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Founded in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback . . .

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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Last year I stirred a mighty fuss among the readership of this magazine - and, apparently, among attendees of science-fiction conventions in general - by launching an attack on the prevalence of so-called "hall costumes" at conventions. All I meant to do was decry the tendency of some of the younger and wilder convention-goers to run around the convention hotels 32 hours a day dressed up as Conan the Conqueror or Darth Vader. But somehow the gifted and imaginative people who take part in the formal convention masquerades thought I was aiming at them, and they let me know quite loudly that they were displeased.

Well, the true costumers - the ones who spend months making the fabulous outfits that dazzle us all on the night of the convention masquerade were not my targets at all, and they know that now, and I have made my peace with them. But I do have one bit of unfinished business left over from my original column on the subject. In that column I noted that an "austere" science-fiction convention from which all masquerading, media programming, and gaming stuff would be banned was to be held in California in January, 1987. "Sercon I" was its nickname - "The Serious Convention" - and I promised a report on it.

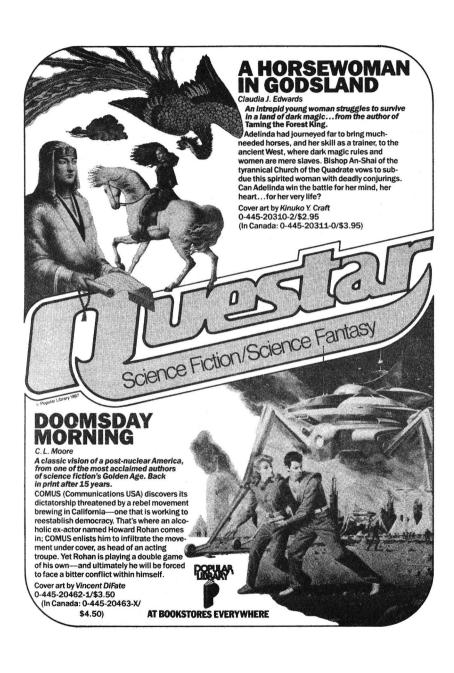
Indeed, now I have been to Sercon I. There were no kids in capes, no gunslingers of the spacelanes, no barbarian slave-girls in attendance. The booksellers' room was exactly that, a room where books were sold — no swords,

no comics, no photos of Captain Kirk. Never once did I have to duck out of the way as a troop of howling Logan's Runners came careening down the hall. It was a nice, quiet, sober weekend. (Well, not *entirely* sober.) It was a very grown-up convention.

I can't say that I missed the hall-costume people at all.

I do confess that I felt Sercon I could have done with a little more color, pizzazz, flamboyance. Just a little. A formal dress-up event of some kind, for instance. If not an actual masquerade, then at least a banquet, or some similar ritual gathering. All hands present had a fine thoughtful time, but some of the drama, some of the pageantry, that we have come to associate with science-fiction conventions was missing. This is not a request for a corps of Darth Vaders at Sercon II — only a mildly disappointed observation that some measure of excitement wasn't there.

In some ways Sercon I was like the conventions I attended as a boy on the East Coast a generation ago: a couple of hundred people interested in science fiction, writers and editors and readers, getting together to talk about the stuff they love. One significant difference, of course, is that those old-time conventions were one-day affairs held in dismal little rented halls on the wrong side of town, and Sercon filled a weekend at the stupendously beautiful Claremont Hotel in the Berkeley hills. Times do change, and we don't really need to go back to Werdermann's



Hall in the shadow of the Sixth Avenue El. Yet in spirit, it seemed, we were back there at one of those olden-time cons: a little gathering of the faithful, assembled to talk about SF.

I suppose there were two hundred attendees, maybe a little more than that. Many were from the Bay Area. which of course is an intense center of science-fiction activity both amateur and professional. Of local professional folk I recall seeing Terry Carr, Richard Lupoff, Lisa Goldstein, Charles N. Brown, Chelsea Ouinn Yarbro, Marta Randall, Poul and Karen Anderson, Karen Joy Fowler, Paul Preuss, Rudy Rucker, Mark Laidlaw, Pat Murphy, and some others. Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, Greg and Astrid Bear, and Gregory Benford came up from Southern California. New York editorial types Beth Meacham, Julius Schwartz, and David Hartwell were there, and the distinguished (and distinguishedlooking) writer Samuel R. Delany. From England came the formidable editor Malcolm Edwards of Gollancz Books and the equally formidable and articulate writer, Ian Watson. Amazing Stories' own editor Patrick Lucien Price was very much in evidence, too. I think I caught sight of Suzy McKee Charnas at one point, and I know I caught sight of Algis Budrys.

That's almost certainly an incomplete list. If professionals didn't actually outnumber fans, it was close to a fifty-fifty balance.

And what did we all do, aside from admiring the celebrated Bay Area scenery from the Claremont's picture-window hillside bar, and foraging through the noted restaurants of the region, and a little quiet deal-making over drinks?

We went to panels, is what we did. We discussed "Fantasy vs. Science Fiction" and "The Art of Editing" and "Labels, Movements and Other Hazards" and "The Pitfalls of Formula" and "Censorship from Within" and similar matters. We speculated on whether it is possible to exhaust a science-fictional idea through overuse, and gave each other tips on how to promote our books, and even asked each other, "Why Write?" We heard Ian Watson and Chip Delany make incisive, thoughtful speeches. We wandered into the booksellers' room and pointed out to each other things we had recently read and enjoyed. At any time, I suspect, three quarters of the attendees were in the main meeting room, being serious.

And I found myself wishing there'd be one dress-up occasion somewhere along the way — a costume ball wouldn't have worked, not with that crowd, but perhaps a formal dinner, even an awards ceremony, something to provide a sense of high occasion. Not that it was a serious lack. Though I wouldn't want all cons to be as restrained and limited as this one, there's no question that Sercon I was a delight to its attendees. I had a fine time.

There'll be another Sercon next February in Austin, Texas. If your taste in conventions runs to the serious and mature, you can get more information about it from Sercon II, Box 27345, Austin TX 78755.

And if you think going to Sercons is a perfectly dreadful idea, I've got just the con for you: Weaponscon I, which is due to take place in Atlanta the weekend of July 31. That date will have come and gone by the time this piece appears, but I'm sure there'll be a second Weaponscon next year, so you can get your reservations in early. The first one promised to have such lively folks as Janet and Chris Morris, Karl

Edward Wagner, David Drake, and Robert Adams stalking around in full costume. At Weaponscon, you see, everyone who attends is required to wear a weapon — and you can bet that they'll be decked out in total regalia.

A lot of the people involved in Weaponscon are good friends of mine, and I wish them well. I know they're going to have a lot of fun. But I doubt that I'll be there. It isn't just a matter of different strokes for different folks. I hasten to explain — it's simply that my saber is due for its annual sharpening in July, my set of duelling blasters is on loan to Harlan Ellison. my sword-cane can no longer pass through airport security, and my mace is too rusty for use in public appearances these days. So I won't be able to qualify for the attendance requirements, and I'm giving Weaponscon my regrets. But I hope you all have a wonderful time.



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FEARING'S FALL by Leonard Carpenter art: Terry Lee



The author lives in Santa Maria, California, with his wife, Cheryl, who is a painter and a teacher, and his two crafty nine-year-olds, Amanda and Candace. To supplement the income from his writing career, he works as a part-time civil servant.

His most recent fiction sales include two novels sold to Tor Books: Conan the Renegade (April 1986) and Conan the Raider (October 1986). He has also had fiction published in Writers of the Future anthology, Dark Lessons crime anthology, and issue 12 of Argonaut Magazine. In addition to writing novels and short fiction, the author spends time working on screenplays and teleplays.

I'd been driving up the rutted track for what seemed like hours, fighting the wheel all the way. I always thought my little Rabbit would take dirt roads easily, but this road was like a corkscrew tunnel winding through dense second-growth redwoods and towering hedges of poison oak. In its deepest shadows the foggy afternoon was murkier than most nights.

I was straining my eyes and neck for a glimpse of Fearing's place, so when I came to the steel gate, I barely hit the brakes in time. The tires grated to a stop with the camouflage-painted metal bar shimmering just inches away from my headlights. It cast a horizontal shadow on the pale shreds of mist drifting over the road.

After my heart slowed back down to normal, I climbed out to look at the barrier: a four-inch diameter pipe, fastened at one end with a case-hardened padlock. Its vertical pivot was set in concrete, anchored deep in the stony soil. To one side the terrain dropped away into brushy weeds with a stream splashing invisibly somewhere beneath them; on the other was a five-foot embankment.

This is a hell of a note, I thought — Fearing knows I'm coming, but he hasn't opened the gate for me! I looked up the road where it wound out of sight behind dead, leaning trunks, wondering how far I'd have to walk to find the house and whether it would rain again. It didn't much matter; it seemed to drizzle perpetually under the redwoods anyway. I resolved to try blowing the car horn first, maybe for an hour or so. I turned back toward the Rabbit.

It was then that I heard the faintest padding on the ground behind me. Before I could turn, a hard weight struck my shoulders and a hand clenched my mouth. A half-second later another smudged hand was braced rock-hard in front of my neck, its fingers clutching an eight-inch slab of blackened steel, notched and beveled into a sadist's dream of a high-tech survival knife.

I was dead, I knew — totally under the control of a superior force. There'd been no chance to resist, and my reaction took the form of a sick, cringing

fear. But as my body started to spasm vainly, the iron grip faded back, leaving me free to stagger forward against the hood of the car. Sprawling on it, I twisted to look around — into Ron Fearing's grinning, black-smeared face.

"You're getting slack, Holloway," he told me matter-of-factly, shoving his pig-splitter into a plastic sheath strapped horizontally to his belt. His robust body was decked out in camouflage-colored fatigues, slouch hat, and combat boots. "You should toughen up some."

"You bastard!" I sagged down onto the car hood, which sagged in turn under my excess weight. My anger was strangely fleeting — swamped by sick relief at being allowed to live, and at not having to fight this human killing machine. But I was damned if I trusted him enough to shake his hand. "How long were you waiting there in the weeds for me?"

He smiled again and checked his skin diver's watch. "About three minutes." His teeth and eyes flashed at me from the shadowy lair of his lamp-blacked face. "When you drove onto the access road, you tripped a scramble-alarm at the house. From that point, I can beat the fastest vehicle here by five minutes. And that's without activating the road obstacles." He shrugged. "If I thought you wanted to play rough, I've got plastique charges wired to blow down some redwood trunks that a tank couldn't plow through."

"My God, you take this survival business seriously, don't you? I thought it was just Doc Savage stuff you made up for your books."

"I'm a realist, Tom." He gazed at me levelly, standing at ease in the road with a military steadiness I hadn't remembered in him. "Believe me, the books don't even scratch the surface."

I shivered and folded my arms against the damp chill that seemed to be increasing with the lateness of the day. "Can we get into some shelter? I'm still sweating from your open-arms welcome. Unlock the gate, and I'll give you a lift back."

"No need for that. I've got my wheels — just stay close behind me." He unlocked the barrier and waved me through, securing it again afterward. Then he trotted into the bushes, where I soon heard the revving of a supercharged engine. A moment later he came trundling out of an invisible road spur in a hulking 4×4 Blazer decked with lights and antennae, with tires like hobnailed jackboots. It looked like some bizarre kind of moon vehicle, except for the green-and-brown camouflage. As I pulled in behind it, its taillights were bright enough to blind me and stain the whole foggy afternoon red.

Apparently, we were still some distance from his house. I tried to relax as I drove, turning on the heater and switching off the hissing radio that I'd left on earlier. The only merciful thing about the trip so far, I realized, was that the loom of the surrounding hills had caused the newscasters' endless chronicle of world crises and war moves to dwindle to a faint buzz of static.

Needless to say, I was having second thoughts about the wisdom of this

trip. I'd known Fearing since college days — his wife, Ruth, too, from before they were married — and I'd seen enough of them and their kids, Jennifer and Nathan, to keep up our friendship over the past decade or so.

But those meetings had all been under fairly constrained and civilized circumstances — Fearing's book-signings and my faculty literary luncheons. They'd grown scarcer since my wife, Lillian, and I stopped being a couple. And there'd never been anything in them to warn me how strongly this side of Fearing's personality, the propane-breathing neo-neanderthal, possessed him on his own turf, as apparently it did. I couldn't see Ruth taking it quietly, even in her role as a fairly long-suffering wife; likely it accounted for the recent hints I'd had of their marital troubles.

