he laughed out loud at that one: it was a ridiculous, stoned and paranoid thought! There was no 'they' out 'there'! He was in his own house, with his friends, slightly stoned (allright, he admitted: totally bombed), but still only two wooden floors separated him from his wife and children. The game might have gone on too long, but it was still only a game. And how on earth did they propose to 'terminate' him?

There was a hiss in the cabin. He raised his palm to the vent above his head and got the answer to his question. They were tampering with his air.

I really don't need this, he thought.

He raised his palm to the vent a second time. The air, he decided, was definitely being sucked out of the cabin. His heart beat faster: already the air seemed heavier to him, clogged and harder to breathe.

He groped about for something to do, but nothing presented itself.

A series of related and unpleasant images invaded his mind: he saw, in sequence, a baby strangled on its vomit, a swollen corpse washed ashore, a child's blue body come tumbling out of an abandoned ice-chest...

He gave in at last to panic. It was a panic exaggerated (as was everything else) by the weed. He groaned and flailed about in his seat, moaning and thrashing about in ways too embarrassing to relate.

This behavior continued until a rational thought finally broke through: frantic activity uses up more air. He resolved to be calm. He forced himself to slow down, waiting long seconds until he was sure he could be counted on to act reasonably. Then, hunching over the terminal like some nearsighted typist, he summoned his cranky ally.

SOLUTION

I'm afraid a favorable outcome depends upon

a non-quantifiable attribute.

IDENTIFY

Well . . . as you will. Courage.

The hiss in the cabin persisted. Jack ignored the palpably thicker air and sent the computer on a phenomenon search. It went about its task in a leisurely manner, returning with the locations of the following oddities: several anti-matter nodes, a star about to nova, and a black hole.

Jack knew nothing of black holes beyond having a general awareness that their workings were extremely complex. He was at the same time aware (or assumed) that he was involved in a plot, that the plot had been concocted with a layman in mind, and that few authors corner their heroes without supplying at least a chance to escape.

He balanced these concerns, trusting that they were the products of good reasoning and not good smoke. Then he nudged the ship toward the black hole at conventional speeds.

The Guardians, he hoped, would think the ship already a death ship.

As the ship sidled toward its target the image of Slim Pickens aboard the plummeting H-Bomb flashed through his mind. This will be the ride to end all rides, he told himself.

The yellow stay-beam startled him as it snaked across the screen. But they were too late: he was beyond their control: they were powerless to counter the black hole's pull.

The ship sped on into the vortex. Jack entered the code for home, wiped his face, wet his lips with the sweat, and waited calmly for his ship to be torn apart.

The trip proved as uneventful as a walk around the block. The black hole worked as a simple funnel: at the bottom lay the Earth, shimmering in space. Jack watched it until he was overcome by the ship's approach velocity and sent off to sleep with his crew.

THE ONLY sound in the cabin was Burgess's hearty snoring.

Jack tested the door: it gave way immediately.

There was an acrid smell in the room. He discovered he was having trouble standing. He felt his face. Had he been crying? He couldn't be sure.

An inspection disclosed several scorch marks above the ship's orange racing stripes.

Danielle and Shirly Occam broke off their conversation when he entered the room. When they asked him what had happened he found that he had no ready answer.

Over a late breakfast the next morning Burgess proudly patted his three fresh stitches and declared himself in line for the Purple Heart. The sculptor pronounced it the greatest expedition since Commodore Perry's.

Roger Occam admitted that he had been impressed by the "exotic, almost mythologic, visuals."

As a lawyer — and as a reasonable man — Jack knew that every fact pattern yields more than one interpretation. He chose to interpret this one as a warning: he closed off the "space room" and vowed never to enter it again.

Joseph Farnan

Born New York City, 1950. Expelled from first high school, finally finished at Hayes in the Bronx, 1967. B.A. in English from U.C.L.A., 1972. Taught high-school English in various New York City Schools, 1972-1974. Agented but unpublished novel

(*Fall-Out*, 1976), written while attending Southwestern University School of Law.

Now live in Santa Monica, have a small law practice (mostly criminal defense) in Los Angeles, and continue to write.



S.A. Robbins

WITH MY last dollar (heretofore tucked in the toe of my good boot) I bought a cup of coffee at Floradora's Bar and Grill, intending to use the change to buy a local paper. But the waitress, slim and blond like all California women, smiled so seductively that I gave her the remainder as a tip.

Having crossed the continent from oddjob to oddjob, floundering from one bed to another without ambition or great purpose, I arrived in San Francisco earlier that day characteristically broke. And now that my last two bits had been lost for a smile, I scanned the speckled-formica countertop for a discarded paper in search of Help Wanted columns. The thought of another mindless job brought the pauper's silent sigh to my lips.

Spotting the familiar grey of newsprint atop the out-of-order cigarette machine, I wandered across Floradora's parquet floor to confiscate a day-old copy of the *Half Moon Bay Gazette*. The coffee was still too hot, so I scanned the tabloid as I stirred the steaming black, skimming the want-ads with the expertise of the regularly unemployed and quickly locating an advertisement for part-time farm labor. *Must be handy with tools and comfortable around animals.* Another oddjobber's sigh.

The blond smile was still in possession of my finances, so I asked her kind permission to use the bar phone. She pointed to a sign over the cash register which read in large but fading letters, HOUSE BUSINESS ONLY — PUBLIC TELEPHONE IN OUTER LOBBY, then warmed up my coffee that was almost ready to drink but now too hot. That smile again.

I turned my pockets inside out in the traditional bum pose, embarrassed at this subtle admission of weakness for blond smiles. She didn't seem to believe in my poverty but with a sideward glance for her boss, pointed toward the red phone and said, "Make it local and make it fast," as she disappeared into the kitchen backwards.

My coffee was once again ready to drink, only minutes from being lukewarm and always in danger of the blond's premature warming up, so I paused to enjoy the cup of black and consider what life on a California farm would be, working for a certain Mr. S. K. Johannes.

According to Mr. Johannes, his farm was in desperate need of someone to help care for his livestock in nearby Half Moon Bay, and his offer sounded quite

He gave up his aimless wanderings to go

Trailing the Great White Snail

attractive to someone with no other options: in return for room/board and a small salary, I would feed and care for his animals and make some minor repairs. Staring into my coffee, I sighed at my lack of viable alternatives.

Upon arrival at Johannes' farm, I would find his estate to be nothing more than a half-acre of crabgrass and dandelion, and the owner himself to be an aging recluse, wheelchair and poor eyesight, who would laugh when I asked where his cows grazed.

"I have no cows, young man," he said between laughs.

Then he motioned for me to follow him as he wheeled himself down the long ramp and across the sidewalk to a small barn behind the cottage. Before he opened the door, he asked me what I then considered to be a strange question.

"Would you mind removing your boots?"

Now I have been asked many things by many employers over the years of oddjobbing, but never to remove my boots upon entering a barn. Being desperately in need of work and in deference to a very old man, I took my boots off and stood them beside the barn wall in silence, eagerly awaiting an explanation for his incredible request.

As I walked in stocking feet behind his wheelchair, Johannes opened the creaking door to his barn and revealed his livestock — *snails!* Thousands of them, snails of every shape and size, in different colors, some in glass cages (the rare ones) and others free to roam about the barn (if "roam" can be used to describe what thousands of snails would do about a barn). As I stared in complete amazement at these odd barnyard specimens, the old man spoke.

"This is my life," Johannes wheezed, "but, alas, I am too old to care for them by myself. I could certainly use your assistance, if you're still interested."

"These . . . I mean, this is . . . I mean, you are . . ." were the only words I could muster, always eloquent when surprised.

"I am a Snail Farmer, young man, and perhaps the western world's foremost authority on Pulmonata Gastropoda." He paused for a moment to proudly reflect upon the residents, and the silence in the barn was overcome by a subtle shuffling by the snails, barely audible, but somehow unpleasant.

"Snails are wonderful creatures," he continued as I stared at the mass of almost-motionless shells on the floor, on the walls, in the cases. In point of fact, the snails were all over the barn, with the exception of a single passageway down the center, wide enough for the wheelchair of S. Johannes. He deftly rolled himself down the aisle as he spoke of his huddled friends.

"These are no ordinary slugs, young man. No, these are unique specimens, some of them are quite rare. Those Moon Snails, for instance," pointing to a glass case filled with 45 to 50 very small snails with white crescents on the shells. "Most people believe their name is derived from the design on their shell, but in reality they are so named because they reproduce according to the lunar calendar, only during full moons."

I wandered carefully about the barn, staring at the various animals, literally hundreds of varieties: Tree Snails, Spotted Lip Snails, snails with striped and spotted shells. The largest, Johannes' prize specimen, was an African Desert Snail three feet in length and with a shell the size of a basketball. Unlike the majority of inhabitants, the large African seemed somehow aware of and interested in our presence.

He identified his favorites, describing their eating and mating habits, geographical region, and occasionally telling an anecdote of a particular acquisition. "This odd collection has taken me a lifetime to organize, and some were not come by easily. The African Desert Snail, for instance, was smuggled into the states by an unknowing traveler who assumed the shell was empty. He was

obviously mistaken . . . the African nearly killed him."

He stopped the story when he sensed my alarm at such a possibility, and assured me that the snails were happy here and therefore harmless. Then he invited me back to the cottage for some brandy, and to discuss the terms of my employ. According to the old farmer, my duties would be simple: twice daily feedings, weekly inventory and population check, and more importantly, a constant watch to prevent the snail's natural predators (beetles and ants) from invading the barn. According to Johannes, in between sips of a vintage Napoleon brandy saved for the occasion, such an invasion happened some years ago when a column of red ants broke through the barnwall and destroyed 150 American Sand Snails before he could stop them.

And so began my tenure as Keeper of the Snails. Each day at dawn I collected various leaves and roots from the nearby hills and chopped them into a fine consistency. This vegetable matter, mixed with certain vitamins, was spread along the barn floor twice daily, dawn and dusk, providing the snails with an adequate diet. As I learned from S. Johannes, a snail is like any other intelligent animal — it will remain with you as long as you feed it.

My second duty, predator defense, was more demanding. Upon inspection, I found the barn had numerous cracks through which black beetles and ants could easily enter, whereupon I undertook the audacious task of repairing the walls. But my weeks of labor were not unrewarded. Upon seeing the new barn (for I was forced to rebuild entire sections) that had been constructed during my first weeks at work, Johannes seemed pleased. That night he rewarded my labors by confiding some of his secret information gathered over the years from his snail observations.

Taking me into a small room which he referred to as his library, he unlocked one of the wall cabinets and showed me his real life's work: fourteen volumes of information catalogued during the last twenty-five years, the collected notes of a man with an intense interest in an ignored being. The entire collection was written in longhand and entitled *The Book of Snails*, describing the life, habits, social conventions and peculiarities of the inhabitants of his farm, precisely footnoted and cross-indexed in a complicated but organized fashion characteristic of the aging snail magnate.

My job, once the daily routine was established, provided much free time during which I occupied myself by reading selections from Johannes' notebooks. He had given me a key to the library and to all but one of the cabinets, reserving that mystery "for a better time." As I read of his experiments and observations, I came upon some fascinating data, unknown to the world of modern science, discovered by Johannes during his life among the snails. As I read, I slowly became an expert . . .

—A selection from *The Book of Snails*

CASE IN POINT: The Red Circle Snail, native to the Mediterranean and Gulf coasts, whose shell after death can be ground into a fine powder and when mixed with certain other ingredients becomes an effective cure for many tropical diseases. This special characteristic of the Red Circle variety has been used successfully by the natives of their respective regions. According to my studies, the special medicinal qualities are found only in that part of the shell surrounded by the dark red circle which identifies this variety, and are present only a short time after the snail's death.

(cf. *The Book of Snails*, Volume IV)

CASE IN POINT: *The Himalayan Rock Snail* which has the ability, when threatened by predators, to change its form and substance entirely. This pseudo-magical function of the Rock Snail, observed on rare occasions as the metamorphosis occurred, provides a complete self-defense. During the four to five minute process, the Rock Snail actually petrifies itself, becoming a medium-sized pebble of amazing density and strength. Though I have not observed the process in reverse, certain Rock Snails in cages were observed to be rock one night and snail in the morning. (cf. *The Book of Snails*, Volume V)

Among these unfolding mysteries were tales of brilliant potions and cures, as well as a detailed section on certain hallucinogenic effects from the crystallized mucus left by a snail as it inches along. In addition to hundreds of references to rare snails (it was a veritable encyclopedia of the animal's varieties) there were certain vague references to communication among the residents of his farm, intimating that Johannes himself once attempted to communicate with the snails.

The latter subject fascinated me and I thumbed through the entire volume in search of a treatise on conversation with snails, finding only a handful of ambiguities. The author himself was silent when asked, and his silence only magnified my growing curiosity. From what I gathered of the scant information on that subject in the first fourteen volumes, there was a language common to both snail and human, but Johannes seemed intent on keeping his discovery a secret. When asked over coffee and cigars about the possibilities of such a language, the old man simply responded, "Too much knowledge can be dangerous," with a wheezing cough as his only exclamation point.

His reticence was reserved for this subject only, and we often engaged in lengthy discussions about the lives and times of his snails. Sometimes I would approach Johannes with a specific question about the text of *The Book of Snails* and he would answer eloquently from the wheelchair that served as a lecturn; other times he would confront me with an apparent contradiction in snail behavior between Johannes' theory and a certain resident's actions, sending me back to the text to research the problem like a schoolboy doing his homework for science class with one important difference: I was becoming passionately involved with my work.

One such after-dinner debate exemplified the old man's method of instruction and initiation. We were sitting on the porch at sunset and drinking the last of his vintage Napoleon V.S.O.P. when Johannes turned and posed a question on the relative lifespans of the common American Garden Snail and its distant Asian counterpart. Startled by his sudden examination like that same schoolboy caught unprepared for a popquiz, I digressed for some time before Johannes' stern expression chased me to the library for the answer. Only after I read the obscure sections did I understand the old master's true lesson for the evening . . .

—A Selection from *The Book of Snails*

CASE IN POINT: *The Brownsnell snail of the Northern Hemisphere*, commonly referred to as the American Garden Snail, whose extreme sense of community (i.e. concern for peers) is comparable with human emotions of loyalty/revenge and sympathetic suffering. (See *Communal-Space Perception*, Volume I in which the pain/pleasure of one being is fully experienced

by another unrelated party.) Further evidence for this pseudo-emotional bond among snails is the immediate retreat into the shells of a certain colony when one of the snails has died, as if the entire family of snails felt the death of one of its own members. The power of a snail's emotional capability is greatest before its death, supporting the contention that snails produce a Death Scream when crushed by a random foot. It is said that the Death Scream of a snail is audible only to that being responsible for its death, a final statement into the killer's ears.

(cf. *The Book of Snails, Volume V*)

The seasons passed this way without my notice, among the myriad and colorful residents of the farm and in the company of its magnificent owner, proposing hypotheses and contradictions to the old man when I wasn't waging war on the beetles and ants. I had grown quite fond of the snails, and they to me, no longer retreating into their shell's inner sanctum when I entered the barn. (Even the paranoid Rock Snails remained calm as I approached.) And my friendship with S. Johannes grew each day, as with a teacher and his only disciple, master and apprentice working toward a common goal that is shrouded in mystery until that day when the apprentice is ready to be fully initiated in the world.