Of course, if Fearing wanted to live his art, I had no right to complain. God knew he'd worked this kind of apocalyptic paranoia into a profitable vein of literature, with his best-selling series novels about Mark Craven, Solo Survivor. We'd developed in radically different directions from the adolescent taste for fantasy literature we'd once shared. I prided myself on never having "gone academic" with him. I didn't denigrate his work, though it was far from the sublime craftings of Poe that now formed my specialty at the university. Fearing had created his own tight little literary world; it bore an intense appeal for some readers.

I hadn't expected to find him living it, though, or to experience it myself so closely and intimately. Suddenly it all seemed pathological, and I wasn't looking forward to finding out more. Yet it dawned on me that it was no longer physically possible just to turn and drive away.

The house, to my surprise, was a classic building from the previous century — a rambling lodge built of heavy stones and massive redwood beams. It looked like it could have been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright's greatuncle, with trellises and terraces climbing the hillside behind it under the giant trees. Its presence here in the wilderness puzzled me — until I realized, of course, it was a winery! Stretching in front of it under the melting dark sky, I could dimly make out a cleared expanse of landscape, weedy knolls patterned with rows of vinestocks. After all, this was the northern edge of the Napa-Sonoma wine country.

The family's northward move from San Francisco was recent, and it threatened to stretch many of their social ties to the breaking point. Hence my invitation to visit; also, perhaps it was an attempt to smooth over their troubled marital relations. Ruth had expressed enthusiasm to me about their new house, and I could see why. The place was picturesque in an austere way, once you got past the dark, sodden weather.

The mooncraft I was following accelerated and disappeared into some kind of dugout at the far side of the house. I pulled my car up as close to the cavernous porch as I could, hopped out, and ducked under the dripping fringe of the eaves. The place was silent, with no lights burning, although I could smell woodsmoke settling down from the high stone chimney. In a

moment Fearing strode cross the gravel drive. The crunching noise his footfalls made was one more means of detecting unwanted visitors, I realized.

"This is quite a place," I greeted him. "Restful and . . . quiet." I peered through the picture window into the gloomy interior of the house. "Are Ruth and the kids here? Or did they drive into town for the day?"

He came up the flagstone steps, hatless now, his bald-topped head pale in the darkness of the porch. He'd wiped the splotches of lampblack from his face, although traces of it still shaded the gray-blond stubble of his jaw. "They're gone, Tom. Ruth left me last week. She took the kids with her."

There was no real emotion in his voice, only a sort of tenacious matter-offactness. I probably registered more dismay myself, faced suddenly with the prospect of a whole weekend alone with Fearing. "I'm sorry to hear it," I told him truthfully.

He said nothing. I stood there a while at a loss, then said, "She didn't let me know before I came, or anything, in case you're wondering. You both must've had a lot on your minds." Still no answer. "Are they staying at your condo in the city?"

He shook his head with a minimal motion. "I don't know yet where they are. Maybe with her relatives."

I nodded at him, understandingly I hoped. "It must have been — pretty sudden. Was there much of a row?"

He shook his head more vigorously, some of the emotion finally creeping through. "It came as a total surprise to me. I've been busy with other things lately, Tom." He exhaled. "Just when I'm finally bringing it all together — the dream I've had of making a new, secure life — for them, not for myself!" He narrowed his eyes in a baffled way. "I wonder, did she stop to think what that would do to me inside? You can't begin to imagine . . ." His voice choked off.

After a few moments of burdened silence, I helped him out. "I've been going through it, too, remember, with Lillian. It's hell at first." I dared to place a hand on his shoulder, which felt hard and tense as a strung bow. "But then, it's much too early for you to think of divorce. Keep trying to get in touch with her — I'm sure you two can come to a meeting of the minds. I'll do what I can to help."

He nodded, smiled faintly, and clasped my upper arm in return. He squeezed it a little too tightly in his rangy hand so that I felt as if I'd had my blood pressure checked. "No, you're right, Tom, I wouldn't want a divorce. Not in my position. You know what they say about that — she gets the gold mine, I get the shaft!" He turned toward the mansion's heavy wooden door, seeming to have shaken off his unwieldy emotions entirely. "But come on inside. You must be half-dead with cold, and it's up to me to do the cooking these days."

The first thing I found inside the house was the large stone fireplace in the parlor — I could have crept into it, except that Fearing quickly built it up to

a roaring blaze with chunks of wood I recognized as split, blackened grapestocks.

In a while, when I was warmed up enough to take a seat in one of the leather-backed chairs, I took in the room more fully. It was decorated in an antique, rustic style with bookshelves, brass, and landscape paintings. Most of the ornaments were potentially functional things — guns, snowshoes, kerosene lamps. The place didn't have much of what I would call a feminine touch.

The parlor opened into the dining room via a broad archway, and there I saw the only discordantly modern feature — one whole corner of the room was glassed in on two sides. Inside the wire-reinforced glass were computers, printers, shelves of reference books, and other technical paraphernalia. One of the monitor screens was glowing green, tirelessly scrolling rows of figures, and I heard the muted clack of a teleprinter start up. I yelled a question about it to Fearing, who was rattling pots in the kitchen beyond.

"Oh, that — Ruth calls it the War Room. It's the nerve center of the house, where all my alarms and gadgets are hooked up. I do some of my book research there, too." His voice shifted in resonance as he moved around the tile-floored kitchen. "We're pretty isolated up here, but I have phone links to various computer services around the country, including some government systems that require a security clearance. Besides controlling the property defenses from here, I can monitor the world situation, so I'll be sure to have enough warning when it all blows."

Fearing's words gave me an odd feeling of unreality, yet they didn't surprise me. I knew that he and his work had occasionally found friends in the current administration, when his particular brand of paranoia seemed likely to stampede the public mood the right way. Perhaps he was rewarded in turn with some access to inside information.

I wandered into the dining room and squinted through the glass, which was hexed with embedded chicken wire. The line printer was still onanistically spilling its output onto the floor; it looked like news service text. Between the two microcomputers were various control boxes, blank closed-circuit monitors, and a profusion of manuals and bound printouts. The only decor was one wall poster, of a fluorescent mushroom cloud standing tall over the Pacific. "I suppose you're getting a lot of data right now, with the Mediterranean situation so tense."

"Things are always tense, whether we hear about them or not." Fearing glanced briefly through the open kitchen door. "And I'm always prepared." He vanished again. "I'd unlock the booth and take you inside — but really, you can see all you need to from there."

Indeed I could. I could see, as well, why Ruth would feel the need to get the hell out of here. After all, wasn't it just one big, freaking nightmare?

Yet here I was, steeling myself to ride out the weekend. And maybe it wasn't hopeless; maybe I could help, even now. All that anyone needs, even

Fearing, I told myself for the thousandth time, is a willing ear to pour out his troubles to. And although I'd never yet in my life managed to be one, I might not get another chance like this.

In a little while, Fearing wheeled a cart up to the broad dining table and unloaded an omelette served with sautéed vegetables, toasted sourdough bread, and wine. I sat down to the meal gratefully; it had all been done quickly and efficiently, and the omelette was delectable.

"You'll have to trust me on the mushrooms," Fearing called in from the kitchen as I ate. "An amazing variety of them grow around here, because of the dampness and the varied terrain. But I know them well enough to spot any poisonous kinds." When at length he came in and set his own full plate down on the table opposite my half-empty one, he added, "Besides, if I'd thrown in any really lethal ones, they'd be taking effect by now."

My gusto had departed; I now sat waiting for the sudden stab of internal pain that might herald mushroom poisoning. But I watched politely while Fearing wolfed down his own omelette as swiftly and efficiently as he'd cooked it.

After cleaning up the dishes, we took the wine into the parlor and sat beside the fire. He told me a little about the estate, how he'd chosen the region as being the one least menaced by nuclear fallout. "The prevailing winds are from the west. They blow across the widest ocean in the world before touching this coast. So if the air is clean anywhere after a strike, it'll be here."

In response to my observation about nuclear winter, he laughed. "If you believe all that, you're licked before you start. But I can outlast a temporary climatic change — say, a year or two."

"You've built a shelter, then?"

"I didn't have to build it," he said with a smile. "The main advantage of this place is the wine cellars. They were dug over a century ago by Chinese laborers. I only had to modify them — fill in some, reinforce others" — he set down his goblet to mold square structural shapes from the firelight with his big hands — "and put in the security and shielding. But say, now's as good a time as any to see them. It's always night down there anyway. Why don't you come along?"

Arising, he ushered me back through the dining room into the spacious old kitchen. He opened a plank door a few steps away from the entry to his glassed-in security center. As he passed through, I felt a draft of cold air; Fearing sniffed at it and turned to me with a hint of annoyance. "I can't seem to get rid of that musty, damp smell in the tunnels. But the occupancy area is force-ventilated with high-volume fresh-air filters. Only the best, you'll see!"

When the row of fluorescent tubes along the apex of the descending passage flared yellow, I could see that the stone stairs had been surfaced with steel grids and that handrails had been bolted to the masonry of the walls. I

followed my host down, feeling a little uneasy at being plunged suddenly from twentieth-century technology into musty history. He stopped at the bottom of the stairway, in a narrow hall with a row of metal fire-resisting doors set in one wall. One of them was a double door, which he unlocked and threw wide to reveal his Blazer, waiting in a garage whose far end was a rolling overhead steel door. "The original wine cellars were stocked through this side entry," he explained. "I've made it into a secure, unshielded garage. After all, the fallout radiation shouldn't hurt the wagon."

As he was checking the locks in the garage, I examined the construction of the interior passage. It was an amalgam of discolored old masonry and timbers with fresh new cinder blocks and steel I-beams. "I can't do any better for the floor surface than the original flagstones," Fearing said when he rejoined me, pointing to the large slabs roughly fitted beneath our feet. "Some of them are six feet across and eight or ten inches thick."

He led me to another door; it opened onto a half-flight of stairs leading down at right angles. "We're still under the house, but this right-angle bend puts us out of reach of gamma rays." He paused in a shorter, lower corridor. Looking at the walls, I could see that the masonry columns and timbers were thicker here, made to sustain the pressure of the greater depth, although the steel I-beams were of the same gauge.

The musty smell was stronger at this level. The floor was damp, and there were traces of nitre on the walls, even on the newer blocks. Yet I saw no sign of flooding. At the end of the passage was a windowless, yellow-painted steel door. Set in the wall beside it was a stainless steel nine-button panel that looked equally impervious to damage.

Fearing walked forward, to screen the panel from my vision with his body while he punched in a lengthy combination. "Take it from me, nobody could burn or grind their way through this door. It's impregnable. True, the areas we've seen so far aren't totally secure, but they have special defenses I haven't shown you. And all the really vital systems are in here."

At his touch the door swung inward, and the lights beyond flickered to life. I couldn't repress a gasp of surprise, both at the size of the room and at its luxuriance. The plush furniture, the broad-curbed gas hearth, the waxed and polished flagstones softened here and there by woven rugs — all made the house above look spartan by comparison. The place had a vast profusion of furniture and goods, a kitchen area, toilet stalls, beds, all the appurtenances of daily living, plus additional equipment stored in shelves at the sides and back: carpentry tools, an electronics workbench, books, more computers, storage tanks and bins, and control boxes similar to those in the glassed-in booth upstairs.

"It took a lot of coolies to dig this place out, you can imagine," Fearing said as he ushered me inside. "A few of them are probably still buried here—labor conditions weren't so soft in those days." He left the door open behind us; it appeared to be the room's only exit. "I can divide up this space

with movable partitions if I want to — but now, during Readiness Phase, I like to be able to see everything at a glance."

As my sense of proportion returned, I calculated that the shelter was roughly square, at least eighty feet across, with a row of masonry pillars widely spaced down its center. The ceiling arched twelve feet high at its peak, raftered by massive redwood beams, some of which Fearing had further braced with three-inch vertical steel pipe columns. He showed me where a few of the timbers were stained or shallowly eroded near the end—by fungus rot, he said. "But then, these logs have held for a century; they're good for another century at least. And you can bet the civilized world doesn't have that much time left."

I was given a lengthy tour of the shelter, with a narration that told much about current theories of survival in the post-nuclear world, and more, if I cared to listen, about my host's distinctive mindset. It all amounted to more data than I could take in at one time. Whether from boredom or from a reluctance to share Fearing's enthusiastic contemplation of planetary doom, I found my thoughts wandering far away from his lecture.

The strange antiquity of the place, beneath its modern trappings, gave rise in my mind to Poe-esque fancies, though not necessarily of a cheery nature. I could easily imagine myself as Fearing's victim, lured down into his dank cellar to taste a modern-day cask of Amontillado. I didn't mention the notion to him because I didn't think it would react well on his burdened mind. Instead, I feigned an interest in his monolog, nodding or muttering assent when it seemed called for.

By the time his enthusiasm began to run down, my weariness was probably evident. At length we headed back upstairs and, after a brief nightcap, to bed. Ron believed in rising and retiring early, and I was groggy from all his technical specifications.

Yet once in the guest room, as often happens, I found myself suddenly wide awake and restless. After all, I was tuned to more cosmopolitan hours, and strange beds were never made for sleeping. So I sat up a long while and read. Or, more precisely, I browsed through the dry, dismal government pamphlets on food canning and urban warfare Fearing kept by the bedside, and glanced at the even more depressing paperback suspense novels with swastikas on their covers. I ended up brooding sightlessly over a soiled, dogeared text on mycology that had obviously been used on field trips to identify exotic mushrooms.

It was hard, I mused, to see how Fearing had come to the place he had — how someone once so like myself, or at least so compatible, could end up so astoundingly different. He'd learned all the same lessons as I, yet apparently drawn all the opposite conclusions — going from peace freak to gun freak, from socialist to tax rebel, from libertarian to fire-breathing drill sergeant. In his fiction and in fact, he'd made paranoia his creed.

And yet, could I really condemn him? What if history should whimsically

decide to prove him right, as the communicasters all seemed to be heralding? Not being one to face Armageddon fearlessly myself, I couldn't say.

Even where Ruth and their kids were concerned, I felt unsure. But then, they could hardly be expected to live out their lives "on alert" in this glorified bunker. And even in Fearing's best-possible scenario, if the world did blow itself up, could anyone really sit out the fallout with him and stay sane? Of course, he wanted them to share in his cherished afterlife — because after all, what's a kingdom without subjects?

The nuclear family: a peculiarly American social unit, defined as the largest number of relatives capable of fitting into a fallout shelter — I shuddered to think of it! And so I sank into a shallow sleep, from which I was awakened not much after dawn by bustlings in the War Room and kitchen below.

That second day went much the same as the first, with deft meals, strategic briefings, and a more extensive tour of the grounds. I still waited in vain to hear some outpouring of concern from Fearing about his family, some indication that his mental radar was homing in on a solution to his problems. But if anything, he was cooler and more deliberate than the previous day—all too tightly in control of his emotions, it seemed to me.

The fog was higher that morning, obscuring only the tops of the forested hills. And as we walked outside, I could see the nearby landscape: weedy hillocks with rows of dead, blackened grapestocks. The climate had proven too damp for the vines, Fearing told me. Fungus had-destroyed their roots.

The rotting vineyards fell away some distance down the valley, ending against low, brush-covered hills. It struck me that there should be an easier road into the estate from that direction. When asked, my host said there had indeed been at one time. He pointed out where he'd bulldozed and blocked it with debris in order to make the approach more difficult.

As we circled the house, we came under the redwoods, passing into silent, towering, fern-carpeted galleries. "From here north, it's rough terrain all the way to the Russian River," Fearing said. He cautioned me to stay close to him and avoid touching anything. "Those wires are only carrying low voltage now, but if we shorted them out, I'd have to go back to the house and reset the alarms."

Looking around more carefully, I spied various wire fences, relays, and raw red welts in the earth where cables had recently been laid. I hesitated to ask what other man-traps his defenses included, lest he decide to try them out on me. But Fearing showed me around peaceably, pointing out technological features and also natural ones — edible plant species, huge yellow banana slugs clinging to redwood trunks, and exotic toadstools probing up from the freshly disturbed earth. "Some of these local varieties are even poisonous to the touch," he told me.

The mushrooms seemed prone to grow along the routes of the electric wires. In one place, upthrusting spaghetti-like masses had buckled and destroyed an asphalt path he'd laid through the forest to shield a coaxial cable.

"I swear the ground voltage stimulates the damned things," he said, stamping out a particularly venomous-looking pink cluster with his high-laced boots. "Of course, the mushroom that we see growing above ground is only the reproductive organ. The main network of the fungus colony goes on living all the time, deep in the soil and the decaying wood. That's why they're so hard to kill."

As the day advanced, my host began the maintenance rounds that seemed to take up a good part of his time, and I tagged along with him. A nervous part of my mind considered broaching the idea of an early departure, but against this weighed my sanctimonious resolve to comfort Fearing somehow. This was based on our past, if not present, friendship, and the subtle prod of my curiosity as well. It might somehow behoove me to understand this living paradox of a man better, if only for the sake of his wife and children. So I stayed, but I took care not to turn my back on him, lest his commando tendencies of the previous day should return.

The main work on the shelter had just been finished. Nevertheless Fearing found plenty to do, such as sealing walls and windows against leaks and retouching rusted metal. He took a lot of pains spraying wood and masonry with liquid fungicide from a twenty-gallon utility drum he wheeled around with him. Later, he set to work lubricating the large electric generator that practically filled one of the rooms near the garage. When I remarked on its size, he debated silently a moment before answering me.

"It's big because it's from a passenger cruise ship, Holloway. You know all the electric wiring and fencing I showed you around the grounds? Well, it was designed to keep out intruders, and it will. But it's really a dual-purpose system." He set down his oil can and hunkered around, squatting, to face me. "You've heard of EMP — the electromagnetic pulse that'll theoretically be generated by detonations of high-megaton weapons? The one they say will screw up electric circuits all over the world? Well, I rely a lot on electronics here, and something like that would really wipe me out — computers, radios, video security, everything: But a research scientist I know told me how to defend against it — still absolutely top secret, of course.

"If I set up my own electromagnetic field, generated from inside the shelter, and strong enough at the time of the strike to soak off most of the EMP's electrical force, it'll keep my circuits from being depolarized." Kneeling in front of the hulking engine, Fearing was once again making shapes in the air with his powerful hands. "The fence perimeter will serve that purpose, if I can just boost the power high enough during the missile exchange." He patted the dynamo, which was driven by a large, slumbering diesel engine. "So you can see why I need a machine this powerful."

I accepted this bit of superscience from Fearing without argument, as I'd accepted all of his explanations, even though I suspected that their value to him was more psychological than practical. My understanding of physics was insufficient to refute them, in any case.

So it went with his further rationalizations all afternoon, and over dinner, as he set forth his predatory, Darwinistic view of world affairs. He sketched his mental defenses in the air before him just as cooly and logically as he would have explained his fallout shelter design. It dawned on me that his crackpot realism was wholly appropriate, even fashionable, in a society obsessed with building muscles and missiles.

Yet I was on my guard, as always since our welcoming grapple. My detachment from his views and his curious mental state was great enough to keep me from really feeling or reacting to anything he said. Or so I thought, until the evening grew late and we were sitting before the fire with our bellies warmed by roasted game fowl and rum.

Fearing was saying, "You can see why I could never go through a divorce with Ruth. Everything I have is tied up in this place. A property split would force a court-ordered sale, then the whole shelter project would be lost, and we'd both be at risk!"

Unthinkingly, I heard myself coming to the fugitive wife's defense. "But can you really expect Ruth and the kids to live their lives on red alert the way you do? Not everyone believes there'll actually be a war. . . ."

"You don't, maybe — or the rest of the ignorant happyfaces out there! But she knows!" Fearing shook his head in baffled fury. "She's followed my logic every step of the way, all the years we've been together. Don't you see, this project has been my whole life!" A spasm of anger drew him upright in the leather chair. "Damn it, Holloway, a wife is supposed to understand these things!"

I tried again. "Most people can't even stand to think about it, Ron, much less eat, sleep, and breathe it. . . ."

"For Christ's sake! You listen to the radio, don't you?" His vehemence, strangely, had progressed almost to the point of laughter. "If the idiots somehow manage to muddle through this crisis, the next one'll get 'em! The Russkies will go for a first strike if we give them half a chance. Anyway, their weapons are more hair-trigger and unreliable than ours. And all the new systems are destabilizing ones — look at the MX, look at the Pershing, and look at Star Wars!" His hands deftly framed defensive shields in air. "Every year the response time gets shorter. Soon it'll be automatic retaliation, machines zapping machines — one huge nuclear booby trap!"

My voice cut in hoarsely over his. "Are you sorry about that, Fearing? Or are you gloating over it?" I was surprised to find myself almost out of my own chair, gripping the arms in restrained anger.

He looked at the floor and shook his head, shaking off as well the emotional import of my question. "It doesn't matter," he said after a moment. "It's inevitable, and she knew it. The kids, too." He propped his forehead on the knuckles of one fist, his arm braced in turn on his knee. "I offered them a way to survive, and they refused it. They chose death over life with me!"

"You can't put it in those terms, Ron." Emotionally jarred, I was back to reasonableness. "To see it like that is just plain . . . crazy. They only want to live ordinary lives."

"Is that so?" He raised his head and fixed his firelit eyes on me in a way he hadn't done before. "If I'm so crazy, then why are you here?"

"What do you mean?" I felt sweat tickling my brow, perhaps from the blazing heat of the hearth.

"Am I supposed to think it's a coincidence, your coming to visit during the biggest national crisis since Pearl Harbor?" As he regarded me, his face wore a cynical look that wasn't even close to a smile. "You know perfectly well this is the best place to be when it all goes down — the only place!" He laughed bitterly. "What makes you so sure that, just because we're old buddies, I'll let you weasel your way into my shelter?"

"Fearing, for God's sake!" I eased back into my seat, away from the pit of delusion that had just opened at my feet. "The thought never occurred to me! I only wanted to visit your new place, see Ruth and the kids . . . you know we've always been friends."

"Oh, yes, you and Ruth! That would be cozy, wouldn't it? The three of us riding out the apocalypse together, with me doing all the dirty work, so she'd see how much finer life can be with a truly sensitive male! You think I don't know you've had it on for Ruth all along?"

"Ron, now calm down! You're way out of line." I kept my eyes on his clenched, sweat-filmed face, forcing my gaze not to slip down to the huge knife sheathed at his belt. "That was never the way it was." He sat on the edge of his chair in a crouch that could easily have become a spring; I felt like an unarmed white hunter facing down a wounded lion. "But if you really feel that way, I'll get the hell out of here."

He kept his gaze on me, turning his face only slightly in the fireglow. "Maybe that would be a smart idea."

I nodded cautiously, feeling the alcohol fumes swirling inside my head at the motion. I glanced to the window and the pitch blackness outside. "Would tomorrow morning be soon enough?"

"Yes. Get some sleep." He eased back into his chair, and I stood up out of mine with a clumsy haste that probably showed my fear as well as my intoxication. I left him drinking alone by the fire and found my way upstairs to the guest room.

The door had a bolt on it, a small mercy. But I didn't doubt that Fearing could get through it bare-handed if he wanted to. Still, I was probably safer here than I would be out on the midnight road, escorted to the gate by my unstable host.

Was I really in danger? Maybe, with him drinking heavily. He was mentally on the brink of something — and not just because of Ruth's leaving. That seemed more an effect than a cause, a mere snag in his grandiose plans.

The potential for violence had always been there, certainly. In recent

years it'd been implicit in all his views, combative, reactionary, and agonizingly individualistic as they were. Nevertheless, I felt slightly stunned to have seen him slip suddenly from modern-day rationality into a madness as profound and passionate as any of Poe's tormented characters.

What was eating him up inside, anyway? He professed to hate Russians, but it seemed clear that he hated most Americans more — most of all, Americans like himself, who might move in on his survivalist domain. By some strange feat of mental agility, he managed to hate himself and simultaneously project his hatred on "them," convincing himself that "they" were conspiring to destroy him. And his belief made it so — not just in his family, but in the whole doomed realm of international affairs.

And in the end he accepted it, embraced it, staked his life on it — the nuclear dawn! Let a thousand mushrooms bloom! If the world survived, he would be the big loser.

Well, to hell with him! For me, no more playing doomsday games. I resolved not to intercede with Ruth on his behalf when I saw her again — if anyone ever did catch up with her, in her flight from his domination! For that matter, Fearing's ideas about me weren't so far off base — Ruth was an attractive, sensitive woman. Maybe I should get together with her and try to heal the gaping vacancy that'd opened up in my own life. I'd have to think about it, once I got a safe distance away from here.