Such a day finally came. Urged by his failing health and by my constant curiosity, Johannes led me to the library after lunch. His face was pale with sunken eyes and the darkened cheeks of a man on the verge, and his tone of voice conveyed a certain paradoxical fear of a man with much work still to be done and little time left to do it.

"I had hoped to finish my work before I leave this world, but as you will soon understand, my confinement to this accursed chair has made that impossible. Perhaps . . ." but he refrained from completing the sentence. Wheeling himself slowly to the forbidden cabinet, he unlocked the small door with the key from around his neck.

"This is all yours now, my friend. What has been my life is now your life — the farm, the snails, my books, this key . . . When you have read the last volume, you will understand my silent obsession." He paused to catch his breath, wheeze and sigh together, then add, ". . . perhaps you will continue where I left off." His voice was empty.

He wheeled himself slowly out of the library, looking once over his shoulder and waving, then into the living room where he sat in front of the open window. As Johannes stared calmly at his farm, I absorbed myself in the final volume, anxious to discover the mystery of S. Johannes and his marvelous snails. So intent was I with this new information that I did not hear the old man wheel himself to the barn.

With each page I became increasingly mesmerized by his final revelations. There was indeed a language common to humankind and snails! Johannes accidentally uncovered this hidden vocabulary years ago, when he could walk, watching three snails suck their way across the sidewalk in front of the living room window, inching along and leaving behind them a faint trail of mucus. As he states in his journal, he was merely amusing himself with their comical race when the moon came from behind the clouds.

The moon suddenly appeared overhead, reflecting in the trails, and revealing certain repeated figures left behind them, like a primitive alphabet scrawled by a child . . .

(cf. *The Book of Snails, Volume XV*)

It was this primitive script, and his intense desire to unlock the lingual barrier between himself and his friends, that consumed the remaining years of his life. Excited and eagerly awaiting some conclusive evidence, I skimmed the next few sections until I arrived at the final chapter: Johannes' version of the Snail Alphabet, containing nine major characters and ten variations of each, and including as an Addendum some experimental translations by Johannes.

I was so happy with this breakthrough that I raised my eyes from the volume to congratulate the old man, and to pose some important questions, but he was nowhere to be found. There were pressing questions that had to be asked, and I ran to find the only man with answers. But when I finally found him in the barn among his friends, he was already dead.

There was no Death Scream from S. Johannes, only the silent sigh of an old man's last breath, but the snails knew he was gone. Their eerie shuffling, once a constant sound, had stopped. Each of the more than 2000 snails had retreated to their shells, as if to mourn.

IT WAS nearly a week before I returned to the library and the final volume. Johannes' death had saddened me more than I anticipated, and this, coupled with my responsibilities as legal heir to his small and wondrous estate, prevented me from turning my attention to my newly-found fantasy. Only after the old man was buried and the estate secure did I return to my studies. In the hurried return to *The Book of Snails* I overlooked my duties as their keeper, and spent two days helping them recover from an attack of black beetles that destroyed over three hundred of Johannes' friends. Lost in the invasion were many unique specimens, among them the entire family of Moon Snails.

Untouched was my favorite, the African Desert Snail, now three feet long, and which was so comfortable in my presence that it often followed me about the grounds and kept me company in the library. His muse-like loyalty gave me even greater incentive to learn this mystery language so that I might be able to communicate with him, finally, after so many seasons of silent companionship. The obsession that kept old Johannes awake for days without sleep in the library was slowly possessing me, working day and night on my mission. No longer was I the wandering oddjobber.

The weeks passed quickly for me, absorbed in my studies and my daily duties of caring for the snails. After numerous readings of the final volume, I began to slowly understand the language and script of the creatures, anxious for the time when our bridge would be complete . . .

—Selection from *The Book of Snails*

ON THE EVIDENCE OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SNAILS and ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF COMMUNICATION WITH SNAILS—

During my casual sunrise observations of the African Desert Snail, and of the small colony of Moon Snails, I became aware of certain unspoken dialogues between the inhabitants of my farm. Scientists for some time have recognized the ability of certain varieties of snail to track their mates over great distances by trailing the mucus. It is my opinion that other means of communication between snails is possible, based upon my observations of the African as it seemed to convey a message to the smaller Moons by means of a rapid flagellation of its antennae. The smaller ones repeated the maneuver one at a time until a

cluster of 30-40 snails had gathered together, as if they were having a meeting.

My first reactions to this were purely speculative; I have always assumed that snails could communicate with each other but I had never witnessed an actual group dialogue. For the next four days I observed many of the inhabitants performing this ritual gathering, which according to my earlier notes were separate from their normal sexual/biological cycles (See Volume III, Section 2a). It was during this observation period that I first became aware of an even greater manifestation of their communicative abilities, a much broader application of what modern science has only briefly ascertained.

It was during the second night of the full moon in late August, as I was observing the Moon Snails perform their lunar reproduction process, that I accidentally discovered the existence of definite snail language forms. From behind the clouds, the moon suddenly appeared overhead, reflecting in the trails, and revealing certain repeated figures, like a primitive alphabet scrawled by a child.

Since that time, I have made numerous and detailed studies of this unusual circumstance of consistent cursive shapes left behind the snails as they inch along the ground. These shapes, in long flowing circular images, clearly prove the existence of a hidden language which, once deciphered, could provide a bridge between man and snail. It is the description of the characters and analysis of the basic structure of their language which has become the focal point of my investigations, and the central element around which my entire life study of the inhabitants of this farm revolves.

(cf. The Book of Snails, Vol. XV)

THE DAY soon came when it was necessary for me to attempt what Johannes had worked his whole life to accomplish — an actual reading of a trail. Because of my growing friendship with the African Desert Snail and his relaxed attitude in my company, I chose to follow him one morning after his feeding and transcribe the designs of his trail into my notebook. He seemed to instinctively understand my new concerns, and moved a little faster than usual, as if to convey a specific message. And I was amazed at the results of the first experiment. The first communication, though somewhat hampered by my amateurish translation, acknowledged this new bridge between our worlds. From what I transcribed of his trail before it evaporated were these simple words:

WE WELCOME WALKING FRIEND TALK TO YOU GREAT JOY

I was elated with this progress, disturbed only by my inability to communicate in return. This one-sided method of communication, which at first seemed a real break-through, only multiplied my increasing curiosity. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but in lieu of answers I had to be satisfied with the reading of random jottings. From this complicated and contradictory barrage of new information, I began to see from the snail's perspective, a large and wonderful life filled with great terror and subtle emotion.

Each morning, during my feeding and maintenance period, I would glance

across the path inside the barn, no longer necessary since the demise of GREAT FATHER IN ROLLING MACHINE but which was nonetheless maintained by the snails in his memory. There were stories of invasion, chronicles of various families, and numerous myths and legend peculiar to each variety of snail. One legend, however, stood above all the rest, appearing in many of the trails, a legend which revolved around the recurring image of a Great White One. At first, I thought my translation of the phrase was at fault, but the African Desert Snail, now a constant companion, provided an undeniably clear description of this mythical being. It was during the first cold days of October, when many of the common snails were in a sleeping phase. I was in the vegetable fields harvesting a fall crop of sassafras for feed when I heard the unmistakable shuffling of the African's large foot behind me. There, on the hard-packed earth, was a version of the Great Snail legend in unusual detail:

**ANCESTORS TALK OF GREAT WHITE ONE — MORE BIG
THAN FATHER IN ROLLING MACHINE — GREAT WHITE
ONE BEGINS AND ENDS TIME — WITHIN HIM IS THE
HISTORY OF OUR UNIVERSE — TURNS UPON ITSELF ...**

I was mystified, almost hypnotized, by the image of a Great Snail. The possibility of the existence of a snail larger than man was unheard of in modern science, never recorded in any western literature, and yet a clear metaphor in the snail world. From each of their many conversations, I gathered the following information of this legendary spirit.

Throughout all of history, snails have known of the Great White One, in many instances referred to as the Beginning and Ending of time, occasionally in a deistic manner. From my point of view, it was not necessarily a religious image but rather a part of snail folklore carried through the ages, accumulating greatness with each successive generation. Its present whereabouts were unknown, at least to the residents of the farm, many of whom had been born on the premises. I was convinced that the Great White One was more than theological fantasy and returned to *The Book of Snails* for supplemental search.

—Selection from *The Book of Snails*

ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF THEOLOGICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATION AMONG CERTAIN VARIETIES OF SNAIL ...

Among the many varieties of snails, there are certain species which, beyond normal distinctions of coloring and habitat, maintain various sociological functions within their society which distinguish them from other varieties. These special functions, apart from regular adaptation and chance mutation, are related to the internal societal framework among snails, a sub-structure of specific characteristics which suggests specialization of function within snail communities.

CASE IN POINT: *The Double Shell Snail*, native to certain remote jungles in Southeast Asia, among its local families, which digests the remains of deceased snails. This digestion is unrelated to the Double Shell Snail dietary/biological needs, occurring entirely within the secondary shell. Specifically, this function is performed ritualistically, as if according to an inner philosophical

formula symbolizing the Cycle of Lives. According to my observations in Section 1 of this Volume, the Resurrection Principle is an important facet of their overall civilization, and suggests a hidden code of beliefs handed down from generation to generation, a form of Oral Law which has its origin sometime in the early history of snail existence.

(cf. *The Book of Snails*, Vol. V)

I was fascinated (as any scientist would be) with the possibility of an inner system of centuries-old beliefs to which all snails subscribe, but all of my efforts to combine Johannes' research with my own investigations of a Great White One remained at a standstill. I read and reread the sections dealing with snail history, but found no evidence among the old master's notes to support my belief that the Great White Snail actually existed, still exists, or that its shell can still be found. Again, my African companion was of some help. Though his memory of the early days in Africa was sketchy, before the EVIL ONES TAKE ME FROM HOME, one piece of information in his random messages seemed to be important:

GREAT WHITE ONE ENDURES BUT MOVES NOT — HE IS ONE WITH MOUNTAINS AND SILVER WATER — HE IS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE — HIS SHELL IS SHAPE OF UNIVERSE . . .

By the time I had translated the message, I was completely obsessed with the image of the Great White Snail, and felt that my years of living in service of S. Johannes and his friends should only culminate in my discovery of such a being, if in fact it did exist. The hapless youth who once bounced from bed to bed and job to job was now consumed with passion for work, replacing his lack of ambition with a goal. But that goal was unreachable. Without the ability to ask questions of my comrades, and therefore restrained from gathering any useful information except by chance, I was left with the disturbing possibility of never learning more about the Great Snail. I knew little of this legendary being other than the relative size of its shell and that it may be located between mountains and rushing water (if rushing water can be described as SILVER from the snail's point of view). Certainly I needed more to go on than that. And even if I were to determine a possible site of such a snail, how could I leave the farm without abandoning Johannes' livestock, how could the resident snails live without me?

It was during one of my reveries on this very subject, depressed and feeling at the dead end of my street, that one of the smallest snails in the farm unknowingly gave me a clue. Watching one of the pill-sized American Sand Snails as it traversed the porch, I noticed his trail. Translated roughly, the little fellow's statement was: **THERE IS WISDOM IN FLUID**. Later that evening I was reminded of something I read in my first days on the farm, a selection in the first volume which described certain hallucinogenic effects from the consumption of snail mucus when crystallized.

—Selection from *The Book of Snails*

CASE IN POINT: *The Spotted Eye Snail, Bluetail Snail and Black Striped Tree Snail of the western hemisphere: The mucus of these snails, when extracted, aged, then crystallized under heat and pressure, produces a fine white powder which, when ingested, causes certain hallucinogenic effects, differing widely de-*

pending upon amount consumed. These audio, visual and sensory distortions (described in detail in the following chapter of this volume) produce an overall change in the human perception of his/her own environment in four basic categories: Time/Space Distortion in which certain phenomena accelerate while others slow; Cause-Effect Analysis in which relationships between actions and external data become disconnected in the normal sense; Intellect-Instinct Fluctuation in which certain rational processes become autonomic while other instinctual reactions, such as the sense of survival and notions of Selfhood, become less immediate; and Communal Space Perception in which the pain/pleasure of another being is fully experienced by another unrelated party.

(cf. Book of Snails, Vol. III)

Following Johannes' explicit directions, I obtained a modest quantity of this fluid secreted by these snails and prepared the powder as he had written. Once the mixture had been prepared, I made one final round through the estate, feeding the snails and checking the barn for cracks, then returned to the library with the African. In front of my open notebook, in order that I might write down my general sensations, I ingested a moderate portion of the powder.

When nothing happened, I was afraid that I had been mistaken in its preparation, and returned to Volume III for further information. But before I had even opened the book, a great change came over me, so quickly that I fell back into my chair quite startled. The room was hazy, and my peripheral vision became blurred — only a small part of my vision, the sights directly in front of me, remained unobscured. Sounds were concurrently magnified, so greatly that the African Desert Snail's shuffling frightened me, sounding as if a tidal wave was crashing upon the cottage. Colors and linear distinctions were lost in the blur, but through the entire disorienting episode, everything seemed quite pleasant. My physical discomfort was counter-balanced by a welling of euphoria within me, and I felt on the verge of a laugh.

How much time elapsed between my collapse into the chair and my first "vision" was unclear. It seemed like days. But when I finally turned my head with a smile for the African, he was on his way out the door, towards the sidewalk where he often left messages for me to decipher. Again, he seemed to understand my needs and moved quickly to fulfill them. The strange drug had impaired my bodily movement and it took forever to get out of the chair and follow my companion — in fact, I was moving at exactly his pace! The realization of this movement dysfunction intrigued me, and I thought perhaps this was the reason for the slowness of snails — they lived in a constantly drugged state, unable to see and always about to laugh.

When I finally arrived at the sidewalk, chuckling to myself and notebook in hand, the African was already drafting the message across the cement. Then came another and most fascinating manifestation of the snail drug: I could read and understand their language fluently, comprehending for the first time nuances that had previously escaped my attention. His message conveyed an unusual state of alarm about my investigations into the Great White One, and a clue to its actual location which I hadn't been able to translate.

**BEWARE WALKING FRIEND — GREAT WHITE ONE HOLDS
DANGER FOR MEN WHO SEEK ITS WISDOM — MANY
WALKING BEINGS HAVE ENTERED THE SHELL AND NOT
TO RETURN — WAIT FOR DAY WHEN SUN GROWS DARK**

UPON POINTED BUILDINGS — SHELL TURNS UPON ITSELF — BEWARE.

It seemed an eternity for him to complete his message and I barely had time to transcribe it before the effects of the powder had lessened and I fell into a deep sleep. My dreams about the Great White One were terrible and frightening, full of unknown things. When I finally awoke sweating and nervous, it was noon the next day — I had missed two feedings!

As I ran across the porch I noticed that the door to the barn was slightly ajar, and when I arrived at the threshold, I discovered a frightening and saddening sight. Sometime during the night while I slept with my nightmares, an army of red ants had invaded the sanctuary and destroyed nearly the entire snail population. The barn was littered with empty shells and covered with the stains of devoured snails. Very few of the ground floor snails had survived, with the exception of the large African and some Rock Snails (only a handful of these eventually returned to their snail shape, some were traumatized that they will remain rocks for the rest of their lives.) The scene of destruction and death had a very grave effect upon me, like a heavy wet blanket around my shoulders, and I stood motionless in the barn, sobbing.

How could I have overlooked such an important duty as the shutting of the barn door? My negligence was the cause, I was entirely responsible for the massacre. Finally I returned to the cottage, dejected and feeling very alone. S. Johannes' lifework had been destroyed in one night by an army of ants, and I was to blame.