I must have dozed off. When I next opened my eyes, my watch said it was past midnight. There was a cold blot of moisture where my slack mouth had touched the bedspread. I couldn't say just what awakened me, but my ears were echoing with a shrill, harsh sound like a klaxon or siren. Now that I lay listening in the dark, all I could hear was the loud, repeated impact of some piece of machinery, possibly a line printer.

I arose and cautiously opened the door. After a moment's listening I went out into the dark hall. I approached the faintly lit stairs, moving more confidently as it became evident that Fearing was occupied downstairs. Over the clacking teleprinter and the level murmur of a radio newscast, I could hear him moving around on the hardwood floor, slamming cabinets. I crept downstairs, stopping at the bottom to peer around the corner.

The fire had burned down to sparks and embers. The only light was in the War Room, and most of that was from the video monitors. Fearing's face was bathed intermittently in the green radiance as he turned from one column of marching characters to another. Under his arm he held a thick sheaf of fanfold computer output. The printer had stopped, and now the radio voice, sharp and tense, was audible from where I stood.

"... no further word from the White House at this hour as the Mediterranean situation continues to worsen. Soviet and American fleets have reportedly exchanged missile salvos, although our best sources indicate that these were not nuclear-armed. Meanwhile, NATO forces worldwide have been placed on highest alert..."

My heart stumbled in my chest, and my brain staggered. This was it. Everything was changed, and the night was suddenly charged with a new and all-encompassing tension. I braced myself to walk out and hail Fearing, yet I hesitated a moment. Mightn't that be more dangerous than facing a flight of Russian missiles?

His motions seemed calm, if brisk. As I watched, he went to a bank of controls and stabbed at various buttons and switches. Then he turned on his heel and left the glass room, slamming the door behind him so that it locked audibly. He threw open the kitchen door; beyond it I could see that the fluorescents in the cellar passage were lit.

"Fearing, wait!" Whether he heard my shout, I couldn't say for sure; he passed straight into the stairwell. I hurried out of my concealment after him, only to see the door to the cellars slam shut, cutting off most of the light. I heard latches engage on the other side.

"Fearing! It's me!" I reached the door and pounded on its oaken planks with the heels of my hands. "Ron, open up! I need the key!"

After a moment I paused. There was no crack under the door, so I couldn't see whether he was lingering on the other side. No sound of his footsteps could have gotten through it either — but from remoter parts of the house issued other sounds. There was a stubborn throbbing noise that must have been the diesel generator starting itself up. And in a moment, a rattle of chain drives and sheet metal that I recognized.

"The garage!" I cast about the dark kitchen a moment, then ran for the back door. It was dead-bolted, the key nowhere in sight. I unlatched the window beside it and wrenched open the sash. A burglar-proof screen separated me from the night outside, which was dark and sodden, awaiting more rain. I set to work kicking at the edges of the frame.

I didn't really want to face Fearing. I'd have been happy to jump into my car and drive away, even at risk of becoming a live pinball on his electronic battlefield. I didn't want his shelter. Moments ago, as I stood there listening to the radio news report with its culmination of my lifelong fears, my priorities had fallen into place.

I wanted to be with my family — with Lillian and the girls. It was the obvious thing, the only thing, even in a city that might soon become a flaring sunspot. To see them once more . . . all the differences that caused our separation were so slight, so laughable! I knew I had to drive back to Berkeley right away. If this was just another false alarm . . . I prayed that it was, knowing my feelings would stay the same.

And yet I couldn't make it on my own. I needed the key to Fearing's tankproof gate, and the promise of a safe passage through his other defenses. In his zeal to look out for Number One, my existence seemed to have slipped his mind. Or maybe my desperation added spice to his survival bid.

For that matter, didn't my host feel a similar urge to be with his loved ones? Wouldn't it be ironic if, having perfected his elaborate shelter, he left

it all behind in the moment of crisis and placed himself at risk for them? Somehow I couldn't picture it.

With a splintering noise the screen finally tore loose — the metal was strong, but the wooden sill that held it was riddled with dry rot. I eased through and dropped to the ground, stumbled once, and headed for the dugout garage entry.

Fearing had left his Blazer parked outside while he did his maintenance, I remembered; now he'd moved it inside and was closing the roller door, the only other entry to the shelter. The electric motor drive was clanking smoothly, and I could see the rectangular patch of light on the concrete ramp narrowing as the door descended.

It was only a dozen paces away, and my attention was on it as I ran. Nevertheless, I remember other brief impressions: blue foxfires playing in the woods behind the house, probably caused by Fearing's electric wiring; the diesel generator's sound changing to a quick subterranean throb, like a frightened heart — now it must be putting out its full current. Also, I thought I sensed faint movements and shiftings among the redwoods. In the blue flickering, I glimpsed hulking movements among the fern fronds there. Could the energy field be the cause? It must be pumping a lot of juice — the hairs were tingling on my neck, and the air itself felt charged with electricity.

I dropped down the embankment to the drive, as the garage door rolled to knee-height; by throwing myself flat and wallowing underneath it, I barely got through. With a spryness primed by my adrenaline rush, I scrambled to my feet, half-expecting to see Fearing drawing a bead on me with one of his magnums. But he wasn't in sight; the garage light had been switched off, and the inner double door was swinging shut on the yellow fluorescence beyond.

Throwing myself forward, I caught one of the door halves before it latched. I pushed through it into the passage, where the chug of the diesel was deafeningly loud. Still no glimpse of Fearing. I ran toward the angle leading to the cellars, then stumbled down the steep flight of steps.

I expected to see him at his lock panel, but I didn't. The door must already have been open when he arrived; now it was swinging ponderously shut. I dashed toward it.

"Fearing, wait!" I screamed. "You don't have to let me inside! Just give me the key to your driveway, and I'll leave!" As I came up against the door, it closed and bolted with pneumatic tightness.

"Wait, damn you!" I kicked vainly at the metal door, then jabbed and poked at the button panel beside it. "I don't want to steal your shelter, I just want out of here!"

A scratchy metallic voice sounded from somewhere overhead. "Getting out would be a good idea, Holloway. Do it now, or I'll divert carbon monoxide from the generator into that corridor. Nothing is going to make me open

this door, so you may as well give up."

"That's fine. All I want is the gate key! Just tell me where you keep a spare one, and I'll get it and go!"

"There are no spares outside this shelter. Don't try poking around for one, either. You might run into a booby trap."

"Christ, Fearing!" I stood before the blank door, unsure what direction to plead in. "How am I supposed to get away from here? On foot?"

"You work it out, Holloway," The voice through the intercom sounded less than human. "It's survival time. The old rules don't apply."

"You son of a bitch! You get a thrill out of this, don't you?"

Silence, except for the cardiac throb of the motor up the hall.

"Fearing, for the love of God!"

Still no answer. I stood there shaking, all my fear and rage at doomsday now focused on him. Feverishly, I thought of drums of gasoline, cases of dynamite, other ways of prying him out of his lair. Nothing workable came to mind.

But suddenly there came, as if in answer to my mental gropings, a trembling, prolonged concussion. The lights flickered once or twice, and I saw dust sift down from the masonry around me.

The shock wave of a nuclear strike — maybe San Francisco! I staggered, more from the sick futility in my gut than from the faint vibrations. Then I braced myself against the wall as a second impact shook the passage.

I heard a rattle of plaster and a groaning of I-beams. These didn't diminish, but carried over into the grinding of yet another, stronger shock that smote my shoulder and sent me staggering away from the wall. The whole passageway was shifting now, deforming almost visibly amid a howling chorus of tortured stone and timber.

What could it be? A direct nuclear hit, here in the middle of the Sonoma woods? What were the chances of that? Was the whole planet crumpling and imploding at once in a vast nuclear paroxysm? I reached for the bottom end of the stair rail and recoiled, my hand smarting from the static electric charge that leaped out of the metal. The very walls must be alive with the energy of Fearing's EMP defense field.

Staggering in the reeling corridor, I heard a grating noise and looked around to see the door of the shelter straining in its jamb. I shrank back against the stairs and watched it slowly buckle and topple forward, the masonry around it crumbling.

Its fall laid open the interior of the shelter and an even greater chaos. There stood Fearing, as stunned as myself, clinging to one of the vertical pipe beams of the vast room. All around him his rich furnishings bucked and heaved across the cellar floor, which was contorting even more violently than the ceiling overhead. On all sides it lurched and thrust up in strange mounds, undermining the support pillars and threatening to collapse the whole structure.

"Ron! Get out of there! Come on, this corridor is still sound!" I couldn't tell whether he heard me over the din of cracking timbers and grating stones. He just stood staring, stunned by the destruction of his dream or by the sheer magnitude of what was happening.

I could sympathize with him. In the urgency of the moment, my recent hatred was forgotten. I wouldn't have thought I had it in me, but I found myself leaving the relative safety of the corridor and moving toward him across the heaving rubble, intent on dragging him out of there. I went slowly, creeping by the light of the few flickering electric lamps that still rattled and dangled from the ceiling.

Then, as I saw the nature of the underground cataclysm close-up, I experienced some of Fearing's paralytic astonishment. The strange, thrusting mounds, I realized, were the broad flagstones of the cellar floor, driven relentlessly upward from beneath. And the pressure that drove them, incredibly, was the intense, relentless force of living things growing in the earth. They were toadstools, pushing up as they do in the forest — massively stimulated here, I suddenly understood, by Fearing's defensive electric force field. The hated life forms that so permeated the soil and the very stones and timbers of his house were suddenly bursting forth to destroy it.

I laughed half-madly at the realization as I worked my way between the mounds and the streams of rubble filtering down from the ceiling. Under the gradually uplifting flagstones, I could now see the pulpy swelling shapes, and even a pale phosphorescence. The stuff grew swiftly, amazingly, like yeast in a huge, clammy oven, stimulated by the tremendous energy of the generator that still throbbed in the background.

It was too impossible, too insane to believe — and so I ignored it, concentrating instead on Fearing's anguished presence in front of me. He still clung to the pipe beam, which now tilted well out of the vertical. I yelled at him wildly, extending my arm across a half-collapsed table even as I shrank to avoid a pulpy mass that swelled up hugely out of a gap in the floor at one side.

I think he saw me. His dilated, steadily blinking eyes turned from the terrors around him toward my face for a moment. But they swung away again, widening impossibly at some new horror, and he finally uttered a sound — a low, rasping scream.

I turned then and saw what Fearing saw — the sight that probably drove him utterly, irrevocably mad. For a long moment, close as I was, I thought it was just a hallucination. There, amid the mottled bulges and snaky tangles of the growing fungus, were pale, swollen human forms. Bloated faces and protruding limbs pushed up out of the ground by the fungus in an awful parody of life, as if reaching and groping for him. They were real, I knew finally. They were the bodies of Ruth and the kids — Fearing's wife and children, whom he'd poisoned, I assumed, and buried underneath the floor of his survival shelter.

Crouching there and gaping at them, he was beyond rescue, physically and mentally. And from that moment I was driven back from him by more upheavals and cascades of rubble. The structure of the place was doomed, the rafters weakened by greatly accelerated internal rot, the upright members buckled and driven aside by pressure from beneath. Now they were shaken by new shuddering impacts that told of the collapse of the house overhead. Glancing up, I gaped to see the very roof timbers splitting open and sprouting tentative pastel probes, living fingers of fungus.

Losing what resolve I had left, I hurled myself back across the broken ground. I sprawled into the corridor barely in time. Behind me the ceiling of the gallery fell thunderously down on Fearing and his possessions, emitting a blast of debris and mushroom-reeking air that blew me halfway up the stairs with its force.

The lights failed then, as did the chugging of the generator. And so I was forced to dig and grope my way out of the ruins in darkness.

By the time I managed to pry up a corner of the garage door, it was light outside. The sky was sodden and leaden as ever, and the rain was already melting the remains of the huge, abnormal fungal blooms huddled around the redwood trunks in the nearby forest. They seemed to have died as impossibly fast as they grew, once the unnatural electrical source of their vitality was removed.

I found that the damage extended only a few dozen yards from the wreckage of the house and from Fearing's underground cables. My car had been crushed by a falling chimney, so I made my way out on foot to the road, thence to civilization.

Civilization there still was, as near as Calistoga, I learned. There'd been no nuclear strikes. The war threat was narrowly averted once again, and international relations soon cooled back to their normal cold simmer.