They were my friends, and now they were dead.

MANY DAYS passed before I regained my composure. Cleaning the barn, I set the remaining residents free in the nearby woods where they could fend for themselves nicely, collecting the empty shells for keepsakes, and for future use as the key ingredient in certain cures. The farm itself was an empty shell — absent was the ever-present shuffling of two thousand snail feet — a noise that I had grown accustomed to, so much so that the silence was a greater burden to me, a reminder of what once was and is no longer.

Only the African Desert Snail remained, loyal despite his obvious grief, and we went about the task of closing the farm and preparing for the journey. Since the Red Attack, he had retreated to his large shell, now the size of a baby carriage. The African seemed to understand my dismantling of the farm and left me to work while he meditated. During these final weeks at the snail farm I had gathered all my notes concerning the legend of the Great White Snail, including rough translations of nearly one hundred snail messages which referred to the Great White One even indirectly. Among these was a passing reference to its actual location, left in the trail of an unknowing Brazilian River Snail as he chronicled the history of his family:

GREAT WHITE ONE BEGINS AND ENDS TIME WHERE
ROCK HOUSE WITH POINT IN SKY MEETS SILVER WATER
— HE WILL RETURN.

It was only after considerable research into various Indian legends and ancient architectural ruins that I came upon a curious coincidence which became a central clue in my search. From my collected translations of snail trails I had concluded that the mythic Great White One, spoken of with reverence in many snail messages, was located near an ancient human ruin which had been the sight of human sacrifice at some point in history, probably a pyramid. This led me to my studies of Mayan and Aztec folklore which in turn

led me to an important discovery: in certain pre-Mayan legends, an image of a large snail appears. Assumed to be pagan imagery/fantasy by contemporary academicians, the coincidence of such an image in both human and snail folklore supported my contention that such a being existed in some form, or still exists perhaps, and that its labyrinthine shell could still be found.

With this new evidence of a Great Snail in Mayan legends, only one matter remained to be resolved before my journey, the future of my African friend. Involved in the preparations for my trip and the organization of my luggage, I hadn't noticed his absence until the day of my departure when I searched the grounds for him, to bid a fond farewell with hopes that he would understand my motives for leaving. I searched for hours before I thought to check the sidewalk in front of the cottage for a message from him. Partially evaporated by the afternoon heat, were his last words:

GOODBYE TO WALKING FRIEND — BEWARE OF THE
GREAT WHITE ONE — HE IS IN AND OUT — DO NOT ... (the
rest was lost.)

Like old dogs who sense their impending death and run away to protect their masters, my African friend knew my plans as he always seemed to know, and disappeared into the woods to avoid my actual departure. I was sad to be leaving him behind but somehow relieved. Perhaps I would return one day with news of my success.

With my knapsack of belongings, my notes, and fifteen volumes of *The Book of Snails* I left the farm of S. Johannes and began my search for the largest snail in the world. No longer the ambitionless hitchhiker floating listlessly through life, but rather an expert in the field of Pulmonata Gastropoda, driven by an inner obsession that carried me from the comfort of California to the jungles of South America, where the nameless backward villages along the Amazon tributaries have in their vocabularies no words for 'Civilization.'

Months passed this way, a veritable chain of futile investigations into numerous tribal legends. Village after village met my questions with ignorance and contempt. These natives had no common ground with white-skinned scientists, and their disdain for my pursuits was expressed each day as I traveled, from cave to cave, from beach to beach, unable to explain my interest in snails, or my ability to translate their glistening trails into English. Whenever I thought about my predicament — understanding the language of snails but not that of my nearest human counterparts — I would laugh to myself, then sigh. Laugh and sigh.

Only the snails themselves aided my efforts. After nearly three weeks of beachcombing for clues without results, though not without some fascinating messages found in the sand, messages that I would otherwise have spent hours translating were it not for my primary mission, I came upon a certain specie of Amazon Swamp Snail with black antennae whose trail mentioned the Great Snail almost religiously.

OH GREAT WHITE ONE — BEGINNING AND ENDING —
INFINITE SPIRAL — SYMBOL OF OUR UNIVERSE!

The remaining portion of the supplication had evaporated in the intense jungle heat before I could jot the symbols in my notebook. But the reappearance of the image encouraged me to set camp near the village and search for some large rock buildings with points in the sky near silver water. That night as I waited for sleep in my torn but still warm sleeping bag, thinking of my next step in the search, I wondered to myself why humans speak in different tongues while the cursive language of snails was universal...

At sunrise I broke camp, eager to search for those legendary rock buildings

with points in the sky. Finding Mayan ruins in South America is not difficult — most have been clearly mapped for the thousands of tourists that come to take pictures each year, and any young native will gladly guide you to and through them for a modest fee. I found such an enterprising youth on the outskirts of the village and explained to him in my bastardized version of high school Spanish that I was interested in some ancient ruins near mountains and rushing water. At first he didn't understand, but with the aid of a mutual translator (his grandmother) and an additional five Americano dollars, he promised to show me some large pyramids near Mount Oahacu, down which flowed a stream. He further promised that it was only two days away which was corroborated by his grandmother although I think she would have corroborated anything for ten Americano dollars.

We camped at sunset on the edge of the jungle, and I fell fast asleep, exhausted from the heat and the climbing and the weight of my machete. When I awoke, the boy was gone, as were most of my provisions, and my wallet containing far more than the ten dollars agreed upon. All that was left was my knapsack which held *The Book of Snails* and my trusty flashlight. Utterly lost, I remained awake for the rest of the night in mortal fear of the jungle noise, normal sounds to any experienced jungle traveler, but sources of dark concern to me.

At daybreak, after a series of waking nightmares, I gathered what few belongings the young hustler-turned-thief left me, intent on continuing to Mount Oahacu by myself without considering the possibility that the boy's grandmother lied about the mountain and the ruins. By noon I was inextricably lost in a part of the jungle that didn't seem to have been traveled by anything human in years — the only road was so over-grown with vegetation that it was easier to hack my way through the bush. All I wanted to do was find another village and get my directions straight, but no such village was in sight.

In desperation, I began to look for snails, my old friends, who might be able to tell me where other walking beings could be found. At this point I was less interested in the Great White One than in mere survival, but the local jungle snails, some Tigerstripes and an occasional Redeye Snail, gave no clues to humans, only to other snails and about various legions of beetles, snakes and the dreaded army ants in the vicinity. On the verge of total fear of being lost forever in the jungles of Brazil, the idea of climbing a tree for a better vantage point occurred to me and I quickly scampered up the nearest palm tree to view the scene: from my point of view, I saw no villages or wisps of smoke to indicate campsites, but did locate the shores of a river tributary that, if followed, would surely lead to humanity . . .

Through the underbrush and around various semi-friendly animals, I eventually arrived at the banks of a river with an unusually strong current (so strong that it knocked me over when I stood in it to wash my face . . .) and calmed myself somewhat with the logical assertion that tomorrow I could build a raft and glide to safety. With the small comfort of this rational conclusion, I resigned myself to building a campfire and spending another night among the eerie sounds of the jungle at night (it was already dusk), I searched the river's edge for driftwood. As my flashlight was growing dim and with the replacement batteries among the provisions stolen by that cursed tourguide-bastard, the old jungle fears began to creep up on me again. It was getting dark, my flashlight was on the verge of complete collapse, and I had only enough driftwood for a short-lived fire — this was enough to set my imagination in motion. Each sound was magnified a hundred-fold, every bird cry seemed to echo forever. Surrounded by the terrible monsters of my imagination that seemed to be making these

sounds, my hands frantically searched my pockets for matches (they were wet, of course, from my face-washing splash earlier). Instead, I discovered in one of my zippered pockets a small cellophane package containing the crystallized powder that I had prepared for my meeting with the Great White Snail.

I don't know what moved me to ingest the powder at that moment — logically it was the wrong thing to do — I was already on the verge of total panic in an unknown environment, and hallucinations would certainly be of no aid. Perhaps it was the desire to substitute a euphoric false reality for the frightening one that confronted me, perhaps it was fate. For whatever reasons, I consumed the entire amount and sat back, in front of my poor excuse for a fire, waiting for the well-known effects of the secret drug. If only old Johannes could see me now, I said to myself.

How long I sat in that position, I don't know. I remember being fascinated with the non-real sounds that emanated from the dark hulk of a jungle that loomed in front of me, and with the fluttering images of the fire as it reflected on the surface of the stream. An hour or two passed comfortably as I giggled at the first-round of semi-hallucinatory visions: I recall watching a large riversnake poke its head curiously through the water, staring at me and waving with its pink forked tongue . . . I remember a bird with black and orange wings flying very close, swooping at my head and then away . . . I remember the fire dying and thinking of more driftwood, and I remember laughing at my complete lethargy in the midst of this madness . . .

. . . when I heard a sound that brought me quickly back to this world (or so I thought) — it was a short, high-pitched squeak repeated at intervals from somewhere in the distant shadows. The sound itself was nonetheless extraordinary than the other noises of the jungle symphony pounding in my head, with one very important exception: I recognized this one. It was the unmistakable sound of a dying snail, the Death Scream noted in Johannes' notebooks emitted by a snail when it is stepped on, or attacked by a beetle, or simply hungry. What intrigued me about the sound was how loud it must have been to reach my ears from such a distance. I don't remember leaving the campsite but soon I was on my way to the source of the only familiar sound in the area, somewhere ahead in the looming jungle shadows.

Beyond the trees, across the small clearing, to the foot of some hills where I suddenly came upon some caves, and one cave in particular that was large enough for a man to enter standing upright. With my ever-dimming flashlight (now more a source of comfort than illumination) I entered the cave instinctively, stumbling against the clammy walls due to my very drugged state, laughing as I worked my way along the tunnel which seemed very long and slightly spiraling upward. Laugh and sigh, laugh and sigh.

After fifty or sixty steps into the cavern or cave or tunnel, I sat for a moment to rest and noticed the strange mixture of emotions within me. Part of me was terrified of my situation, wandering almost-blind in an unknown cave in an unknown region of an unknown land, half out of my senses with exhaustion and hallucination. Another part of me seemed oddly content, even amused, though I didn't know why. It didn't matter to me that the cave may not have been real but only a vision brought about by the drug, it didn't matter that I couldn't trust my judgement. Laughing, I staggered on.

The cave seemed to go on and on, slightly circling inward and upward like a great gyre, towards a summit that my imagination pictured to be civilization and safety, but which I knew, with what little reason was left, would only be the inner-most part of this insane cave. As I stumbled on, I became aware of various objects scattered on the floor: farm tools, pottery shards, an occasional skull, my lost knapsack and wallet, a fountain pen with ink still in its chamber, some

empty tuna fish cans. I was amused at the variety of hallucinations, but quite startled when I found among these imaginary objects a larger metal shape — in the dim light of my no-longer-trusty flashlight it seemed to be the old man's wheelchair. I knew it was just another hallucination, but I sat in it anyway. Resting in Johannes' Rolling Machine, I was immersed in the madness of that crazy white powder and would have enjoyed the hallucination completely were it not for the growing fear inside me, like the dull ache of an old injury or some repressed childhood memory fighting its way back to consciousness . . .

I don't know how long I wandered in the cave before I realized that it wasn't a cave. Of course, there were no bats or stalagmites or alternate tunnels that characterize caves — only one spiraling tunnel which seemed to turn in upon itself. Then as my last ounce of logic slipped away and my flashlight went dark, I approached the summit of the cave that wasn't a cave, the highest and innermost point of the coil. I felt the roof with my hands, the inside of what from the outside must have looked like a point . . . when I suddenly realized (greatest fears actualizing) that I was inside the Great Shell, and the fright inside grew as I heard sounds in the distance, human voices (could that be possible?) and the subtle shuffling of a snail's foot, the unmistakeable sound of a large snail on the move.

Paralyzed by fear and inebriation, I was trapped by the very animal I was looking for, hunter and hunted with roles reversed, trapped in the innermost parts of a large snail shell by the approach of its owner returning home. I could hear the shuffling of the Great White Snail's foot sucking its way into the shell along the corridors where I had only moments before been sitting in the old man's Rolling Machine. I could feel the air thicken with the moist presence of the Great White One. I tried to scream but as in all nightmares in which one dreams of impending death, nothing came out of my open mouth. In my delirium, enveloped by total darkness and pressed against the walls by the oncoming mass of snail, I suddenly heard the echoes of voices, human voices. The reality of this hallucination amidst the oncoming madness was so distinct that I laughed out loud at my predicament, laughing in response to that voice which now seemed very close and almost recognizable, a voice from my past which in my drugged state I believed to be that of the waitress at Floradora's Bar and Grill . . .

"Excuse me, sir . . . Sir? . . . Are you asleep?"

The words were clear and precise, and I raised my head from my arms to find myself once again in Half Moon Bay, staring amazed and in utter disbelief at the wonderful smile of that slim and blond California woman who seemed very concerned with my condition.

"Are you all right, fella? You look like you've seen a ghost or something." She punctuated the remark with another comforting smile that was no mere hallucination.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It's another vision of that damned powder, I said to myself, another weird jungle hallucination, and I quickly glanced around for signs of the Great White Snail, or my broken flashlight, or my driftwood campfire — searching for some evidence of the reality of my dream, but finding instead only a few haggard truckers, my cup of now-cold coffee, and a newspaper in front of me, the one I found long ago on the cigarette machine, with a circle around an advertisement for part-time farm labor.

In that hazy waking-state, one foot in reality and one foot in the world of dreams, nothing is clear. The existence of both worlds seems equally impossible and as we wake, we are left with a discomforting sense of loss, and we clear our throats in an effort to regain the voice that we lost as we fell off the

dream-cliff or were overrun by the dream-truck or devoured by the dream-snail.

She poured a fresh cup of coffee and pointed to the red phone behind the bar. "Make it local and make it fast . . ." She winked, smiling that smile that I would never forget, and I realized that I hadn't yet called the owner of the farm. Slowly rising from my seat, still partially convinced that this was just another manifestation of that insane snaildrug, I tenderly dialed the phone number of a certain Mr. S. Johannes who lived in the nearby hills and who was in desperate need of someone to help him care for his small farm. His offer sounded quite attractive (and vaguely familiar) to someone such as myself, and I agreed to meet him later that afternoon to discuss the possibilities of my employ.

Returning to my seat in front of that speckled-formica countertop, I shook my head as I sipped the coffee. At long last, not too hot and not too cold, two degrees above lukewarm and finished in three gulps. The waitress returned with the stainless steel pot and shrugged when I explained that I had no money for a refill.

"On the house, fella. You look like you need another cup of black. I was real worried about you for a minute there, like you was dying, or something . . ." She poured herself a cup and sat down next to me. Still weak-kneed from my dream and unsure of what to say to an attractive waitress who had just saved me from the Great White Snail, I apologized for my behavior and explained that I was up for a job at a local farm, promising to return the favor and one day buy her a cup of coffee. That smile again, and another oddjobber's laugh and sigh.

When I arrived at Johannes' farm, I found his estate to be nothing more than a half-acre of crabgrass and dandelion, and the owner to be an aging recluse with poor eyesight, confined to a wheelchair that was strangely like the one in my Floradora dream. With that well-known but nonetheless heartstopping sense that I had asked this question before, I apprehensively inquired where his cows grazed, and he responded with a laugh that suggested what was about to occur.