So went the fall of Fearing's house, and so I told it to all who questioned me in subsequent days. It was a harrowing lesson, and I plan to remember it and make good on the resolutions it brought; I think Lillian agrees with me. Whether the sheriffs and federal officers will ever really believe it and what they'll find when they exhume the cellar aren't important. Even the most skeptical of them don't hold me responsible for the doom that overtook Fearing and his family. They attribute my "hallucinations" to mushroom poisoning.



by Paul Di Filippo art: John Lakey

The author is a native Rhode Islander who got hooked on science fiction at the age of eleven. After bumming around Europe, attempting various odd jobs, and subsisting on the Steinbeck diet — beans, rice, and red wine — he decided that all these activities guided him to a career as a writer. His stories have appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Twilight Zone, Night Cry, and Fantasy Tales; this is his first sale to Amazing® Stories.

The Hesperides. How far away and unreal those islands seem now. A place out of time, cushioned and insulated by wealth, where the whims of the rich collided with the unpredictable passions of their playthings — and the lesser of those two forces gave way, with results often merely ludicrous, but sometimes all too tragic.

The Hesperides. Sun, money, tailored bodies, hot and violent emotions, whispers in the night. It all runs together in my memory now, a blurred spectrum like those caused by the oil slicks from the hydrofoils in the Bay, shifting, mutable, impossible to grasp. A moiré on the silk covering a woman's haunch.

A few incidents stand out starkly, though. And these are the ones I would most forget.

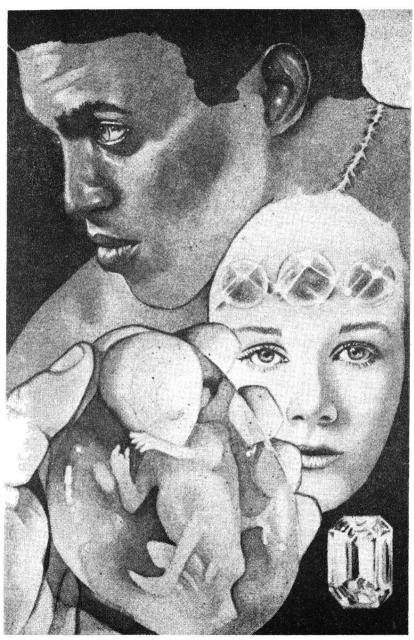
The Hesperides. Once I called them home.

Behind the bar in La Pomme d'Or, I counted bottles. Scotch, tequila, vodka, retsina (hard to acquire since the coup in Greece), a nauseating peach liqueur which was all the rage that year. Whenever I found I was running low on a particular item, I would key in an order code and quantity on the submicro hanging from my belt. Eventually, I'd squirt the whole order over the fiber-optic line to the mainland. With luck, the shipment would arrive on tomorrow morning's 'foil.

The big windows onto the veranda were deopaqued. Morning sunlight poured in, giving the interior of La Pomme an oddly wholesome look. With the bi-O-lites off, the air empty of smoke and perfume, the nuglass chairs resting upside down atop the ceramic tables, the stage bare, my club looked innocent and untainted, holding no hint of the sordid dramas enacted there nightly.

I liked it best at this brief hour, but the night came all too quickly.

When I reached the middle of the bar, I flicked on the radio to catch the news.



Kid Charlemagne

"— murder. In other news, a delegation of ASEAN diplomats will ride an ESA Hermes shuttle to an orbital meeting with President Kennedy, who is occupying the High Frontier White House this month. The delegation is hoping to spur an investigation into the recent tragedy in Singapore. On a lighter note, fashion-followers will be glad to hear —"

I filtered out the unimportant babble as I continued the count.

My head must have been below the bar when he walked in. I always left the door open in the morning so the salt-freighted breeze could wash the stale indoor smells away, although I didn't start business till one.

In any case, when I popped up, I found myself confronting him.

He was a slim fellow of twenty-two, or thereabouts — young enough to be my son. His features were very delicate, yet with nothing androgynous or feminine about them: simply finely chiseled. His skin was the color of a polished chestnut; his eyes, a luminous blue. He wore a patched and saltstained khaki shirt and denim cutoffs. Across his chest ran a bandolier, holding something concealed against his back.

My eyes lingered for a moment on his throat as I tried to puzzle out what sort of necklace he wore, so tightly clasped. Then I realized it was no piece of jewelry, but rather a scar, a pale cicatrice stretching nearly from ear to ear.

For some reason the sight of the scar so threw me, marring as it did his otherwise classic appearance, that I grew flustered, as if I were the intruder. This boy — appearing so unexpectedly, like Pan stepping from behind a shrub too small to conceal him — struck a series of notes in me, the totality of which I couldn't immediately grasp. To compensate, I shot my hand forward with rather more energy than was appropriate.

"Hello," I said.

He took my hand. His was calloused from manual work; his grip, firm. "Hello," he replied.

His voice was another shock. I had expected something youthful and dulcet, in keeping with his looks. But instead, from that violated throat came a boozy, raspy, seemingly whiskey-seasoned growl. I immediately thought of Dylan in his prime, thirty-odd years ago, then added another whole layer of Tom-Waits scratchiness. The effect was jarring, but not unpleasant to hear.

The population of the Hesperides was small and stable and exclusive enough so that one could come to know everyone — barring the everchanging horde of daytrippers, of course. Even the few transients at our small hotel had no anonymity. This man, with his boyish attractions and anomalous voice, would have caused a sensation among our bored citizens — men and women alike — and I would surely have heard of him within hours of his arrival. I could only assume that he was a daytripper, if an atypical one, and that the morning ferry had arrived early.

"Just got here?" I asked.

"Nope. I swam in last night."

I stared at him hard. The California coast was a mile and half of choppy

water away.

He must have read my disbelief. Stepping back from the bar (I spotted his bare, gnarly feet), he unslung the object on his back. I recognized it for a musikit covered in a waterproof sheath. (Two decades ago, the components of that kit would have filled a room.)

"This is all I own," he said. "It's not heavy enough to slow me down."

I chose to believe his unwavering blue gaze.

"Where'd you sleep?"

"On the beach."

So much for our vaunted private security force. The island's homeowners would have a dozen kinds of fit if they ever learned how easily this kid had invaded their precious enclave. Perhaps I could tweak Deatherage somehow with this.

"Well," I said for lack of a better comment. "You need something to eat?" He smiled. It was a hundred watts. "Only secondarily. What I really want is a job." He nodded toward the stage.

I thought about it. I had had no one booked for the past week, relying on autosynthesized stuff and satellite-beamed performances. I could sense that my patrons were growing bored, preferring the glamour of live musicians as a background for their assignations and spats.

"Where have you played before?"

"Just Mexico. Where I grew up."

Immediately, I got nervous. I couldn't afford to hire an illegal and lose my license if caught.

The boy — so damn good at sensing my thoughts — dug in the pocket of his tattered shorts. He handed me his ID, gritty with sand. The holo that leaped out from the plastic card was his. I flexed the card to reveal his status; it turned bright green, proclaiming him a citizen. His name was given as Charlie Maine.

"My father was an American," he said with his ingenuous smile. "My mother was from Mexico City. We had to stay south for a long time, till my dad died. Then I came north."

I gave him back his card. Somewhere in our short conversation, I had decided to take a chance on him. No doubt there was a selfish undercurrent to my thoughts, imagining how he would draw the rich and lonely widows in.

"You've got a job," I said, and we shook once more. "How do you like to be billed for publicity?"

White, white teeth flashed. "Kid Charlemagne."

I smiled for the first time in a long while. "Cute." Memories turned over, roiled, and one floated to the surface. "Hey, wasn't there a song once —"

"Steely Dan," he said. "From the '70s. My father used to play it all the time."

He wasn't smiling anymore, and neither was I.

We both knew it was a very sad song.

* * *

On the night I introduced the two of them, I wore a linen suit the color of a mummy's cerements, a raw, unbleached beige. Men's suits that year had no lapels, and so my signature flower — a black carnation — was pinned above my heart.

The interior of La Pomme was dark, save for the soft blue-green phosphorescence provided by the bi-O-lites on each table, and those in a line down the bar. I always thought the whole effect was one of an undersea grotto, lit by the slow fires of the drowned men and women who sat as if on coral thrones, more lively than corpses, yet no more feeling.

Full fathom five thy father lies. . . .

The veranda windows were two huge slabs of ebony. By the closed door stood one of Deatherage's men, solicitous bouncer and ruffled-feathersmoother, looking uncomfortable in his suit.

I circulated among my patrons, attending to their frivolous, often only subtly implied desires. As usual, I hated myself for fawning over them. But there was little in the world at that time which I felt capable of doing, and the unassuming niche I had carved for myself here offered a certain contemptible security.

Charlie had yet to appear for his first set. Only the third night of his playing, and already attendance was up. As I had speculated, many of the islands' sad and predatory older women, and not a few of the men, were drawn to him, as if he released some pheromone of youth and potency. At a single table, I spotted Laura Ellis, Simone Riedesel, and Marguerite Englander: the full set of immaculately coiffed, well-preserved Fates, each with enameled nails long and sharp enough to snip threads.

Back at the bar, I savored my usual mineral water with a twist of lemon, and waited for Charlie to appear.

Exactly at midnight, the Kid materialized onstage, lit by a single spotlight. Seated on a tall stool, he had his bare feet twisted in the rungs. He wore a white shirt of mine that bloused loosely on him and his old blue shorts. The long flat case of his musikit — like his namesake's broadsword — was balanced on his lap.

The Kid began to play.

Like some beautifully plumaged bird with a raucous yet arresting call, Charlie sang. He knew plenty of old songs that were guaranteed to touch places in us antiques that we had deemed dead — his father's legacy, I suppose. He sang the newest tunes heard daily on the radio with a freshness akin to the then-popular singer, Stella Fusion. And every tenth number or so, there would come an original piece — haunting mixes of Caribbean, Mexican, and American rhythms, carrying elusively poetic images.

When he finished, the applause was real and tremendous.

Above the clapping, from the table nearest me, I heard a bitter voice say, "The bloody little kaffir sings like a black crow." A sharp bark of laughter

answered.

I looked to see who had spoken and shattered the magic.

Seated together were Koos van Staaden, his daughter, Christina, and Henrik Blauvelt.

Van Staaden and his daughter were refugees, having fled South Africa — or rather, to use its official name, Azania — six years ago when that aching, tortured country finally erupted. Van Staaden had been Administrator of the Transvaal at the time. During his tenure, he had apparently accumulated quite a fortune, most of which he had managed to transfer abroad prior to the revolution. He and Christina, I knew, had caught one of the last flights out of Jo'burg. Maria, his wife, had been at their country home that week. No doubt her scattered bones had bleached the color of my suit by now.

Spiteful gossip maintained that on the walls of van Staaden's house hung relics of his homeland, among which was a sjambok, its business end tipped with flakes of brown. I couldn't quite credit even van Staaden with such an offense.

Blauvelt, a burly fellow countryman, had been an expatriate in England when the government fell. Nowadays, he acted as Christina's companion.

Like so many wealthy dissolutes without goals, they had ended up in the Hesperides.

I watched van Staaden warily as the patter of applause faded. If he continued to voice his drunken racial slurs, I'd have to sic Deatherage's man on him. I had plenty of HUB patrons richer than he whom I had no wish to offend.

As it was, his daughter intervened.

"Quiet, father," she said firmly. "I think he sings very well."

Her grip on his arm seemed to drain all belligerence from him. Across his riven face, his love for his daughter warred with his hate. Finally, he raised his glass to his lips and drank deeply, a tired and defeated old relic.

I studied the strange tableau they presented. Van Staaden was a cranelike figure with a stubble of white hair and a sharp nose. Blauvelt was a beefy man in his thirties, with a dandy's mannerisms ill-suited to his heavy body. Christina — well, Christina, I thought then, no more fitted in visually with those two than a nun in a rogue's gallery, or Circe amid her swine.

She was a willowy, small-breasted woman with hair the color and fineness of platinum threads, which was styled in bangs across her brow and feathery down the back of her long neck. Her nose was tiny, her lips always hidden by jet lipgloss. Tonight, she wore lilac pants and top, with white sandals. Like half the women in the club, she had a small lifegem affixed at the base of her throat, which fluxed in time with her pulse.

The whole potentially ugly scene was over in seconds, much shorter than I have taken to describe it. Charlie had vanished from the stage, and the club buzzed anew with meaningless talk.