"I have no cows," young man," he said, laughing and wheezing like my old friend. He motioned me to follow him as he wheeled himself down that long ramp, across that sidewalk, to the dilapidated barn behind his cottage. Before he opened the door with that unmistakable squeak, he asked me what I would have considered a strange question in other times.

"Would you mind removing your boots?" ●

S. A. Robbins

There's autobiography in all fiction, or so they say, and in-between the lines of my stories, even the story in your magazine, details of the real person can be found. If you don't see it, it isn't there, and not very important either, turns out. That I was raised in Danville, Illinois, educated in Oberlin, Ohio and now live in Oakland, California are insignificant trivia, but perhaps what I was doing the night I began this story will intrigue you; I was then employed as a nightwatchman (one of many occupations required of an aspiring writer) where I looked after several dozen children at the Center. Sometimes, when they couldn't sleep, I told them stories. One

rainy night, after stepping on a snail, and feeling very bad about it, I told the story of the Great White Snail to one of the kids awakened by the thunder. It became the first in a series of bedtime tales I later transcribed to paper and print. Since then, time passing, I've been a bartender, a poetry tutor, a martial arts instructor; whatever was required to support my insatiable writing habits. Presently I am working on a novel-length project for Doubleday and Company, tentatively entitled *Confessions of a Short Man*. Previous poetry and prose published in *Poetry Now*, *Aiki-News*, *Pocketpal* and "Having Been There," an anthology of stories pub. by Scribner's & Sons.

Some Thought & Advice for Our Planet's Second-Place Mountain

Oh, Godwin Austen, through my good atlas I have just
learned of your plight;
and my whole heart goes out to you, Godwin Austen:
who would be obscure Austen when he might have been
lord-high Everest?

WHAT makes these cruel choices, do you think?
But stick in there, Godwin Austen; 2nd is not ALL
that bad,

and I mean it. Don't go thinking of earthquakes,
tantrums, tremors, growth bumps for you, sink-ins for
him;

don't hate old Everest all that much, Godwin Austen;
it's not worth it. You're not the jealous type, are
you?

I HOPE not. Because if you start thinking of turning
the world over-upside-down just to get on top, Godwin Austen,
I'm not going to like you all that much. Anyway,
tell me first, and then I'll do all that I can, peace-
fully,

to help you somehow obtain that 778 and 1/12th feet
additional

that you still need to out inch old Everest and top
him where he stands.

In the meantime, stick up there, G.A. I'll still love
you,

the same way I love vice-presidents, Buzz Aldrin,
bridesmaids, 2nd sons,

bench warmers, silver medalists, queens for a day,
supernumeraries, runners-up, second fiddles,
and Alydar who chased swift Affirmed. — Come on! cheer
up, NOW!

2nd mountain's not so bad. REALLY. Think of *all* the
hills.

—David R. Bunch

Round and round she goes, and where she stops . . .

Wally Coins Pearl Harbor Parallax

WHEN THE last merry-go-round broke down, the twentieth century finally came to a close. The old wooden horse, its paint faded to the lightness of pale water color, fell through the crumbling floorboards. The steel post that held it had rusted through in two places.

The invention of the carousel was not attributed to any one man. Unlike the assembly line and gas combustion engine, credited to Henry Ford, the merry-go-round had no single patriarch.

Starboard Christopher, as he stood in the glass underbelly of his mammoth, dreamlike star craft *Lucifer II*, reminded himself that no one man had invented the carousel. He realized the assembly line had been a linear creation, a pole inserted into the century like a wooden cross. The gas combustion engine also, with its famous single patriarch, had a geometry of thrusts that were almost endless repetitions of straight lines.

But the merry-go-round was different. Destined to outlast its infernal playmates, its final day marked the end of two sets of thousandyears, or twenty sets of hundreds. It was different and also indifferent, spinning.

As Starboard Christopher monitored its demise, his emotions were titillated by the paradoxes involved. Its benches, decorated with cherubs suffering from various forms of rust, decay and termites, had long ago lost their seats. Really, there was no place at all to sit on the thing.

When the faded horse pitched on its side through the rotting boards, only a few wild children were trying to ride it. Luckily, no one was seriously hurt, and that was how Starboard Christopher thought it should be. He recorded the event as "T.S. Elliot's Whimper," and spun neuron discs to sell as hits in other galaxies. The song was cellular, and so it could take place in minds light years away from its Earth home.

If anything could be said to be comical about the last merry-go-round's death throes, it was the way its engine died. The machine which made the merry-go-round go round, lovingly called the coffee grinder by its mechanics, made noises during its last week like a one-armed voodoo man trying to beat syncopation on a congo drum. The engine had been repaired and re-assembled from bits of old, armored tank engines. Those sturdy survivors of that massive fraud known as the second global conflict slipped easily into place in the heart of the carousel.

Starboard Christopher reproduced the machine parts now on its computer panel. Three views were placed side by side to show the three dimensions. They were beautiful things, like antique tractors, and revealed in primitive fashion the inner geometries of those dwelling on the third planet from the sun.



Illustrated by Dan Day

All of these gears, like sub-atomic particles, microverse in macroverse, (showed the circular geometry of the carrousel as a whole. That is why it had been selected, over the gas combustion engine and the assembly line, to finish in a dead heat with the close of the twentieth century.

Starboard Christopher took his eyes from the computer screen. His dark, handsome features were accented by his deep blue spacesuit. He peered down through the glass floor under his feet.

"Congratulations," he said to the blue-green sphere and its silver handmaiden swirling below him, "you have survived the twentieth century. It was no easy feat."

The carrousel itself, in a park in the heart of a coastal, metropolitan center, splintered on the hot pavement. But bordering the concrete was a patch of grass, and the shattered wooden parts, blown by a slight breeze, clustered toward the planet's soil.

Starboard Christopher followed his orders and monitored each splinter. He threw their images on his computer screen like yarrow stalks cast for a reading from the *I Ching*.

Then he noticed the wooden lion. From the inertia of the amusement park's spinning ride, the lion had tumbled off and rolled into the grass. By chance, it had uprighted itself. A masterpiece of wood-carving, it was one of the ride's most beautiful pieces.

A remarkable wit, Christopher juxtaposed the lion's image with that of the engine parts on the computer screen. This, he thought, was fitting — the lion and the remnants of World War II. What a fraud that had been, what a show, what unspeakable torture and carnage. And for what reason? That, Starboard Christopher would let others decide.

The remaining amusement rides in the park were of comparatively little importance, but interested Starboard just the same. He decided to explore some of them.

With one hand he held the *Lucifer II* in orbit. With the other hand he examined the Octopus. What it did, generally, was cause men, women and children to be sick.

It made their heads spin. This was amusing to Starboard Christopher.

But enough of that. He was under orders to return his contemplation to the merry-go-round, which had just ground to a broken halt not more than fifteen minutes ago. The plaster elephant remained standing, its trunk lifted though half gone, broken off in two unfortunate decades. What remained of the giraffe was too sad to contemplate. But all had survived the automobile, which was now thoroughly extinct.

Here was the test, the critical encounter, a final real judgement. The green sea serpent, its glass eyes ablaze in the sun, dangled from a support by the leather strap on its neck . . .

The Tunnel of Love was still wet in its darkness. It was in fact, the tunnel's wetness that interested Starboard Chris. Little else about any tunnel was worthwhile for him to explore. From the space ship, tunnels on Earth were very hard to detect at all.

The pinball machines were a different matter. The metal balls clicked into the slots provided by the home planet's geometry. They demonstrated the law his beloved world had used to traverse galaxies. That simple quotient, developed it was said by one man in his time, provided Chris with a way to understand the amusement park. The first law: "All that is a sphere spins round."

The second law from his world, which grew into the third, the Great Universal, he refused to say aloud or even think. It was enough to know what it

was.

On the computer screen he examined one page of a date calender. One day printed by offset press on a small, square of paper, it had probably sat on someone's desk with other dates. But this page read, "December 7, 1941."

"A day that shall live in infamy," spoke certain statesmen.

"December 7, 1941," remembered Starboard Christopher, "there had been a tire sale at Sears and Roebuck. The gas combustion engine blossomed into black rubber tires, spinning almost forever."

Chris had not been on Earth many times, but that date was one of the few. He had disguised himself well enough. It worked the same way disguising *LUCIFER II* worked. He found himself proceeding toward the northern pole of Earth on a street labelled 52nd. The town was not important, but the tire sale was. He had to reach Sears and Roebuck soon. The tires he had designed for his vehicle were smooth as glass and not doing too well.

The Sears and Roebuck garage man was astounded by the tires when he took them off.

"I've never seen anything like these before, smooth as a whistle," he said. "What are they, home made or something?"

To avoid more questions, Starboard said, "No, they're just worn, that's all."

"Pretty worn, buddy," replied the garage man.

For his cover, Chris had picked a meek, bow tied man in a tweed suit. Maintaining the image was taking more energy and concentration than he had figured. He didn't want to become involved in lengthy conversations that might distract him from projecting his screen.

After all, in some respects these people had more power than him within their own material universe. They had existed in it for their entire lives. He had only observed it for a small portion of his. Though it was true he had been observing it for thousands of their years, that was a small ratio of his entire life. Besides, observing and participating in it were entirely different.

He discovered that in a hurry when he was called upon to pay for the tires. He barely managed to produce a leather bulk that served as a reasonable facsimile for a wallet. The tender strips of paper inside it wavered and glowed with his efforts. Chris's psuedo-fingers were trembling. The garage man's cigarette fell from his mouth, which was as wide open with shock as his staring eyes.

The attempt at a twenty dollar bill glowed a little too much. Its figures and letters continually reshaped on a grid of dots. Starboard Christopher wished two things: 1) that he had practiced this trick more, and 2) that he was back on his ship objectively observing. The garage man was becoming very excited when at last the bill looked real and Chris put it in the man's hand.

This, Chris hoped, should finish the business.

Now he thought he could be on his way to the amusement park, the only reason he stepped foot on this planet after so many years of observing.

But the garage man had other ideas. He was looking at the bill very closely, turning it over in his hands and saying, "I don't know, I don't know..."

Chris did not like this situation, delayed in his first attempt at a transaction. The merry-go-round was waiting. It was December 7, 1941. And that fact, the actual date, came to his rescue.

The Sears and Roebuck man was distracted by the announcement on the radio. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, a day of infamy. It was all happening, and it made the garage man bolt toward the nearest radio wave receiver.

"Just a rather poor way to get on the road to nuclear fission," thought Chris, "but he has my money, so I should be at last free to leave."

He drove through town. By this time a great deal of excitement bubbled everywhere. It made him long for his starship and the silent grandeur of its unique confines. A siren was behind him. He had lost some of his concentration on a primary level and driven through a red light.

"There are just too many levels, too many things to think about under this blanket of gravity," he mumbled angrily, "damn Henry Ford, damn linear streets and damn assembly lines."

The image of his head wavered, throwing off a bolt of dark blue light.

"What the hell was that?" a uniformed official spoke to him. He had a pad of papers in his hand and was writing. "What the hell was that? What's going on anyway? First there's those Japs bombing us, and then the light. What was that?"

"What was what?" Chris was cautious.

"Didn't you see it? It was blue and shiny and I don't know. Christ, didn't you see it?"

The official was confused, and Chris was thankful for this. After all, now he had to produce identification and other documents concerning the vehicle he rode. This was no easy task, considering his own perplexity. All he really wanted to do was arrive at the merry-go-round by auto. Driving to it on four black tires was an important part of the plan.

The geometry of any situation always dictated his actions.

But try to tell that to a cop, who was waiting. At last Chris had the correct documents in front of him.

"This your current address?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you see the red light back there?"

"Sort of, but you know the situation and all. I had the radio on. I guess the thing just has me too excited."

"Yeah, it could sure do that. But maybe you should pull off the road a while until you calm down, you know?"

"Yes, you're right."

"Well, I'm going to have to write you a ticket . . ."

"Fine."

Starboard still had the ticket on the *Lucifer II*. Dated December 7, 1941, he kept it in his Material Possessions Room. It was unpaid, of course.

He had not minded getting the ticket, since after the officer gave it to him he could simply drive away. No penalty. But like everything else in the Material Possessions Room, he had kept it in the hope that owning things from the planet would help him understand Earth better.

When the final carrousel broke down, the twentieth century would come to a close — but in the middle of that century, when Christopher arrived at the amusement park, the ride was not moving. None were. It was cold and near winter.

Starboard was disappointed. He had wanted to ride the carrousel that afternoon. One saving grace; he still had Old Larry to meet.

Old Larry sat on a bench near the paralyzed merry-go-round and cracked peanuts. Some he ate, others he fed to the half-frozen pigeons. Chris recognized him immediately.

"Why isn't it running?" he asked Larry.

"Too cold," replied the gristled old man, scratching his shabby day's stubble. He pulled his battered raincoat closer to his shoulders to show how cold he was.

"I'm going to make it run anyway," said Chris.

"When?"

"Later on, hopefully tonight."

"That's good. It's getting near Christmas. It should run."

"It will run better when it gets the tank parts."

"It really might as well have them now," said Old Larry, "I mean as long as it runs at all, this close to Christmas and all."

"Christmas means a lot to you now, eh?"

"Well, why shouldn't it? You've seen the tracks on the time chart scans. It's one of the deepest tracks in time these people have, year after year, right after the planet's solstice."

"And it's not only during the current Christian craze either," Starboard reminded him. "The path has been worn in the time cycle for ages."

"I know that. Don't forget I've been hanging around this globe a long time."

"How long have we been stationed here, Larry?"

Chris sat beside him on the bench.

"As they count on Earth, three thousand, two hundred five years, five months, one week, six days, sixteen hours, seventeen minutes and thirty three seconds."

"And as the crow counts?"

"A little over sixty years," said Old Larry.

"Do you ever get tired of it, living right on the planet like you do?"

"A little, but it's my job. You're an Observer. I'm a Participant. It could be worse. Remember what Rigel was like?"

"Oh God, don't remind me."

But Larry continued anyway, "I think it was what, about two aeons we spent there. And what do they finally do? Just when they manage to stop themselves from blowing the shit out of each other with advanced weaponry, they go ahead and poison their own gene pool. A damn shame I call it."

"Enough about old loves. I was wondering what you thought about Those from home planet electing a carousel as Living Emblem here. It seems a little conservative to me."

"But it's perfect. The truth is, Christopher, I don't even consider it an election. This planet, this century, this world itself chose it, or rather produced it. And it bears out the law — everything spherical must spin around. That might be conservative, but the law was certainly never elected. It just grew."

"Or evolved through its own spinning."

"Exactly, like the merry-go-round, with its parts from the war, that midcentury madness."

"But what a fake," added Christopher.

"Yet it is the center of the century, and it kills."

"Yes, the center of the century. But men kill, not wars. And now we have to get the merry-go-round going round."

"Later tonight."

They left the park to have a fish sandwich with dessert at nearby Deborah's cafe. Old Larry explained apple pie with ice cream to Christopher, who enjoyed it with his coffee. The meeting of the pioneer sage, Johnny Appleseed, with the highly developed aesthetics of the ancient Chinese mandarins, who ate frozen sherbets made with snow hauled from the mountain tops, gave Chris a pleasant sensation. It inspired strength for his midnight task. It elevated him beyond Henry Ford and his labor pyramid, even as Starboard functioned under its sway.

The power source was no problem. In his auto, Chris had a small power pack which could drive the carousel. It was the night watchman, who Larry described as a "hard-lined, straight edged sort," that Starboard knew would be

a problem.

He and Old Larry climbed a fence, managing to bring their power pack with them.

Chris stopped only once, near a run down pinball machine, and asked Larry, "But why not one of these?"

"Don't be a damned idiot," said Larry, "that contains no major parts from the war. Now come on, we have work to do."

"I'm not so sure this will contain war parts," said Starboard, but followed Larry through the twilight.

NEAR THE amusement park, on 105th Street West, another argument was taking place. Johnnie Santerrio was telling his mother why he felt he had to enlist in the army. Dark complexioned Mrs. Santerrio, slightly portly, was not buying it.

"My friends . . ."argued young Johnnie.

"If they were your friends, they would be satisfied with the fact that you were alive," replied Mrs. Santerrio.

"But Dad . . ."

"Is too old to fight, so why should he worry already?"

"The country . . ."

"Will do just fine with you finishing school."

"The Army . . ."

"Is going to win. Hasn't it always?"

"Democracy . . ."

"Means a free choice. You don't *have* to fight."

"Patriotism . . ."

"Means love your country. So how can you do that when you're dead."

"My teacher in school . . ."

"Doesn't know what he's talking about."

"My best friend, Tony . . ."

"Will probably be dead this time next year," said Mrs. Santerrio, and broke down and wept.

She was, in a sense, a prophet. Johnnie Santerrio's best friend, Tony, was dead the following year. It happened in the Pacific, a place he had always wanted to see, the last place he actually saw. But just like Cassandra, Mrs. Santerrio's pleas were not heeded. Her son joined up and was out of City College before Christmas.

She felt that he would join, even as she told him not to.

In the back of her mind was a dread certainty, even as she listed her arguments against it, that her son would enter the struggle. They decided to take a walk together in the night air. This was their traditional way of ironing things out between them — a night walk and a long talk.

SNOW HAD begun to fall. Flakes kissed and melted on the wooden figures of animals as Larry and Christopher pulled their winter coverings off.

"This ride certainly does have a lot of magic," said Christopher, examining the sea serpent, "I really couldn't tell from the computer screen."

"You never can," said Larry, "that's why I'm a Participant."

"Well you certainly are becoming involved with the planet," said Christopher, "even to the point of playing one-upsmanship."

"Damn right."

"And picking up on their swearing."

"Hell, let's get this thing going."

"Then take the power pack out of its crate."

BRANDYWINE JONES hated intruders. He had hated them his entire life — when he lived with his uncle on an isolated farm in Maine, when he married and moved to the city where a burglar had injured his wife, and finally here at his job in the amusement park. Brandywine Jones thought everything would just be fine in the world, if only people would not intrude on others.

"Take those Japs for instance," Brandywine told the guard he was relieving. "They want to intrude into the Pacific. If they would only stay where they're supposed to, everything would be all right. But no, they are going to creep over into our territory. Well, we have to stop them infamous devils."

"Right, Brandywine. Well I'll see you, good night."

Brandywine hmphed and made himself a cup of coffee. He hated intruders worse than anything, claiming they were responsible for at least ninety percent of the world's problems. All of which made him perfect for his job, night watchman at the amusement park. He stirred in cream, checked to see if he had bullets in his pistol and stared out at the snow flurries.

JOHNNIE SANTERRIO and his mother walked up 105th Street West to the amusement park. It was the biggest attraction in the neighborhood and they headed that way automatically, without thinking. They both loved the snow and talked about how nice it was to see it falling again. They were staying away from the important subject for a while in order to enjoy themselves.

They heard the noise from the amusement park at the same time and looked at each other in bewilderment.

"The merry-go-round already?" said Mrs. Santerrio. "In winter?"

"Let's see," said Johnnie, and they picked up their pace in that direction.

When they saw the lights through the fence and heard the music, they knew it was running. They laughed and squeezed through a break in the fence Johnnie had known about since he was a little boy.

They saw it going around in the beauty of the falling snow and Mrs. Santerrio thought she was dreaming. A man in a tweed suit and an old bum seemed to be running it.

"Remember Mom, the first time you took me on it," Johnnie said.

"You didn't like it, you cried," she laughed.

"But then by the end of the ride I was begging you to take me again."

"You rode all day," she said softly.

Johnnie hugged her under one arm as they looked at the ride.

"If you have to go, if you really have to go," she said, her voice wavering, "please, please dear God, take care of yourself."

"I will, Mom. I always do."

The son and mother shared a warm moment in the glow of the carrousel lights. Falling snow gently covered them.

Starboard Christopher was busy taping the noise of the machine. Suddenly he noticed the two standing there.

"Hello folks," he said and beckoned, "care to go for a ride?"

"Come on, Mom," he hugged her, "Let's get on."

"Oh now, Johnnie," she laughed and pushed him, "don't be silly. We're too old for that sort of thing."

"Well, I'll ride it when I get back."

Brandywine Jones stood near the arcade and stared across the grounds. He was standing very still and had been so for the last five minutes. He was too shocked to move and couldn't believe his eyes.

The carrousel was lit and spinning around, its organ pumping out corny melodies. But how could it be? All power in the park was shut off for the winter.

Who was that man in the tweed coat riding the carrousel's dragon? And the old bum? Apparently he was running the thing.

"This," said Brandywine, putting his hand on his holstered gun, "this has got to stop."

"Hey you, you two! What are you doing there?"

Christopher saw Brandywine coming. The Santerrios had already left the park.

"Go to work," Starboard said to Old Larry, and pulled a few tiny boxes from his shabby pocket.

He blew bread crumbs and peanut shells off the boxes before plugging two into the power pack. He twisted a few dials and a beam shot toward the startled guard.

The beam passed Brandywine and two feet behind him shaped itself into a human form. It was a Japanese soldier carrying a rifle.

"Banzai!"

Brandywine Jones' hair on the back of his neck, on his head and in his armpits stood on end.

"Jesus Christ," he said, dropped his gun, tried to run but couldn't, picked up his gun and managed to fire a shot at the apparition. It passed right through.

"I have all the readings now," said Christopher, "recorded and time-logged for December 7. Let's leave."

"Damn right," said Larry.

They moved toward the exit as their power pack began disintegrating. It turned yellow, then white, then was a bundle of papery ash. The carrousel spun to a slow stop as its lights and noise faded. In a moment, it was as silent as the falling snow.

"Hey, you in the tweed coat," Brandywine was struggling to recover, "where are you going?"

"Don't worry," yelled back Christopher, "it's O.K. We have the readings. There's nothing to do now but wait and see what happens. Cover up those horses. They have a long way to go yet."

"Even if it is in circles," added Larry.

"What do you mean? Come back here! I want to know what's going on around here!. We got a name in Maine for characters like you. I want both of you to halt!"

Christopher was laughing until a bullet whistled over his head. He and Larry then ran as fast as they could. As they sprawled over the fence, a bullet bit off the tip of a fence post.

"Deadly old duffer," said Christopher.

"I'm afraid I shook him up a bit too much with that holog soldier."

"I'll be glad when I'm on my starship and out of this tweed suit."

They jumped into the car with its new Sears and Roebuck tires and drove off.

"This thing runs like a top," said Larry.

"That's because I designed it and not Henry Ford. By the way, where is Maine anyway?"

Brandywine's hand was shaking. He never really shot directly at anyone so quickly before. He wiped the cold sweat from his brow and decided not to report any of this. Two months later he returned to Maine.

The readings Christopher took that night were put into the starship's computer and the hopeful end of the century pinpointed to the exact hour. In its worried heart, the parade of wooden animals, mechanically driven, continued to create moments of glee and joy above the whining gears.

Johnnie Santerrio, unlike his best friend, Tony, did return from the conflagration. He seriously injured his foot in the early going and spent the war years at a desk job. He returned only once to the carousel, and his daughter rode the green, wooden dragon. Mrs. Santerrio thanked God and prayed her rosary, another round geometry in her quiet life.

Old Larry continued to roam, occasionally going back to see the carousel. As it spun, he counted the years and decades. With its demise he left and joined Christopher on *Lucifer II*.

"Will you miss the planet?" Starboard asked.

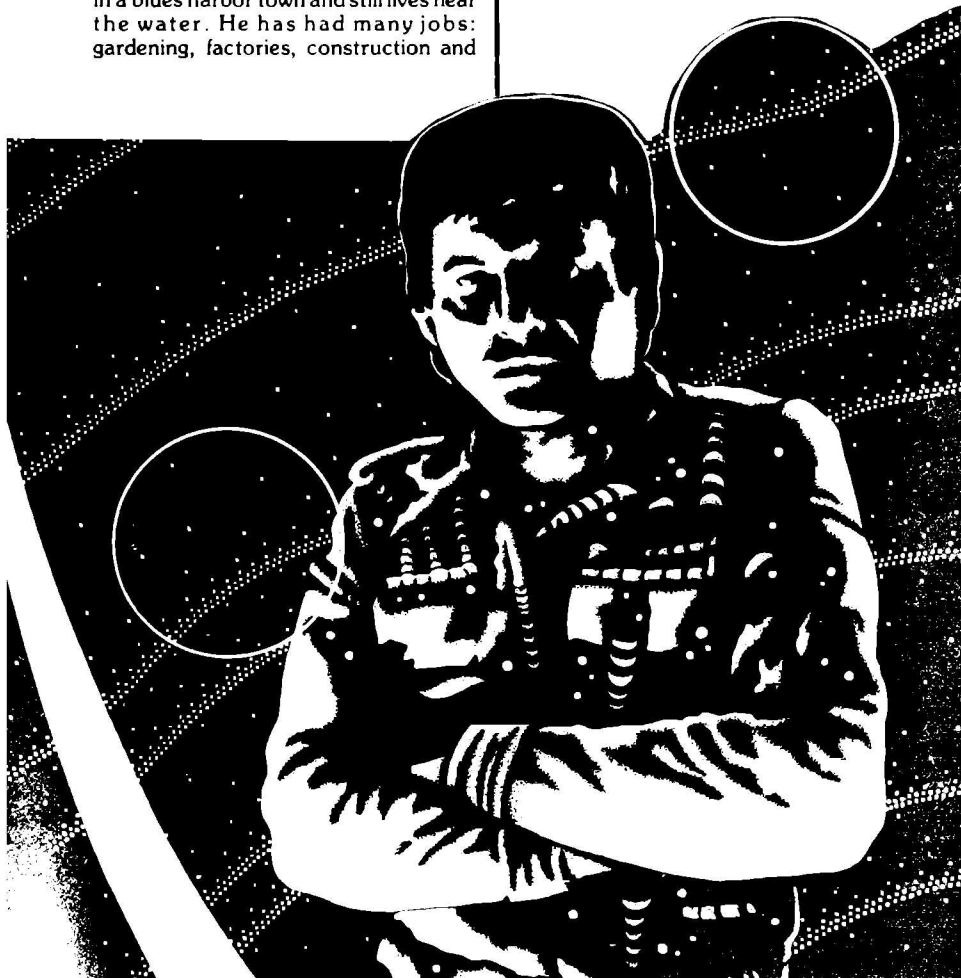
"Yes, I think I will."

They charted a course to the next critical world on their list and left behind blue-green Earth, secure after its survival of the holocaustic century that was finally over. ●

Wally Coins (Carl Waluconis)

Wally Coins began by hitch-hiking across the continent to San Francisco in the folk ages of their early 60's. He grew up in a blues harbor town and still lives near the water. He has had many jobs: gardening, factories, construction and

college instructor. Now he sells books and comics from his own store in the Pacific Northwest. Married with his first born in gestation. His first science fiction, novel, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, was published in May of 1980 by Manor Books.



AMAZING INTERVIEW

a conversation with Stanislaw Lem

by L. W. Michaelson

This is an interview-chat with Stanislaw Lem, Poland's major science fiction writer, who is also a university professor, scholar, physician (non-practicing), and philosopher, that occurred in Krakow, Dec. 28, 1979.

I'd better say at the outset, this interview had to filter through the mind and words of interpreter Pan (Mr.) Merek Czerski, as Lem speaks only Polish and German, and I was in a straitjacket of English and Spanish. I should confess, too, that to my mind Lem is not only the best writer of that genre in Poland, but perhaps the world, and furthermore, I feel his novel SOLARIS, is one of the top science fiction works of this century.

To be sure I'm biased in his favor, being a teacher of science fiction at Colorado State University where, for the past seven years, I've included in a required reading list any book of Lem's I could get my hands on. True, my students didn't care too much for SOLARIS; the long sections on the library research by cosmonaut Kelvin did drag for students who are used to slam-bang violence stories, complete with bug-eyed monsters.

And this last, the American taste for violence and swift adventure, is one of Lem's central peeves about U.S. science fiction in general. In earlier articles in critical SF journals, Lem's dislike has been well documented and will not be stressed here.

First of all, some explanation is in order about just how I happened to end up in Krakow, sitting at the feet of Lem:

A year ago I applied for an exchange scholarship at the University of Warsaw—an exchange program started by the University of Kansas, where James Gunn, author of many SF novels, is a professor.

Whether or not it was my friendship with Gunn or sheer luck that won me the chance to teach at Warsaw, and thus put me in the vicinity of Lem, I don't know. But I did mention in my preliminary application that I hoped to interview Lem, and that I thought he was the greatest since H.G. Wells.

Of course, my interview bid was an impertinence: I learned later through the Polish Interpress agency that Lem, often busy on another novel and doing part-time teaching in West Germany, seldom granted interviews to anyone; in fact, the only one he sanctioned last year was for a Japanese scholar who was translating many of his works into Japanese.

However, via the skillful intercessions of a charming staffer at the Polish Interpress agency at Warsaw, Elizebeta Waluskiewicz (Wall-you-ske-vitch), the meeting was arranged. (Elizebeta may have taken the tack that for the honor of Polish literary status he should not be so stingy with his interview time.)

Lem lives modestly (although he is reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Poland — his books sell over three million copies in Europe alone) in a row cottage, the kind you see in the industrial districts of London, on a very bleak, no-frills sort of street. Lem came down to the front electric gate to let us in — a gate designed to keep out unwelcome interviewers and devoted fans — and he ushered us into a rather small, but cozy study with the four walls lined with thousands of books — a good many of his own.

Lem is a bright, dark-eyed little man, about five feet six inches in height, with a comfortable middle-age pot. The pot, plus a merry twinkle in his eyes gives him a somewhat jolly gnome appearance, and yet the eyes can turn dark, brooding, and his demeanor is mostly restrained and serious — more fitting I would say for what he has lately become — one of the major satirists since Dean Swift.

I got the interview off to a bad start by expressing surprise and delight at his large library, and remarked that Thoreau had a large library of 600 books — all of his essay, *WALDEN*, that hadn't sold. Luckily, interpreter Czerski eased me over this gauchery by explaining that I was really aware that Lem's books sold very well indeed.

"Yes," Lem said then, "my books sell

over a million in Germany alone. But I don't want to earn any more money."

I gathered that more sales would only mean more tax payments, and that it was better to have a low economic profile in Poland. Lem's rather divine indifference to cold zlotys (the currency of Poland) was repeated in his answer to my next question:

ME: Would you like to earn some *American* dollars? I'm acting as a temporary agent, sans portfolio, for a magazine that likes to reprint fiction from all over the world?

LEM: No, really, I mean it. I don't want to earn any extra money.

To say the least, I was taken aback, for I, personally never met a writer (including myself) that would cold-shoulder a bid for hard cash.

ME: But . . . but . . . (I managed to say after catching my breath), this will require no effort on your part. They'll just reprint a chapter say, of your *CYBERIAD*, and mail you a check.