Ten minutes later, I felt a gentle tug at my elbow as I mingled.

I turned to face Christina van Staaden.

"I know you overheard my father's tactless comment, Mr. Holloway," she said. "I'd like to apologize for him. You will make the proper allowances for his situation, I hope."

I nodded without expressing my real opinion. It was something I had grown quite good at.

"Wonderful," she said. "It's all forgotten, then. By the way, I really do feel that Kid Charlemagne is a most exciting performer. I wasn't just sticking up for him out of sympathy. In fact, I was wondering if I could possibly meet him."

She paused for a moment. Then, as if it possessed the utmost importance, she said, "I understand he's from Mexico."

Again, I nodded without comment, neither confirming nor denying. I was trapped in her eyes.

Once a friend brought me a piece of olivine from Hawaii. Formed in a volcano's heart, the gem was like translucent jade, hard and impenetrable, with fascinating depths.

Christina's eyes were two shards of olivine.

I thought about her request. I neither liked nor disliked the woman at this point. Yet I felt indebted to her for defusing her father. And of course, she could always approach Charlie on her own if I didn't introduce her.

But why try to dissect my motives at this late date?

"Okay," I said. "Let's go now."

Backstage, I knocked on the door to Charlie's small dressing room. There was no answer, so we went in.

We found Charlie reading. He pored intently over a paperback I had given him. It was the '95 edition of Ballard's *Vermilion Sands*, with the Ralph Steadman cover.

"Charlie," I said. He looked up.

Sky met sea.

Something snapped closed in the air between them.

"Christina van Staaden," I said.

But neither heard me.

The next morning, I sat at a table in the empty room still pulsing with the ghosts of last night's events, figuring accounts. A shadow fell across the screen of the submicro.

Across from me stood Leon Deatherage, head of Hesperides security, having arrived in his usual silence.

I filed my useless reckoning of gains and losses and flicked the machine off. "Sit down, Leon, and save your energy for evildoers."

Deatherage lifted a heavy transparent chair off the table with one hand and deftly set it upright. He dropped down into it with a grace that always surprised me in such a big man. From his pocket he took a pack of Camel vegerettes. He lit one, puffed briefly, and made a face.

"Five goddamn years, and I still can't stand these. My only consolation is that I helped to nail the bastards."

Before becoming head of the islands' security, Deatherage had worked for the L.A. police force. He had been part of the team responsible for capturing the domestic eco-terrorists who had released the tailored tobbaco-mosaic virus that had ended all cultivation of that crop. The Sierra Club never recovered from the revelation that the conspirators had solicited and received funding from them.

"What can I do for you, Leon?" I asked. "Do you need a drink this early in the morning? I won't tell anyone." I pushed back from the table, as if to rise.

Deatherage made a magician's move, and suddenly in the palm of his hand lay a small empty white plastic shell the size of a quarter. It was color-coded like an antique transistor with three dots of red.

My stomach churned. I wanted to puke my breakfast. Somehow I kept it down.

My face must have blanched. Deatherage smiled. Suddenly, I regretted taunting him.

"Recognize it, do you, Holloway? I thought it might touch a chord in your past. Do you want to name it, or shall I?"

I wet my lips. Merely to summon up the name took an immense act of will.

"Estheticine," I said.

"Exactly. In a nice convenient dermal patch. Would you like to guess where I found it?"

I said nothing.

"On the beach, with the used condoms and the empty bottles, during my morning jog."

I swallowed gratefully. For an instant, I had been sure he was going to claim it had come from the club.

"I'm clean," I said.

Deatherage looked at me solemnly. "I know that. Do you think I'd come to you if I thought you were the user? I know what you went through to kick the stuff. I want your help. I've just been on the phone to friends on the mainland. They say that, due to a series of busts, sources for E have dried up. It's almost impossible to score now. Whoever's using this might get your name somehow and come to you. At which point, you come to me, correct?"

I nodded.

"Very good." Deatherage rose as if to leave, then sat again, seeming to remember something. I knew it to be a charade. The man forgot nothing.

"By the way. This singer of yours. Is he a Mex?"

"Why do you ask?"

"A lot of this stuff comes through Mexico. It could be that he's our connection"

"He's a citizen," I said. "You can check his card. And he told me he's a HUB." I don't know why I lied, except that Deatherage had upset me so much.

"Hip Urban Black, huh? Well, we'll see." Deatherage stood without pretense now. "Remember what I said, Holloway." He left.

A lot of unpleasant memories swarmed in to fill his seat.

Once the world had seemed bright and beautiful. That was when I was young, and my lover was alive.

His name — we won't get into his name. What essentials do names capture? He was a charming young mestizo boy of no fixed abode or occupation, whom I had met on a business trip to Guatemala, just before the war. (Once I had another job, another life, when I lived much as everyone else.)

Picturing his face now, for the first time in years, I realized how much Charlie resembled him.

I managed to get the boy a visa after I returned Stateside, although even then, in the days before mandatory citizen IDs, the authorities were tightening up on immigration of the unskilled. I had to grease many bureaucratic palms.

I thought I was doing him an immense favor, lifting him up out of his poverty and squalor. I little knew then that I was arranging his death.

Life in the First World did not agree with him. Everything was too confusing; there were too many choices, too many options. He got into a fast crowd, took risks, became promiscuous — picked up AIDS.

He died six months before they announced the drug that cured me of the infection he had passed on to me.

Infection of the body, but not the heart.

When his death came, the world grew pale and dingy, an echoing stage filled with mocking mannequins and hollow props.

When I found estheticine, a new kind of beauty returned to fill the void. Unnaturally sharp, crystalline, infinitely seductive and ultimately unsatisfying, promising eventual meaning beyond words that never materialized.

But once estheticine left me — I truly feel that the drug spurned me, as if I were not good enough for it, rather than I the drug — how did the world look?

Curiously two-dimensional. A black-and-white place, leached of all emotional resonance.

Something of an improvement, I suppose, over the pain of stage two.

Thanks to estheticine.

Uglybuster, E, lotos, beardsley — call it what you will, it remained the quintessential drug of the late, late twentieth century.

In a world of ever-increasing ugliness, who did not occasionally wish that everything might appear beautiful?

At the beginning of the decade, experiments on the perception of beauty came to a head. (The publicity images persist: the wired people at the ballet, the museum, the edge of the Grand Canyon, their responses being plumbed and recorded.) Exact ratios and mixes of neurotransmitters were fingered as the agents; sites of stimulation in the brain were charted. Synthesis succeeded. The result: estheticine.

To be used only judiciously, of course. Let the connoisseur brighten Beethoven, magnify Mozart, uncage Cage.

Most definitely not recommended as a crutch.

How surprised the experts were when the public began to swallow it like candy, and the GNP dropped by three per cent in six months. How quick the authorities were to outlaw it. How fast the underground sales sprang up.

And now it had reached me here, on my dead-end island in the sun.

Two concerns filled all my free time during the weeks following the meeting between Charlie and Christina.

Who was using estheticine on the island?

What was going on between my young singer and the woman with the semiprecious eyes?

I made no headway on the former. Deatherage did not approach me again, and try as I might, I could detect no users among my clientele — least of all Charlie, who I knew needed the drug no more than a fish needed a substitute for the clean sea in which it daily swam.

As for my impractical lie about Charlie's origins, Deatherage never called me on it, perhaps believing my former addict's brain was turning to mush.

I made more progress on the latter topic. In a sense, learning what they did together was easy. In another way, baffling.

Everyone in the Hesperides — except the reclusive and rum-sodden Koos van Staaden — knew the two were lovers. That much of their relationship was evident in their every gesture.

The two of them were together continuously, except when Charlie was performing.

Wearing hemosponge units, they dived in the azure waters surrounding the Hesperides. Once they even swam out and down to the UCLA research station bedded on the ocean floor. I remember how tired Charlie was at that night's performance. The muscles in his lean flat legs twitched as he sat astride his stool, and he had to cancel his last set of the evening.

They rode motor scooters (no cars were allowed on the islands) all over the hilly interior and along the cliff paths. One morning, as I stood on the veranda watching the crowds of gawking daytrippers (the feverish pleasures indulged in by the rich in plain view on the beach never failed to shock them), I saw two small figures atop Sheepshead Bluff. I recognized the col-

ored smudges intuitively for Charlie and Christina.

Sunlight glinted off the chrome of their bikes and caused my eyes to tear. For a moment, I had the frightening delusion that they were about to jump, fulfilling some incomprehensible lovers' suicide pact.

Water-skiing and hang-gliding, swimming and racing hydroplanes, the two enjoyed all the Hesperides had to offer. It seemed an idyll of young love, an eternal summer of instant fulfillment.

That much, as I've said, was easy to discern.

The baffling part was understanding how two such disparate personalities meshed. What had really prompted Christina to ask for that introduction? I couldn't reconcile infatuation with a certain flintiness I sensed in her soul.

I felt I had to know more about her. I decided Blauvelt was the one to pump.

Around noon one day, I managed to catch the man as he idled past the club. At my insistence, he came inside for a drink. He favored the awful peach liqueur I so disliked to stock.

We sat at the same table where Deatherage and I had had our disturbing talk. I naturally compared the two men. Although of a size with the security chief, Blauvelt was somehow spongy, an amorphous thing masquerading as a man. In his sweaty tennis clothes, he looked like a wax dummy left too long in the sun. I knew I would have no trouble getting information from him.

"Henrik," I said, "I need your help." He looked flattered. "You understand that I have an enormous investment tied up in that singer of mine. He's good for business, and I don't want anything to happen to him."

I was sure the mercenary angle would appeal to Blauvelt. His cynical smile confirmed it.

"So," I continued, "I need to know all about Christina, and her relationship with him. After all, we wouldn't want her father causing trouble, would we? How is it, by the way, that he's not aware of what's going on?"

Blauvelt sipped his syrupy drink. "Old Koos — he thinks I'm still chaperoning his daughter. He talks to no one — thinks all you Americans are rooineks, anyway. And I'm not about to tell him his girl's seeing Charlemagne. Not as long as Christina keeps the money flowing my way."

"Is Christina the type to form a romantic attachment so quickly?"

Blauvelt scowled, as if I had hit upon some sore spot. "Not in my book. There was never anything between us. Christina's been a different person since the accident."

"Accident?"

"Back in the Transvaal. One night on the road between Jo'burg and Pretoria, she drove right into a stupid kaffir and his cows crossing the highway. Her Mercedes flipped three times. Stupid wog was killed outright, of course. Christina sustained a lot of brain damage. Ever notice her hair?"

"Thin and white, I believe."

"Grew back that way after they shaved her head for the operation. Used to be black as night before. Just like her mother's. Those bangs of hers — they hide the scar on her forehead. Notice how she always wears a cap when she swims. She's very self-conscious about it."

"She seems quite normal now. How did they repair her injuries?"

Blauvelt waved his hand negligently, as if to dismiss as unimportant all things he could not understand. "Tissue transplant of some sort. Newest thing, it was. God, we had some smart bloody people before the bad times. But even they couldn't stop the black bastards, could they? Even Abombing Capetown didn't slow them down."

He drained his drink and got to his feet. I considered Christina's fleshedin past.

"Do you think it's love, then?" I asked.

Blauvelt shrugged. "Love for herself, yes. For that little songbird — hardly." Then he left.

Alone, I tapped into the medical data bases, curious as to how Christina's apparently massive wounds had been healed.

Embryonic brain tissue had proven to be the only matter that could be planted to adapt and grow in the adult brain, repairing and substituting for lost sections. No *in vitro* process had yet been perfected to serve as an ethical source of the tissue, and so the procedure was not advocated in the West.

In old South Africa, they had had embryos to spare — "donated" by pregnant slum-dwellers in Soweto and elsewhere.

The clinics where such operations had been performed were the first places to be torched in the war. Then they were dismantled brick by charred brick.

The first time Charlie and Christina disappeared, it was for only three days, and I wasn't too concerned. I, who never left the confines of La Pomme, knew best of anyone how close and stultifying the Hesperides could become. I assumed that they felt at last the need to explore their feelings for each other in a different setting. That could have been Charlie's motives for the unscheduled trip, at least. What alien urges swayed Christina, I could not say.

In any event, my response was limited and simple. I posted notice of Charlie's absence, pretending to my customers that it had been planned, and contacted the mainland agency I used for a new singer on a day-by-day basis. She was talented enough, I supposed, but lacked Charlie's genius.