LEM: No, I really don't want to be bothered. I don't want to type any more letters. I'm happy here in my study, writing just what I want. I've given up my teaching in Germany, too.

ME: What did you teach in Germany?

LEM: I taught mostly philosophy — the philosophy of the future. (Saying this he got up and took down a book from his shelves.) I have used this as a text, *THE NEXT TWO-HUNDRED YEARS*. (I began to copy down the author's name) Don't bother. He's no good. Imagine, he says here on page 175 that oil prices will never climb above 14 dollars a barrel. The price is now (Dec. 28) thirty dollars and still climbing.

ME: Would you care to talk about politics? (I asked this hoping he would say something about life for a writer in a communist country.)

LEM: Well, your politics. I think your Carter is . . . ah . . . too nice to be a president (this was a few weeks before Carter's saber-rattling about Afghanistan and Iran). Your Nixon was a crook, but he was forceful . . . more of a leader.

ME: Poland is a very religious country. Large crowds attended Pope John II wherever he appeared here.

LEM: Perhaps it is an oversimplification that Poles are generally religious. I think many attend church to annoy the Russians.

ME: I've been reading your works, and I'm surprised, especially in *STAR DIARIES* at some of the pointed religious satire. But maybe this is understandable due to your early training in medicine.

LEM: Yes, my father was a doctor. We believed more in pills to cure people rather than prayer. To oversimplify, I was brought up with the scientific outlook.

ME: I was intrigued by the chapter in your recent book, *A PERFECT VACUUM*, the one about Robinson Crusoe inventing not a man Friday, but a girl, a virgin. It took me awhile to catch on that this was a sarcastic comment on the medieval view of Mary Magadalen. Do you think you'll be excommunicated for these opinions?

My interpreter, Pan Czerski, broke in here. "Many years ago, when Pope John II was just plain Karol Wojtyla, a humble priest teaching theology at Krakow's Jagielonian University, Lem and Karol spent many hours over coffee arguing about God."

ME: (Turning to Lem) I suppose Pope John won most of your discussions then. But now?

LEM: (Smiling) But now?

ME: But now you've broken into print with your ideas, and it seems you've had the last words. I hope you won't be excommunicated.

LEM: The Pope is a very kindly man. Broad-minded.

ME: Still, you'd better not send him your *PERFECT VACUUM*.

LEM: We're still good friends. We both deal in words and ideas. His influence is undoubtedly stronger. Besides, there are other chapters in the book. The nutty ex-Nazi soldier who recreates a medieval world in South America.

ME: I was quite frightened by your chapter, "Non Serviam," wherein an artificial universe is created in a laboratory and the inventor listens in on the "personoids" who inhabit this tiny planet, as they argue about God, or their creator.

LEM: Yes, and I point out that the lab technician listens with amusement as the tiny people make up religious myths very much like the ones we have made up.

ME: But what really gave me a chill was when the laboratory director complained about the cost of energy to keep this little world in existence, and he then threatened to cut off the project to save fuel.

LEM: Someday our sun may cut out, too, and then what will our philosophies amount to?

ME: All I can say to that is *Amen!* Or Hemingway had a good line in his "Killers" . . . "better not think about it."

At this point, Lem decreed a coffee break and in came Pani Lem, his wife, a slim attractive lady, who apparently was waiting in the wings, and she quickly brought us the dark, strong Polish coffee.

ME: One more thing (I said between swallows), I want to take issue with you on the chapter "Pericalypsis" in *PERFECT VACUUM*. Here, your non-existent author, Joachim Fersengled, complains about packaging. It is true, as he says, that: "Our mighty civilization strives for the production of commodities as impermanent as possible in packaging as permanent as possible."

LEM: Don't you agree with him?

ME: Indeed I do, up to a point. Your Fersengled complains that whole new industries have grown up to dispose of this packaging, and you must have had in mind America and her nerve gas bombs. We've had a lot of trouble getting rid of the gas, and also the containers.

LEM: Well, I was thinking of your tin cans and your hard-to-open pill boxes.

ME: But I will say, I haven't seen Poland much troubled by packaging.

LEM: Yes, our paper shortage.

ME: Yes, indeed! I had to carry a shopping bag whenever I stopped in a store and in it were dumped raw potatoes, carrots, and grapefruit. I longed for just one paper bag.

LEM: Well, I meant more mechanically advanced cultures. (At this point, I reached for my hat and coat.) No hurry. How about more coffee?

ME: (Taking one look at the dark, heavy brew) I'll pass. But I would like to bring up, once more, American science fiction. I know you've been asked this before, but please tell me again what it is you don't like about most U.S. SF.

LEM: Well, I've written down my ah . . . indignation . . . my thoughts in this magazine. (And so saying he brought down from his shelves a copy of *Science Fiction Studies* with his article: "Phillip Dick — a Visionary Among the Charlatans.") I think Dick, and your Ursula Le Guin, are about the only serious writers you have. I think American SF writers are too much interested in mass markets and mass sales, and they use violence and bug-eyed monsters to gain readers. Dick and a few others treat subjects that will give the form a higher stature in literature.

ME: It is pretty much true, what you say, but even so I was disappointed in your *TRAVELS OF PIRX*. I was hoping a monster would appear and satisfy my acquired taste for violence and excitement.

LEM: I tried to get reader anxiety through the possibility of imminent failure of equipment. The space ships are ill-made and the reader wonders if the astronaut will make it to Mars.

ME: But still, I felt let down somehow.

LEM: But why did you feel let down?

ME: In America, maybe because of our frontier hangover, we have been brought up on violence. Our newspapers deal in traffic accidents, gangster shootings,

blood and gore.

LEM: Yes, but Lord knows Poland is steeped in blood. The Nazis were ten times more violent than your Indians, your gangsters. So I prefer to deal in the excitement of new lands of new people on distant planets, not especially unfriendly people, but different.

ME: Especially different about religion. The mind boggles at your "Dogma of the Second Hand Creation" in *STAR DIARIES*.

LEM: When you have clones manufacturing other clones, God as the Creator seems to get lost in the shuffle.

ME: Getting back to violence and bug-eyed monsters, your own *SOLARIS* did have a bug-eye of sorts — an angry ocean devoted to influencing, in a mean, sneaky sort of way, the cosmonauts to depart.

LEM: *Mea culpa*. I'm guilty sometimes. Your Ray Bradbury does have a story about an unfriendly planet where it rains all the time — which is a not-so-gentle hint for the explorers to depart and leave things alone.

ME: I've taken up too much of your time, and I want to thank you for your courtesy.

Lem said goodbye to me in German, and I said *Adios*, and *Hasta la Vista*.

As Pan Czerski and I were escorted to the front electric gate, I heard a dog barking in the rear of the cottage. I raised my eyebrows, and Pan Czerski said: "Well, Lem is the wealthiest man in Poland, and even in Krakow, we have a bit of robbery now and then. But a dog keeps away . . . ah . . . busy-bodies."

Back at the University of Warsaw, I asked my students in American literature: "How many here have read Lem?"

"Lem who?" was the answer. *

**Incidentally, In Warsaw's largest concert hall, Opera Welki, there are three granite busts of Hemingway, only two of Josef Conrad. None of Lem so far. ●*

Fans, Prose & Cons

Send news to: NW 440 Windus St., Pullman, WA 99163

by Steve Fahnstalk

IF THIS IS PART #6, IT MUST BE TUESDAY:

As will be evident from this really short intro, I have no axes to grind, nothing in particular I want to blat about; I have rather a lot of publications to get to this time. I am trying to get a couple of things going for upcoming columns; one of which is fandom's immortal classic "The Enchanted Duplicator"; its last appearance in **AMAZING** was at least five years ago. There are a lot of you out there who aren't familiar with Jophan's quest, and should be. I will keep you informed on efforts to get permission about it.

I am receiving some letters from people who'd like to have their names and addresses published; sort of the old "fan pals" thing like "Sergeant Saturn" and his ilk had going. If you'd like to see some names and addresses published, let me know.

Another thing. Occasionally, I get a bit flippant in my comments, and have to eat crow. Here's a tasty bit of raven: in a recent con listing, I said "GOH's, Jeanne Gomoll and Dan Steffan. What, no pro?" That was unkind and untrue, and even unfunny. Dan is a pro. Accept my sincere apologies, Dan. Now, if only I can get people to not take me so seriously when I'm joking, I won't have to write apologies!

And lastly: first, from now on, I will be writing reviews of specific fan publication numbers, not just a general impression of the pub. In other words, I will review, say, **SFR** #35, rather than **SFR** as a whole. This will enable me to keep zines current, among other things. Secondly, I would like

to compile some kind of listing of all the fan clubs in the world (sounds ambitious, doesn't it?), so would any of you affiliated with any fan organization please send me a listing. Include type of club (general SF, fantasy, Darkover, Trek, Dr. Who, or whatever); age of club; number and name of principal officers, mailing address, dues, and whatever else you think might be of interest. I'm not sure what I'll do with it, but do send it.

Remember, I need those con listings four months in advance. Keep those cards and letters coming in, folks. Clear ether, friends!

ZINE LISTINGS:

SCIENCE FICTION TIMES: William H. Desmond, 339 Newbury St., Boston MA 02115. \$6/12, monthly. From the folks who bring you *Galileo* and *Galaxy*, comes the May issue of **SFT**; 24 newsprint tabloid-size pages which include news, columns, interviews, reviews, a Goldin/Sky story, and several pages of sf comics, many in color. Thish covers the Foolcon "Balrog" awards, the ABA awards, and the Nebula Banquet, as well as the aforementioned stuff. At 50¢ a copy, **SFT** is a best buy.

GENRE PLAT; Allyn Cadogan, 435 Hayes St. #38, San Francisco, CA 94102. \$1/copy, irreg. Number 4, the winter/spring 1980 issue, is the first GP to be published in a long time, but it's worth the wait. Thish includes articles by Rich Coad, Poul Anderson, Bill Gibson, etc.; a funny anecdarticle on the S.F. punk scene by Allyn,

art by Canfield, Barr, Pearson, Steffan, Kirk, Gilliland, Leialoha, *et al*; but the funniest/best article is an "interview" with Harlan by one "Angela Moon Feldperson" who says, in part, "written words have always been too much into symbolism for me" among other "real heavy things". I almost laughed myself sick over that one.

POTBOILER; Lari Davidson, 8471 Bennett Rd., Richmond B.C. V6Y 1N6, Canada. \$2.25/semi-ann. Even though it's offset, this zine is fannishly uneven in content. Number 1 contains fannish stories, poetry, and art; the best (in my opinion) is the pure-50-ish "Flash Point", a typical "sci-fi" detective story of that decade, illustrated in fine '50's style by Stephen Schwartz, and written by Alisa D. Rovind (sounds suspiciously like a pen name to me) . . . even though it's got its ups and downs, it's a fine first issue, overall. Price a bit steep, though.

MATRIX/VECTOR; British SF Association, see below for address. These two zines are all sorts of news/reviews/information on what's happening in the UK; the latest, **MATRIX 29** and **VECTOR 97**, are chock-full of good things. **MATRIX** is the BSFA newsletter, and contains all the fannish news; and #29 has a terrific article by Jim Barker about being FGOH at Albacorn, in Glasgow. Barker's a funny cartoonist (he appears ubiquitously in Colin Lester's *'79 International SF Yearbook*) and writes well, too. In **VECTOR**, it's all sercon; including an article on LeGuin's fiction by Cy Chauvin; one on writing for Badger Books by R.L. Fanthorpe; a Season speech by John Brunner; and my personal favorite, Chris Priest's stunning indictment of SFWA's Nebula voting procedures. You can get both zines (and more besides) by sending £6 surface, £15 air (or US equivalent) to: in U.S., Cy Chauvin, 610 Gladstone, Detroit MI 48066; or, in U.K., Sandy Brown, 18 Gordon Terrace, Blantyre G72 9NA, Scotland. And then you'll be a BSFA member, too.

RIVERSIDE QUARTERLY; Leland Sapiro, Box 367, Garden City, NY 11530.

\$4/4, quarterly (of course). RQ #25 is pretty much sercon. It contains articles on Dhalgren, Romanian SF, American SF in the '30's, and a lot of other pretty heavy stuff, but strangely enough, it's not *real* heavy going. There's poetry, reviews, etc., and art which ranges from barely adequate to good (I particularly liked the Maroney on page 53). It's well laid out, and offset printed. I liked the '30's article best, especially since I only recently learned that my paternal grandfather used to read **AMAZING** back then!

DARK FANTASY; Shadow Press (Howard E. Day), Box 207, Gananogue, Ont., K7G 2T7, Canada. \$6/4, freq. unk. Number 22, a small offset zine with glossy covers, concerns itself with amateur art and fantasy writing, both prose and poetry. For its type, the pseudo-Chambers/Lovecraft pastiche called "The Flat on Rue Chambord" is good. If you like fantasy, you might enjoy this zine.

FAST & LOOSE, Alan L. Bostick, 5022 9th Ave. NE, Seattle, WA 98105. Irregular but frequent; available for "editorial whim" or some kind of contribution. In number 7 are Ted White's "Uffish Thots", lotsa interesting letters, and art by Harry Bell, Jay Kinney, Dan "okay, he's a pro!" Steffan (just a joke, heh-heh), others. The prize of this zine is Alan's "Gorgar Speaks!" article. It details Alan's winning of the Rain Too pinball prize, playing the talking machine Gorgar. ("Gorgar No Have Big Vocabulary", says Ole Kvern) . . . if you ask real nicely, Alan may send you a copy.

OOMPHALOSKEPSIS, Sharee Carlton, 7119-81 St., Edmonton, Alberta T6C 2T4, Canada. I'm reviewing number one just to arouse feelings of envy in all your fannish breasts . . . see, she really has nothing to say in this, but she got this free Gestetner, see, and stencils, and paper, so she just *had* to pub. Send her a quarter, there are a couple of nice Ken Macklin drawings in it. (See, folks? I'll review anything you send . . . almost!)

THE GALLIFREY CONNECTION, Joy Riddle, Star Route, Marlow, OK 73055. Number one again. This is the Newsletter of the Oklahoma Dr. Who Club; and Joy hopes to make it a clearing-house for Who freaks (her word, not mine) from all over. She would appreciate articles, stories, art, reviews . . . anything dealing with Who. Who's on first? Oh, yes, you should probably send her a stamp.

CATALYST, Greg Bennett, PO Box 57430, Webster, TX 77598. Price and frequency unknown, but send a couple of bucks and you, too, can belong to the "Gulf Coast SF Society" and get CATALYST. After leaving Seattle, Chairman Greg founded the GCSFS and the zine; anyone in the Houston area wanting to converse with other sf folks can find him in the Nassau Bay phone book. So far, CAT details the setting up of the club; but Greg also includes some background information for neos. Number 5 has a short "fan-speak" dictionary. Greg, you forgot "PESFA" and "MosCon"!

SCI FI NEWS & REVIEWS; For members of the SF, Horror and Fantasy Assoc., PO Box 69157, LA, CA 90069. Bimonthly, \$5/yr (I think). This isn't strictly a fanzine, but there may be some people in the LA area who are interested in attending what appears to be a somewhat commercial convention, and in getting the group's newsletter. It's got a lot of stuff, including a column by Forry "SCIFI" Ackerman. See, Forry, I used it several times this column.

CONVENTIONS:

MOSCON II: Sept. 12-14; \$8 to 9/1, \$10 at door; PO Box 9141, Moscow, ID 83843, attn. Beth Finkbiner. Cavanaugh's, \$23 single. GOH: George Barr, Jerry Sohl. FGOH: Frank Denton. Also F.M. Busby, Alex Schomburg, others. Jacuzzi party, Lensman Awards, usual. A favorite NW con . . . and the volcanic ash is all gone.

OTHERCON IV; Sept. 12-14; \$10 to Box 3933, Aggie Land Station, TX 77844. GOH: Jack Chalker. That's all the information I have.

INTERVENTION BETA; Sept. 26-28; \$12 at door; or \$10 to Box 151366 Salt Lake City, UT 84115. GOH: M.Z. Bradley, FGOH: Victoria Poyser, MC: Orson Scott Card, ARTIST GOH: Michael C. Goodwin. Usual events, plus the incomparable Poyser(s). Hi, Mike G., where's my name-tag?

ARMADILLOCON II; Oct. 3-5; \$8 to 10/1; \$12 after, to: Taylor, Box 9621, NW Station, Austin, TX 78766. GOH: Gardner Dozois, FGOH: Harry Morris, Jr., TM: Chad Oliver(!) Also Neal Barrett, Ed Bryant, George R.R. Martin, lotsa others. Sounds like a good 'un!

ROVACON; Oct. 10-12; \$2 to 9/30, \$4 after (wotta price!); to PO Box 117, Salem, VA 24153. GOH: Fred Pohl, also Kelly Freas, others. Good people, both of 'em; should make for a great con.

NONCON 3; Oct. 10-12; \$12 to PO Box 1740, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 2P1, Canada. GOH: Vonda McIntyre, FGOH: Jim Young (founder of MINN-SFS). Short Story Contest plus the usual. Traditionally, an enjoyable con. Yes, Randy, 3 cons does make a tradition.

OCTOCON III; Oct. 11-12; \$12 (2 day), \$8 (1 day) advance, \$14 and \$9 at door; Box 1824, Santa Rosa, CA 95402. El Rancho Tropicana, \$28.95/\$38.95; GOH: Theodore Sturgeon; ARTIST GOH: Don Dixon. Also, Poul Anderson, Orson Scott Card, Larry Niven plus many other authors, artists, scientists, editors. Theme: The Conquest of Time and Space. I've heard some good things about the previous OC's. When I lived there, I thought I was the only SF reader near the Russian River!

ROC*KON*5; Oct. 17-19; \$10 to 10/10, \$15 after, to: Box 9911, Little Rock, AR 72219. GOH: Andrew Offutt, FGOH: Dick & Nicki Lynch, TM: Jo Clayton. Looks like another good convention from here.

WINDYCON VII; Oct. 24-26; \$9 to 9/30, \$15 after to: Box 2572, Chicago IL 60690. GOH: Robert Sheckley, FGOH: Gardner Dozois, TM: Bob "Smooth" Tucker. Usual events plus smoothing.

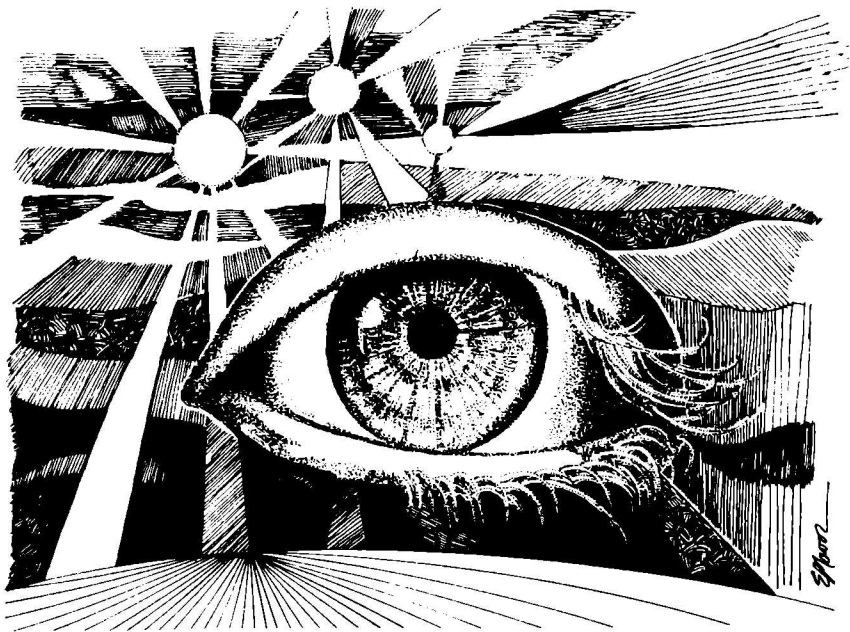
MILEHICON XII; Oct. 24-26; \$8 to 10/1, \$10 after to: Box 27074, Denver CO 80227 (enclose SASE). GOH: Stephen Donaldson, FGOH: Roy Tackett, TM: Ed Bryant. Masquerade, usual. Read Donaldson's *Wounded Land* before you go . . . what a book! (Unsolicited plug.)

WORLD FANTASY CON; Oct. 31-Nov. 2; \$20 to 9/1, \$25 after, \$7 supporting to: Chuck Miller, 239 N. 4th St., Columbia, PA 17512. 750 membership limit, so reserve now. GOH: Jack Vance, Boris Vallejo, MC: Robert Bloch. Make checks payable to "6th World Fantasy Convention." This is fantasy's biggest convention, where they give the "Howards".

PHILCON 80; Nov. 14-16; \$6 advance, \$10 at door, to: Lawler, 2750 Narcissa Road, Plymouth Meeting, PA 19462. GOH: Ben Bova, Kelly Freas, Robert Sheckley. Nice guest list.

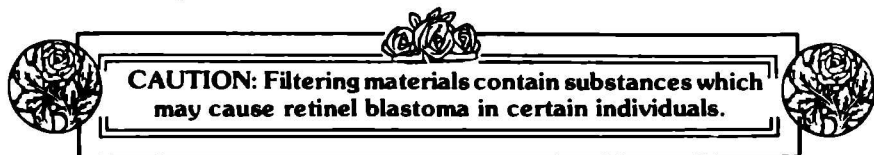
ORYCON; Nov. 14-16; \$8 to 9/1, \$10 after, to: "Oregon SF Convention, Inc.", Box 14727, Portland, OR 97214. GOH: Fritz Leiber, TM: F.M. Busby. Usual events, plus, if you're lucky, Mt. St. Helens or Mt. Hood may put on a real show for you. We have some real natural attractions here in the Northwest . . . not to worry, I'm joking again.

Remember, I *must* have con listings four months in advance; some people have been sending me listings for cons only a couple of months away. People, it takes lots of time to get these magazines together, so give me plenty of time, okay? Keep reading *AMAZING* and writing those 'zines! ●



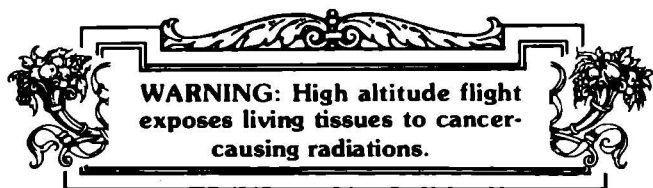
I had been reading a book when the message came—Religions of the Recent Past—and it'd just said that when Buddhists died, they didn't want to come back anymore, they wanted to just be gone for ever. That began to depress me, so when the telegram came, I decided to perk myself up. Life is wonderful—everyone knows that—so why wouldn't anyone want to come back if there was a chance?

I INSERTED the Air-E's air filters into my nostrils and went to the airport, my luggage consisting of one bag and my book. The Air-E's didn't work so well as I got nearer the airport.

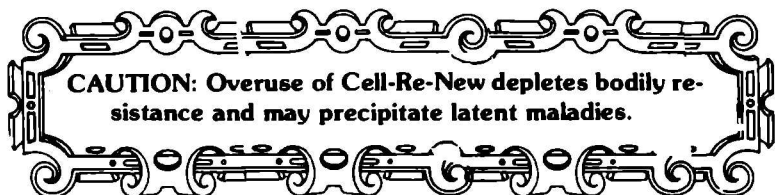


The ticket officer recommended some Come-a-cleen eyedrops if my eyes began to bother me. I do have to wear eyescreens during the day and lenses all the time, but my eyes never hurt me very much. It was only a twelve-minute wait anyway.

I couldn't make the seatbelts on the plane work, but the stewardess helped me. She smelled very good, like Omneocillin syrup, and she had all her teeth too. I took off my eyescreens and could see a little better. I could even read the tiny yellow label on the back of the seat in front of me.



I had prepared for that! I took two Kitterling Cell-Re-New tabs.



The law said they had to put warning labels on everything. Everything seemed to have one on it. Hard to understand what most of them mean anyway. I personally never heard of anyone getting sick from "latent malady." Good thing we live in a free country—a lot of people would like to keep these helpful drugs away from us.

I offered a Cell-Re-New to the man next to me. He had nose flowers.

"You have pretty flowers," I said.

"Thank you."

"Pardon? I don't hear like I used to."

"Thank you," he said louder. He smiled (no teeth) and nodded. "Teeth came out two months ago."

"Very nice," I said. There were at least eight or nine flowers and they were just starting to turn a deep purple.

"When they blossom out all the way, they cut them off," he said.

"How long did you work in the sun?"

He didn't seem to hear me. Maybe he had ear problems too. "They finish blossoming in, oh, about a month," he said with another smile. "You ever have flowers?"

"Once, here." I pointed to a dime-sized scar on the back of my right hand. "It was yellow when it blossomed. But I don't go out in the sun anymore because of my eyes."

He nodded and began stamping one foot. Probably bad circulation.

I read my book. I couldn't understand it too well. I rechecked the front cover. It said *LEVEL FOUR* and I used to read level four all the time. But this was hard.

The man said something I couldn't hear.

"Pardon? My ears . . ."

"I said, 'You read?' " the man repeated. His nose flowers were going to be beauties.

"Yes. I don't understand this one too much though."

"What does it say? I read a level six book once."

"It says that people, a long time ago, when they died, they wanted to stay dead. And not come back."

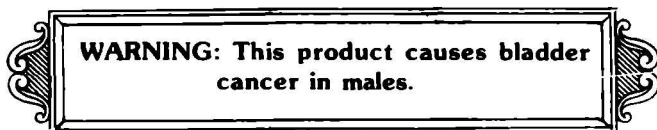
The man scratched a white spot on his gums with a thick fingernail. "I didn't know we *could* come back. Can we come back? That'd be real nice. I think life is wonderful."

This was getting complicated. "They *thought* they could come back. But they didn't want to."

"It must be something new," the man said with his fingernail still scratching his gums. "I didn't know we could come back. I'll have to look into that."

The good-smelling stewardess leaned over us. I hadn't seen her come up. "Drinks, gentlemen? We have Tib, Korala, and for our passengers going on to Nebriowa, we have Skeel and Vibraskee . . ."

"Tib," I said, and my fellow passenger wanted the same. The line of yellow print on the bottle read:



MY MOTHER'S house was very old and had many rooms. The air purifiers were the biggest I had ever seen. And there she lay on her bed, not looking anywhere near her 58 years. She never had a single flower either. Her face was smooth and young-looking, not like you see on many women these days. I wished I had her secret.

There was a letter for me she had written, but a lot of the words were complicated. I got out a Syn-a-flow spansule and went looking for water. The caution on the Syn-a-flow had so many big words it didn't make any sense at all.

Maybe later when I could read the letter I could figure out the label too. Next to the water supply there was a door. Out of curiosity I opened it and saw there was a basement.

It had lots of dirt and green things all over its floor. The lights overhead were so bright I even had to put on my sunscreens again. All the unusual stuff down there had me worried a little. Had my mother been an Eccentric?

I went back upstairs and tried to read the long message she left me. Normally I didn't read this much at one sitting, but with the Syn-a-flow it was possible if I concentrated.

Dear Son—

You may wonder how I lived so long, as, indeed, few people do nowadays. I will tell you, but you must tell no one else, lest you become an outcast and suffer from lack of friends. That is the greatest deprivation.

I had to rest my eyes for a while and then look up "deprivation." The concepts were hard to follow. I looked at her still, pink face for a few minutes. She looked very good. There wasn't a flower on her face anywhere. I couldn't get over it.

The secret is in the basement. That is where I grow all the food I eat. My dear son, I only ask one thing of you; live in my house for one month, and during that time do not consume

I had to stop and look up "consume."

... do not consume anything except what grows in the basement garden. By the door there are pictures on the wall of the things that grow there that you may eat.

Take no drugs. Eat nothing else. Do not go outside and breathe the air during this month. That is all I ask of you.

Your Mother.

Well, it sounded easy enough, but I wondered about eating those things that came out of the dirt. It didn't seem sanitary.

I took another Syn-a-flow and called up the people who get rid of bodies. I forgot what they're called.

When they came they told me what a nice area the house was in and that the air here got to Stage V only about three or four times a year. They had been drinking some kind of Skeel and offered me a can. I took it, figuring I'd start eating the things in the basement the next day.

They had difficulty moving her out of the house. There was a little accident which I didn't like and won't go into.

That night, Rena, a woman who lived next door, came over to offer her sadness in my behalf. She was 24, just like me, and she had most of her hair and big dark eyes. When she took out her nose filters I saw she had a nice mouth too. And the rest of the way down to her feet, her shape moved in and out in the right places, indicating no major tumors.

"You might be hungry?" Rena asked.

"I only had breakfast today."

"Maybe I could bring some food over?"

I thought again of the letter's request. "Good. We could eat together," I said. That idea pleased us both.


An hour later, I had set the table and she brought over an assortment of juicy and colorful things. I lit a little candle I found, but we could barely see our plates, so

I put on a light too. It was still a nice effect.

Over the vegetable curd she asked me how long I would be staying here.

"About a month," I said. "I have an apartment in Socializona."

"Now for the main dish," Rena said. She tore open the self-heating bag of pressed fowl cake. I read the label while the meat started to steam and sizzle, but I didn't know a lot of the words.



WARNING: The heating agent used in this product may induce multiple sclerosis in certain individuals. Contains butylated cylozine, a carcinogen.

Rena had nice long fingers that made my thighs quiver. Her hands looked soft and lovely.

The meat tasted sweet and spicy and it steamed up my lenses. She asked me something but I missed it. "Pardon?"

"I said, 'Are you married?'" She may have been smiling.

"No. I bet you aren't either."

"What do you think?" she said coyly.

I took my potency certification from my wallet and showed it to her. She didn't say anything but she smiled and handed it back.

"Want some dessert? I have pudding. Brown or yellow flavor?"

I felt like yellow since we had fowl cake. I was beginning to like Rena. I was just a stranger and here she was fixing me a beautiful dinner. Candlelight too!

The yellow pudding had a taste that made me wish it had been a bigger package. The taste went all over my mouth and I could even taste it in my throat. It was very good. I complimented her on her choice of foods.

"You know what else I brought?" she said shyly. She held out her hand and I bent to look closely. In her palm she held two yellow and black GloSex spansules.

"I'd kinda like to take one," Rena said, "if you would."

I didn't hesitate. We put them in our mouths and swallowed them as we kissed. Some of her teeth were missing, but her mouth was hot and wet and I liked it.

The GloSex hit with a thump. My face got hot first. Then my ears rang and my erection developed. I only remember pieces of moments from then on. It was the first orgasm I'd had in three and a half months and it didn't burn at all.