It was during the substitute's first song, as I stood in the club with its strangely altered and diminished atmosphere, that I realized what freshness the Kid had brought to our artificial paradise. Had he arrived that morning weeks ago riding a dolphin and clutching a lyre, his advent could not have been more portentous or fraught with consequence.

My idle wondering about how Christina had managed such a long separa-

tion from her possessive father was satisfied when the rumor-mill ground out information on the whereabouts of Henrik Blauvelt. He had chartered a small boat, filled it with peach liqueur and two women, and anchored in Sturgeon Cove the day Charlie and Christina left. Evidently, in Koos van Staaden's eyes, Blauvelt and Christina were off sailing.

On the morning of the fourth day, Jaime Ybarrondo, owner of the Hesperides' lone hotel, called me. His bearded face floating in the holotank struck me like some apparition in a Delphic pool as he told me that Charlie had returned to his hotel room sometime after midnight. I thanked him and switched off.

I contained myself until Charlie arrived that evening at the club. I let him reach his dressing room before I joined him.

He sat on the couch with his musikit cradled gently in his lap. I recognized the tune he was fingering: "Love's Labours Lost," by the beaIIles. He had programmed the drums to sound exactly like Ringo, while he played Julian Lennon's part.

I was shocked at the changes in his face. An indefinable something had left him, perhaps his air of invincible youth. New lines seemed graven about his cerulean eyes. His lips were tightly compressed.

He finally looked up at me. He swiped nervously at his black curls, shut his machine off, and sat back.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," he replied.

Having recapitulated our first conversation, we halted.

"Good to have you back," I said.

He smiled. It was only fifty watts.

"Where've you been?"

"South."

I waited, but he volunteered nothing else.

"Well," I said. "Do you feel like playing tonight?"

"Sure," he nodded. "Sure."

There seemed to be nothing else to say, so I made a half-turn, thinking to go. His lifted hand stopped me. I swung back.

His right hand had come to rest — unconsciously, I believe — on the scar around his neck. Suddenly, I thought how it looked as if someone had wrapped a piece of barbed wire around his throat and it had sunk permanently beneath his skin. Life in anarchic Mexico City had been chaotic before the UN forces stepped in. I thought then of Christina's hidden scar, and my invisible ones. In a searing, timeless epiphany, I felt the three of us bound together into one crippled being.

"My life hasn't been easy," Charlie rasped. He looked down, as if ashamed of even such minor self-pity. "I was only looking for love — and to give it. That's all."

Two steps closed the distance between us. I stood by his seated figure with

my hands on his bony shoulders while he silently wept.

That night his singing broke the heart of everyone else in the packed club in revenge.

Two weeks passed. Christina and Charlie still were constant companions. The rest of the world revolved in its time-accustomed ways.

The three Fates — Ellis, Riedesel, and Englander — started a new fad raging. Eschewing clothes, they had gold circuits printed directly onto their skin. A small battery pack in one earring caused the circuits to emit mournful drones, facetious beeps, or catchy jingles out of the button-speaker that was the matching earpiece. Soon, the whole island was a carnival of naked noisy flesh laced with gold diagrams. The poor fellow who had been drafted into layering the circuits — a retired billionaire from Silicon Valley — saw so much female skin during the fad that he was later forced to spend a month at the monastery in Carmel.

Among the daytrippers, I noticed the proliferation of tee shirts that read:

NO MORE SINGAPORE?

ACCIDENT, HELL - IT WAS WAR!

The televised images of the millions of corpses in the sterilized country did much to offset our island's natural gaiety. In Las Vegas, bookmakers were offering 3-2 odds that the Philippines were the source of the CBW agent that had eliminated their rivals in the cheap-labor market. (Insiders picked Malaysia.) Already the media were calling it "The South Pacific Commerce Wars."

I didn't envy "Young Joe" his task of mediating the dispute. But no one had ever promised him the president's job would be easy.

At the end of those particularly frantic two weeks, my own private world felt a tremor high on the emotional Richter scale.

Charlie and Christina disappeared a second time, for five days.

They returned for a night. I never even got a chance to see him. Then they vanished for a week.

When they returned again, Koos van Staaden had somehow learned of his daughter's affair.

Deatherage stood massively between van Staaden and me. The old man wasn't shouting — that would have been less upsetting. Instead, his voice was dead and controlled, as if artificially generated.

When Blauvelt had phoned me that van Staaden was on his way to the club to confront either Charlie or me, I had summoned Deatherage as mediator.

"I insist that he be fired, Holloway," van Staaden persisted in his monotone. "He's seduced my daughter and is obviously no more than a wild rutting bull. No white woman on the island is safe while he's around."

I opened my mouth to voice something appropriately caustic, but

Deatherage, sensing my anger, intervened.

"The man's done nothing to warrant his dismissal, Mr. van Staaden. From all accounts, the affair between your daughter and the Kid was mutual. And she is an adult. I'm afraid that your only recourse is to try to change your daughter's mind, if you continue to disagree with her."

"She's locked herself in her wing of the house. Won't come out, either." Van Staaden paused. "In the old days, where I come from, Chief Deatherage, a man in your capacity would clap this Kid person in jail for such an offense, and then supervise his hanging."

It was out in the open now, and although Deatherage and I had both known van Staaden's true feelings, to hear them voiced shocked us silent.

Deatherage spoke first. "We don't have your goddamn exalted but defunct system in this country, mister."

Van Staaden held Deatherage's gaze, a defiant specter. "Then someone should kill the beast personally."

Deatherage went to grab van Staaden's lapels, found none, and settled for his shirt front. "That's an actionable threat, van Staaden, and could get you locked up. If I hear any more such shit, it will."

Van Staaden twisted free and banged out the door.

I phoned everywhere, seeking news of Charlie, but couldn't find him. I wondered if he was closeted with Christina in her half of van Staaden's house high atop Bosky Knob. I remembered him as he had been that night when I held him while he cried.

The next morning Deatherage came by to take me to see the Kid's broken body on the rocks below Bosky Knob.

It was literally the first time I had left La Pomme d'Or in three years. The sunlight felt heavy and hot atop my unshielded head. The sand felt queer beneath my bare feet. Deatherage had come with the news while I still wore my robe, and I had gone out immediately with him.

Charlie's death was obviously the catalyst for my leaving the dark sanctuary of my club. Yet I felt that subtler forces were also at work. It was as if I had been a fairy-tale prisoner immured, and the death of Kid Charlemagne had set me free.

Down on the wet, weed-wrapped rocks, a small crowd had gathered for a novel diversion. Three of Deatherage's men held them back.

Splayed awkwardly over the slick stones (he had never been awkward in life) lay Charlie Maine. His flesh was puffy from contusions.

And someone had opened up the old scar in his throat.

I stood a moment, transfixed. Then I crouched to take his limp hand.

When I arose, Christina was there. Her eyes were filmy, like two pebbles glazed with snail slime.

"He's so beautiful," she said dreamily.

And then I knew.

The motor scooter buzzed through the dark, up toward Bosky Knob. Random breaks in the foliage and trees on my right allowed me to see the gaudy lights clustered around the Bay below. They looked alien somehow, already distant. Tonight, for the first time in years, my club was closed.

It didn't matter to me. I knew I was leaving. Something black inside me that had held me captive all these years had shattered under the impact of Charlie's death. What the future held for me, I couldn't say. But it had to be better than the past.

I had a final chore, though, before my morning departure.

Events had moved on. Koos van Staaden sat morosely in the Hesperides' single jail cell. He denied any involvement in the murder, but made no secret of his satisfaction. Henrik Blauvelt was confined to his house under guard, as a possible accessory. Deatherage's theory was that Blauvelt had pinioned Charlie's arms from behind while van Staaden performed the grisly murder.

I hadn't told him that it took only one to kill when love bred trust.

I rounded a curve and saw the lights in the windows of van Staaden's home. The place blazed like a cold pyre. I cut the motor, dismounted, and walked the rest of the way.

The front door was unlocked. I patted my pocket. The cassette was still there. I had purchased it — an anonymous self-contained unit — on a quick trip to the mainland that afternoon, after the shock of seeing Charlie's body and after my fatally delayed revelation had worn off. It would never be traced to me.

I pushed open the door and went in.

I found Christina in a second-floor bedroom. She sprawled on a divan, beneath a wall-mounted sjambok, wearing silken undergarments that rode high on her thighs and low on her shoulders. She was engaged in a minute examination of the flame of a candle standing on a table beside her. I knew she had probably been sitting that way for hours.

Once, I had done the same thing myself.

"Christina," I said quietly.

She turned her Circean profile languidly. The candlelight shimmered on the watered silk across her loins.

"The beautiful Mr. Holloway," she murmured between her black lips.

"Why did you do it, Christina?" I asked. "Why couldn't you just discard him, leave him to the rest of us, once you'd finished with him?"

"He was threatening to tell Father," she said. "Tell him about the people we met in Mexico, and what they sold me." The flickering candle captivated her again. After a time, she said, "But they know me down there now, and trust me. I have my contacts. I don't need Charlie anymore."

"He was a person, Christina. He deserved to live."

The black rose of her mouth formed a smile. "He was just a kaffir. I've

killed them before — accidentally and on purpose. I don't hate kaffirs, though. Why should I? Do you know that I have a little piece of kaffir's brain in mine? A piece from a little baby bugger. That almost makes me a kaffir, doesn't it?"

She began to giggle, and didn't stop.

I went up to her and lifted the feathery hair from her neck. The white tab of estheticine blended almost invisibly with her alabaster skin. The three dots of coding looked like red freckles.

Rummaging in her purse, I found the rest of her stash: a dozen tabs, bought at such a high price.

I held them in a hand that trembled only slightly as I thought about what they contained: easy relief from the pain of Charlie's death.

But I didn't use them on myself.

Instead, I applied them up and down her pretty legs, pressing firmly to establish diffusion. She didn't resist, although I'm sure that in the back of her mind she knew as well as I did that twelve was way over the threshold of permanent brain damage.

"Life's so ugly," she said when I was done. "Did I ever tell you about my mother? I couldn't let them take my one comfort away."

"There's no need to worry anymore," I said. I took the self-contained player-cassette from my jacket, set it down, and flicked it on. I thought about how Charlie had really loved the old songs.

"Oh, how nice - music," she said.

The old lyrics poured forth:

It's all so beautiful,
It's all so beautiful . . .

Before I left, I snuffed the candle out.



THE VISITATION by Susan Palwick art: Nicholas Jainschigg



Of this story, her third fiction sale, the author tells us: "I wrote it while I was a student at Clarion West, living in a dorm room overlooking Puget Sound. Tacked above my desk was a passage from E. M. Forster's Howard's End. Forster describes the joyous conclusion of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, adding, 'But the goblins were there. They could return. He had said so bravely, and that is why one can trust Beethoven when he says other things.'

[&]quot;Hence the goblin."

Grace Mirra woke to the thin, thready wail of the goblin's crying. She couldn't place the sound at first; it had been a good eighteen months since the creature's last visit, and she'd been too busy to give him much thought. She lay sleepily in bed, bathed in the sun from the window, puzzling. Perhaps the infant down the street was hungry, or the Warners' Siamese cat had gotten treed again. Then she realized that the sound came from within the house and thought in surprise, Why, it's the goblin, and hurried to see what was frightening him.

He stood backed against the wall at the far end of the kitchen, sobbing. Grace scanned the room and spotted a spider scuttling along the linoleum between the goblin and the kitchen door. "Little one," she said with a laugh, crossing the room easily; spiders hadn't frightened her for years. "Little monster, is that all?"

He ran to her, mewling frantically — the featureless, sexless creature, velvet-soft and shadow-dark, which the five women had created from discarded madness years ago. "It's all right," Grace told him, cradling him against her shoulder and patting his back as he squirmed, "there, there, all it does is catch flies in the garden. It won't hurt you. Nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all." She stepped over the spider and walked into the living room, enjoying the comfort of the goblin's weight and warmth in her arms.

"Where've you been all this time, then?" She didn't expect an answer, but she was surprised when he kept crying. There was nothing terrifying in the living room: just the coffee table, the television, a few overstuffed old chairs, the couch — ah, her crocheting was on the couch, the afghan she'd been working on for winter. Maybe that was it.

"Over here?" she asked, carrying him to the bag of yarn. "These skinny things all coiled like snakes, is that what has you so upset? But it's yarn, dear, nothing alive. Nothing dangerous."