I woke up alone the next morning. Rena left me a note saying that I should call her soon. I remembered her fondly as I looked at her pillow and the pieces of light brown hair that lay there in the sunken impression. All around the kitchen and dining room, in all the places where she'd been, wherever I looked, I saw her image.

AS MY MOTHER had asked me, I began the next day by going down to the basement and checking the chart for what I could eat. The food down there tasted anywhere from horrid to very odd and I had trouble chewing up some of the leaves. My teeth began to hurt. Without my stimulants I fell asleep within an hour. At 11:00 I woke up thinking I'd split open my head in my sleep. I felt for blood but there was none. Even in the mirror I could see nothing. My head hurt fiercely. I wanted pain-killers so badly I could never tell you.

Out of desperation I began to eat more of the things down there. Some of them were long and green and had little hard flat things in them. They seemed to digest best of all.

It hurts me to think back on those first six or seven days. I lost track of time. I slept to avoid the vertigo and the nausea and the cramps I got in the backs of my arms and legs. Over two weeks my headache gradually faded.

I had every reason to take painkillers, but I remembered my mother and didn't. The way those men handled her—all because of the Skeel they drank—helped me resist. I owed her this much. So I only ate what grew downstairs. I never liked it very much, but I ate it. I never lost my suspicions about its cleanliness either.

Something happened in the beginning of the third week. I noticed a smell in the upstairs. A salesman came by and when I opened the door, a horrid grey-smelling odor oozed in from outside, a hot, lung-stinging odor. When I went into the basement, there was another smell—how could I describe it?—warm, moist, a good smell. After poking around, I found it was the dirt! Dirt smelled good!

I went around the house for days, picking up things and holding them to my nose. I grinned for days.

My digestion improved, but at night I still sometimes dreamed of Vitasnax, Glitters, Moolidrine, and creamy black Dorlinas.

At the end of the third week, something else happened. I began hearing the airliners going overhead and the publicans outside in the streets. Those things had always been there, but now the noises started getting louder and louder. The noise was ugly. My headaches came back a little. I still slept a lot—twelve to fourteen hours a day. I couldn't help it.

Sometimes I thought of Rena, but I was too weak to see her and talk to her, and I was afraid if she offered me a GloSex I'd take it.

The beginning of the fourth and last week brought something else. Finally, I had been feeling normal enough to try some reading. I tried but I couldn't—but I couldn't read because I couldn't make out the words. I took off my lenses and rubbed my eyes. That felt so good! It was when I took my hands away that I realized I could read better *without* the lenses than with them! I was so excited that I went through the house from top to bottom, looking at chairs and walls and pictures with my bare eyes, knocking my knuckles against everything to hear the resonances, and smelling—still smelling things!—anything I hadn't examined before.

I could see things across the room now. I could see the edges of cushions and even the weave of the fabric and when I looked in a mirror, I saw the stunned grinning face of someone I could just barely remember from years ago; he had lines around his eyes and mouth he hadn't had before. My mind was clear about one thing now: this was why my mother had wanted me to eat the strange food that grew in the basement under the odd-colored lights.

I realized all of a sudden that my headache was gone—completely gone. Energy rushed through me, just like I'd taken 25 milligrams of Ever-Drine. I called Rena.

"Rena! This is your neighbor. Remember?"

"You live in the old woman's house, don't you?"

"Yes, yes," I said. "You fixed me a dinner the first night I was here."

"Oh yeah. Why haven't you called?" Her voice was dreamy and distant-sounding, as though she were too far away from the microphone.

"I've been sick, but I'm better now. I'm all well and I want to see you very badly can't leave the house yet. Can you come over right away?"

"Well. . . . I guess I can later. In an hour?"

"An hour is good. I've thought about you a lot, but I was too sick most of the time to talk to anyone."

"You thought of me?"

"Yes, I thought of you. Why?"

"That was nice of you to think of me." Her voice was pitched higher than it had been before—but maybe my ears just heard it differently.

"So, in an hour?" I said. "Are you feeling all right, Rena?"

"I feel wonderful," she drawled in a distant voice. "I took two Elequil just an hour ago. . . . I'll go get ready now. Bye."

I trembled with excitement. The hour would go so slowly unless I could preoccupy myself with something. I decided to read my book. Having forgotten everything I'd read before, I started at the beginning.

At once I was struck with the simplicity of the language and the ease with which I grasped the ideas spelled out. I couldn't understand how I had had so much trouble with this before. I skimmed till I got to the part that had confused me.

A central concept of Buddhism is reincarnation, where the souls of the dead re-enter the newborn. This goes on indefinitely or until the person escapes the cycle of birth and death and rebirth. The Buddhist's highest goal is to leave the cycle and die, never re-entering another living being, which of course would then endure more of the suffering that all living things must endure.

That was simple enough. But I wasn't suffering, I was loving every second! They must have lived terrible lives, I thought. Their governments must not have let them be free, as mine did. Nor must they have had all the conveniences that make the present day so pleasant and exciting.

Rena knocked and I threw my book aside to let her in. I opened the door, prepared to embrace her, cuddle her, and kiss her—when my heart fell to the bottom of my stomach.

Rena huddled within her own arms, the brown nose filters hanging down against her mouth. Her thick oval lenses were covered with a murky film.

"Hi," she said, grinning shyly, her yellow stumps of teeth showing between her blue lips.

"Rena?"

"What?"

A thick wave of biting smells followed her as she scooted her feet in through the door and into the center of the room.

No, I thought, this couldn't be the same Rena. I looked more closely. I could see now: a row of lumps grew out of her brittle hair, down across her nose to her mouth. "Are your flowers new?" I asked her.

"Oh, no. They're just buds yet." She pulled out the filters. "I got them about six months ago, probably when I had to go the mountains for a week to work. They're still just buds, pink, see? Maybe they won't blossom till next winter. You have any?"

I pointed to the scar on my hand. I tasted old food at the back of my throat.

She took something out of her pocket and held her hand toward me: two more yellow and black GloSex spansules. "Wanta take these now?"

"No, Rena, listen."

She put one down her throat and pulled off her jacket.

"Rena, are you listening to me?" She nodded and grinned. The teeth showed again. "Rena, I don't eat chemicals anymore. None at all. None."

She grinned more broadly and released the fasteners on her jumpsuit.

"Rena—I stopped eating chemicals and my ears and my eyes and my nose all work now! I can smell things and hear things and I don't need my lenses anymore! I never realized anything was wrong with me till I got well. Rena, are you listening to me?"

Now she was naked, squirming and writhing on her feet. Her flesh twitched and crawled over her bones. A little foam gathered at one corner of her mouth. She moaned and reached for me.

"Rena! Stop and listen to me!"

She screeched and rushed me, her pelvis thrust forward—the whole area between her thighs littered with small translucent lumps.

"Rena! Don't!"

Her hands opened and closed in spasms. She came at my face but I pushed her aside. Foam filled the corners of her mouth.

I jumped behind her and tried to hold her but she was too strong. My hand went into her hair and a handful broke off and crumbled like dust. She screeched and howled and ran into things and fell over whatever touched her legs. Her dark eyes rolled back in her head and her pelvis jerked wildly.

"Rena! Stop, please stop!"

She came at me again, her hands twisted into arthritic hooks. I stood with my back to the front door—and without thinking, as she lurched toward me, I opened the door and let her stumble out into the thick morning air.

I ran through the house trying to get away from the noise, I hid my head, I held my hands over my ears, but I could hear it all and it went on and on, the clawing and the cries growing hoarser and lower, until I could hear only her rough heavy breathing. I waited several more minutes.

When I opened the door, her leaning body toppled over the doorsill, her heavy head making a hollow thump on the floor. I lifted her head in my hands. Her short square teeth showed through her black lips and her eyes did not close. The row of lumps on her sweaty face had turned a deep rich pink.

"Rena?"

Waves of bitter air rolled through the door. I took hold of her bloody hands and pulled her all the way inside.

"Rena? Please, Rena?" I patted her face, but already her skin was beginning to turn hard. The eyes still didn't close.

I put her on a sofa and tried to force her limbs into some appearance of sleep. I was only half successful. Her swollen lips and those little yellow teeth seemed to be frozen in the middle of a curse.

I moved back and looked at her. I thought and thought, all through the morning and into the afternoon, as her skin went paste white and her lumps darkened.

By the time the sun had turned the sky afternoon yellow, I had considered all my options. More than likely, Rena would not be missed for several days, and if she were found here, like this, no one would blame me—people die unexpectedly all the time.

I really wanted some T-Quill.

I had liked Rena. I didn't like people very often, but Rena was nice and now she wasn't any more.

I couldn't use the filters to go out of the house or my mind would probably freeze up again.

But I couldn't go out without the things because of the air.

And I couldn't stay in the house forever. And Rena was dead.

I opened the shutter and watched the people moving about under their UV shields. They all wore flowers, some of them only buds, but others of them opened into broad fleshy blossoms of blue and yellow and green and white. The day seemed such a normal day for them.

Finally, I decided. I took up my *Religions of the Recent Past* and re-read the passage that had given me trouble. It made more sense now. Much more sense.

I did not put the filters in my nose nor did I perch the UV shield over my head. I said goodbye to Rena. I apologized to her. The door opened and the thick air began to fill the house.

Now I walk down the street like a normal man. I nod and smile and say pleasant hellos to everyone I meet. Their eyes peer suspiciously around the lumps and flowers that decorate their faces, but they do nod and some smile and nearly all say hello. I wish them good days. I compliment ladies on their clothes.

I walk toward the brightest part of the sky, toward the west. I am happy. I am very sad, but when they smile and when they say hello, I am happy. The air no longer stings when I breathe, but I feel it grow thicker and heavier in my lungs. I feel my head and my shoulders and my arms grow full to bursting with incipient blossoms of red and purple, white and yellow centers, pinks and blues and greens. The sun fills my skin with life. The book falls from my hands. I feel myself exploding with flowers and I am happy I am happy I am happy

Wayne Wightman

by Mitchell S. White

Both of us had just fallen off his sailboat into the bay and before we could right the thing and sail on, we had been carefully studied by something that was either a sunfish or a shark. We weren't sure which it was. At the moment we are sitting in a dark place with a German name and we are drinking porter. WW had been gloomy all day, but now I notice he looks very happy. I ask about that.

"That fish out there," he says, "whatever it was, straightened out my priorities."

"You need to explain that."

"Sometimes I worry about whether I'm going to be happy in ten or twenty years with the way I'm directing my life now. I worry if what I'm doing is worth doing. The big *WHY?*"

"Ah," I say. "I recognize that one. The big 'What's-the-point?'"

"So the fish out there reorganized my priorities. When I was hacking up salt water and trying to get around to the centerboard, I realized that if that thing was a shark, I could find myself checking out in thirty, forty-five seconds."

I ordered more porter. I think better when the synapses are lubricated.

"Knowing that I could be visiting the Ranch in the immediate future clears away a lot of the cobwebs of complacency. When we got back into the boat I knew again what I have to keep being reminded

of: Being here is the important thing. When I was in the water, I knew just how much I liked being here, and I wanted to keep on being here. What happens over and above that is icing."

"Is it the porter, or is that a very passive way of living your life, oohing and ahing the birdies and the flowers and the fishies in the sea?"

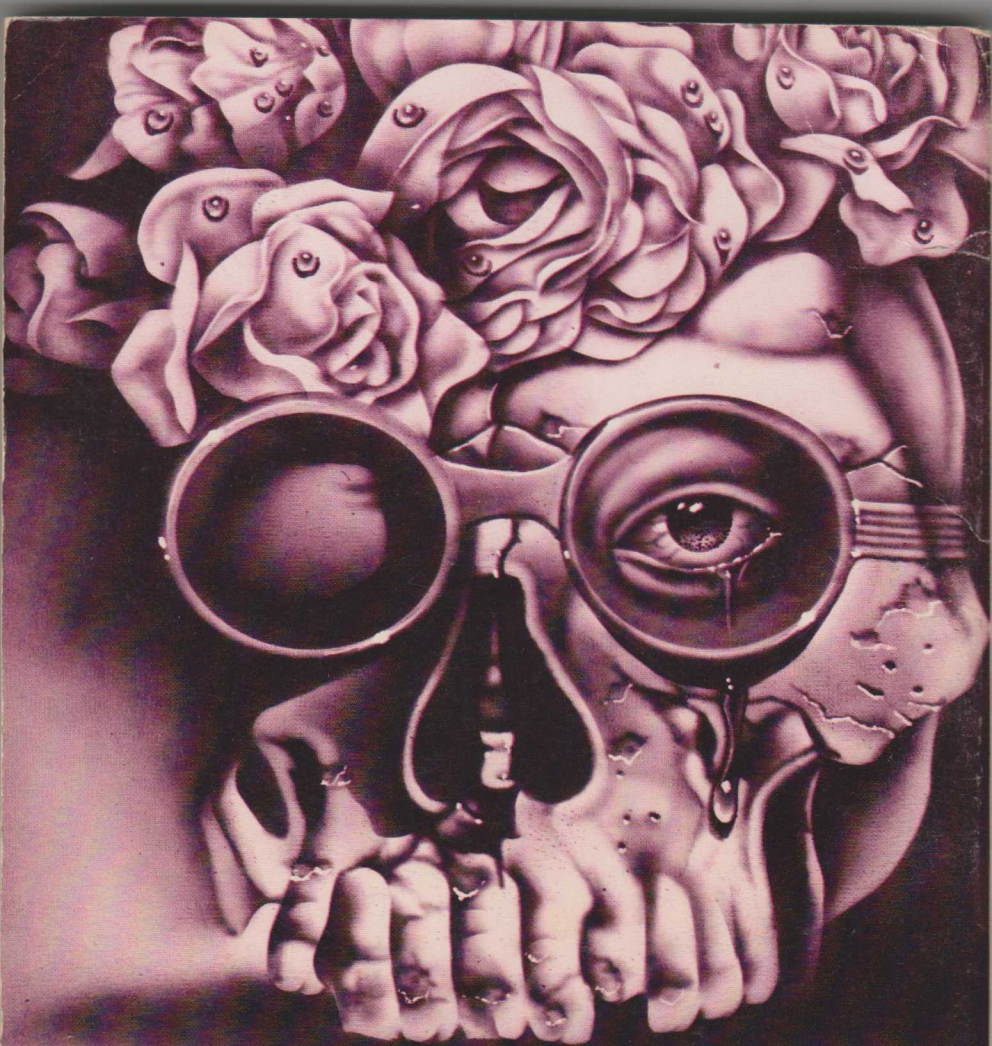
"As I said, the rest of it is icing, but some people specialize in icing, very heavy duty icing. You can ooh and ahh those things you mentioned — and that's all right — or you can decide to spend your being here making sure the birdies and the fishies stick around so you can ooh and ahh at them when you feel like it. You should also be oohing and ahing the mosquitoes, the gophers, the grassyhoppers — have you ever looked at a housefly *very* closely? Those things are amazing. And you know the old saying."

"What saying?"

"Consider the porter in the glass, how it bubbles; how it awaits your pleasure: that even Solomon, in all his power and wisdom, is not here now."

I raise my glass. "To being here now."

"To icing and the rest."



LOVE AMONG THE FLOWERS



Wayne Wightman

MOTHER DIED yesterday. Or maybe the day before. The telegram said, "Your mother died yesterday," so it's hard to know exactly. She was fifteen years over due anyway. Nonetheless, I didn't want to get depressed, so I took a T-Quill even though the label said it could cause "testicular hemorrhage." How was a person supposed to know what that meant? — *Continued on 124*