He kept crying. Well, that really couldn't have been it. Yarn hadn't seemed anything worse than twisted fiber since Grace's worst period in the hospital, and that was thirty years ago now. The goblin had never bothered with her handiwork during any of his earlier visits.

"Hush, goblin. Be calm. Whatever it is, we'll find it." Grace knew from experience that when she found the source of the goblin's fears she'd have found her own as well. She'd started to believe she was really over all of it, that the goblin was gone for good; but there must be something else. There was always something else. Dr. Tansey had warned them about that, before they left the hospital. "It's all right to be upset by some things," she'd said. "You wouldn't be human if you weren't. Sanity is really nothing more than a sense of proportion. . . ."

Some little thing, no doubt. Grace toured the house with the goblin on her hip, showing him the shadows at the back of closets, the tangle of weeds in the garden and the darkness of the forest beyond, all the things which had once paralyzed her. Still the goblin howled. "What is it?" Grace said, per-

plexed, when she had taken him through the house. "What has you in such a state?"

His keening grated on her now, but she patted his back as soothingly as she ever had, working to stay calm. "Parents act self-assured for their children," Dr. Tansey had said during one of the group sessions in the hospital. "They may feel threatened by the same things their kids do, but they can't let it show." It had been a passing comment, part of some discussion Grace could no longer remember. She preferred to forget the hospital, would never have thought of it at all if it hadn't been for the creature she held. There was less and less to remind her. Everyone else was gone except for Elena, even Dr. Tansey dead by now, and Grace and Elena were rarely in touch.

"Something in the kitchen? Shall we try that?" She hefted the goblin into another position and headed back with a sigh. The spider was gone now, but the goblin howled incessantly, clutching Grace's bathrobe and releasing an occasional hiccup, during her display of cooking appliances. "This is the microwave, goblin, but I'm not scared of that and I can't see why you would be. This is the refrigerator. It's been twenty-five years since I was afraid of being trapped in there somehow. This is a can opener, goblin; this is a frying pan. These are my knives, for carving meat, that's all, and I keep them safely in their rack when I'm not using them. Little one, whatever in the world are you crying about? You've never gone on this long! God's love, goblin, what is it?"

By now she was afraid, the droning noise wearing down her resistance and making her more susceptible to old irrationalities. "Put your troubles in the circle," Dr. Tansey had said at the end of every session, as they stood there holding hands: the five patients and Dr. Tansey herself, with her straggling blond bun and cotton print dresses underneath the white hospital coat. Those dresses had been the first spot of color Grace had seen for four years, the first cheerfulness to penetrate the drugs, and the pain, and the humiliation.

Grace realized she was trembling, scolded herself. No, she certainly wasn't going to think about that — difficult enough to think back to Tansey's group sessions, all that work they had done, the heaps of misery they had left on the floor. Grace had discarded all her fears, Tilly her crippling guilt, Charlotte the paranoia which made her imagine cameras in every light fixture. Oh, it was senseless stuff, all of it, things which seemed ridiculous now but had been overwhelming then. Melanie had left a heap of dead, scolding relatives in the circle; Elena had tossed in her self-destructive rages.

Slowly, so slowly, but at last they all went home. It had taken them months to confess to each other that they were being visited by an odd little black thing, still longer to realize where it had come from, and why. None of them had ever told Dr. Tansey, for fear of being called mad again. Only they could see it, or hear it, or quiet its complaints.

But nothing Grace had done today had quieted the goblin. If only he could speak, to tell her what was wrong!

Elena. Maybe Elena could tell her what to do. Grace sat the goblin on the counter, wincing at his shrieks, and flipped through her tattered address book. She hadn't spoken to Elena for a good three years now, hadn't had reason to call.

Yes, here was the number, smudged into near unreadability. Busy signal; Grace sighed and replaced the receiver, rubbing her forehead to ease away the beginnings of a migraine.

The goblin's squalling changed pitch, became even more frantic, and Grace realized that maybe his pain had nothing to do with her. If he had visited Elena, hadn't gotten what he needed there — if Elena had been unable to comfort him because she was having a crisis herself...

Frowning, Grace tried to remember the last time she had heard from Elena. There'd been a postcard from France two summers ago, a Christmas card last year: the messages on both brief, inconclusive, the cards themselves gloomy, but then Elena had never been one for bright colors.

Grace picked up the phone, redialed, again got a busy signal. Damn! No way to tell anything. "Elena," she said wearily to the goblin. "Does this have something to do with her?"

The crying rose again, soaring into fury. "All right," Grace said, "all right, I'll find out what's wrong. Don't worry." She should have thought of it sooner; Elena's anger was as much a part of the creature as Grace's phobias, after all. "Shush," Grace said firmly to the goblin. "I know what the matter is. You can stop making that noise now."

But he whimpered anyway as Grace threw on clothing and collected her car keys and dug around in the glove compartment for the proper map. Elena lived an hour to the north; as Grace drove, the goblin huddled in the seat next to her, she wondered if she should have called the police — but what would she have said? "I can tell my friend is in trouble because of the behavior of our guardian goblin?" A lot of good that would have done; and maybe she was wrong, anyway. Maybe the phone had been busy because Elena was chatting with someone. Maybe the goblin had some supernatural version of colic.

She tried to believe these things as she drove, so that the goblin would believe them; she told him fairy tales and found a radio station playing soothing classical music, and pointed out cows and horses along the route as she would have done for a real child. When she got to Elena's house she suppressed her alarm at the neglected lawn and overgrown driveway and walked calmly up the front steps, keeping her stride steady even when she heard the bellowing coming from within the house.

The door stood open. Grace entered, the goblin in her arms, to find Elena cowering in a corner of the living room. She was spattered with blood and clutched a piece of broken glass in one hand. "Elena," Grace cried, her

stomach knotting. "Oh, Elena, what happened -"

Elena only screamed something Grace couldn't understand, and threw the piece of glass. She was too weak for it to go far; Grace ducked easily out of the way, too alert now even to be frightened, and ran into the kitchen to phone for an ambulance. As she passed the hallway closet she heard cats crying, sounding much like the goblin, and remembered the session at the hospital when Elena had talked about locking them up during her rages. "So I won't hurt them — I feel it coming on and lock them up so I won't hurt them. They're all I have in the world. . . ."

The phone was off the hook, dangling on the floor. Grace dumped the goblin unceremoniously on the kitchen table with a terse "Stay there" before she made the call. She gave the address and explained what had happened as mechanically as if she were a stranger, as if she didn't know that Elena would have to go back —

No, she wouldn't think of that. She wouldn't. She went back into the living room to wait, keeping a safe distance from Elena, who babbled and glared and threatened to throw a lamp she had dragged off a table.

The ambulance came quickly, the medics calm and professional as they sedated Elena and strapped her to a stretcher. Grace, unable to watch, went to let the cats out of their closet; Elena couldn't hurt them now. They rubbed against Grace's legs, mewing fretfully, but as soon as she bent down to pat them the goblin emerged, squalling, from the kitchen.

"All right," Grace said, "I have to go back in there. I know I do. But I can't pick you up, goblin. The ambulance men would wonder why I was holding something they couldn't see."

She straightened, shaking, and went back into the living room, the goblin tagging along behind her. Elena lay on the stretcher, looking lost, as one of the medics said something about psychiatric evaluation. It's only for a little while, Grace thought, aching. Oh, Elena, surely there will be someone humane there, another Dr. Tansey, and you'll be able to come home soon. Places are better these days.

Elena blinked, looking at Grace now. "Gracie? That you?"

Grace nodded, relieved. Recognition had come quickly, a good sign. She saw Elena swallow, lick dry lips; the medics were hooking her up to an IV now. "How? How did you . . .?"

"The - the child, he came to tell me."

"Ah," Elena said. Grace saw her gaze shift to where the goblin sat, clinging to a table leg. "Yes."

They said no more than that. One of the medics asked if anyone should be notified before Elena went to the hospital. "No," Elena said from the stretcher, her voice weak and slurred, "I have no family. She's all there is." And the cats, Grace thought. And the goblin.

"Come with me," Elena said. "Ride... ride with me to the hospital, Gracie. In the death wagon —"

"It's an ambulance, Elena. Just an ambulance."

"Come with me. Please."

She couldn't refuse. She rode holding Elena's hand where it lay strapped to the stretcher, and holding the goblin in her lap. She spoke steadily to both of them, taking carefully measured breaths as she described what little she could see of the passing scenery. "Yes, Elena, here's the hospital now. The grounds are lovely, Elena. There are trees and flowers and everything looks clean. This must be a good place."

And all the while all she could think was that she was going to the hospital, that they would keep her there and not let her out — that they would drug her as they had already drugged Elena, and use electric shock and insulin shock, yes, all of that, the rapes and the intimidations, and Dr. Tansey dead. No Dr. Tansey now to rescue them, to get them off the medication and into group sessions. No Dr. Tansey to help them discard all the pain, to help them rid themselves of all the feelings which had created the goblin. She and Elena would have to stay there and they'd never get out, never this time —

But she fought it down, using every relaxation technique she had ever learned to keep from bolting up and hurling herself out of the moving ambulance. She cradled the sobbing goblin and spoke quietly to Elena, and walked next to the stretcher as it was wheeled into the hospital.

The place smelled, as even the best such places do, of urine and vomit and antiseptic. Grace put on imaginary blinders so she wouldn't have to see the other patients. She answered the doctors' questions about Elena as well as she could, and promised Elena she'd visit, and then walked out again, into the cool dusk, where she was wretchedly sick in one of the flower beds. A doctor stopped, alarmed, to offer help.

"I'm all right," Grace answered, exhausted. "I'm all right now. I don't need help, really. I was just upset about my friend."

Finally he left. Grace sat there for a moment before getting up, trying to think what Dr. Tansey would have said about this. The goblin, curled up next to her on the grass, was quiet for the first time in hours, and so she decided that Dr. Tansey would have said that everything was fine. "Our fears are determined by our history," Tansey had told her once. "Many of them are rational."

She felt well enough then to go back inside the building to call a cab. Elena had given her house keys, and Grace spent an hour there cleaning up the blood and the glass, feeding the cats and watering the plants. Then she drove her own car back home, the goblin now peacefully asleep in her lap. He'd stay with her for the rest of the night, she knew. He'd be gone in the morning. She wondered if she'd see him again; but surely he'd be back for some little thing, a year or two down the line. There was always something else.

EPITAPH BY AN ALIEN IN YELLOW MOONLIGHT

It sat beside a sallow fire
Unstartled by our approach
Human-shaped and mostly bone,
With arms outstretched over the fire,
It beckoned.

We came from where Geoffrey had died.

"I knew you would come," it said hesitantly,
Using words like strange relics.

"To humans, I know,
The thought of leaving the dead unburied,
Unmourned, on such a cold planet —
Come, sit. I was Geoffrey's friend."

We gathered around. The being rubbed its palms
In the flicker, but did not look warmed.
"Yes, I speak human; Geoffrey taught me.
Been together three years
Prospecting, exploring. He never mentioned me,
Did he?

"Geoffrey was quiet and tense and determined.

He taught me much of being human.

I taught him some of being content.

Why he killed himself, I can't rightly say,

Not knowing humans as you do.

"I think maybe he thought he had no choice.

He told me once that's why we all die.

Though I feel differently, somehow.

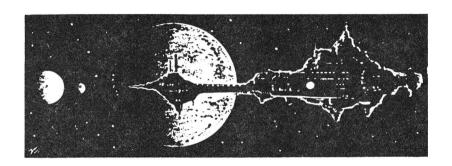
I will miss Geoffrey. He taught me to be Human.

And that's maybe what I am.

"Though I'm not, I hope you'll take me With you. Once in the company Of the strange beings you are, a being like me Feels he has no choice either. But choice means little to a human like myself, Though it meant a lot to Geoffrey."

It smiled, I think, and wrapped its thin arms Tightly about its body. "There's hope in that," it said.

- Jack R. Hill



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In publishing, to no one's surprise, there are hallmark years and there are years that are a complete bust. But most of them, inevitably, are like 1986 - almost, but not quite, a reasonable success.

To spotlight trends in such a year is a dangerous, and probably foolhardy, proposition. But based on what has gone before, and what I already see in '87, it might be worth taking a look, just to see if horror and dark fantasy is getting stagnant, or if there's some preliminary indications of movement - one way or the other.

The year 1986, then, was primarily when the new horror boom began to show signs of losing steam, in spite of the fact that several publishers. Tor the most notable among them, began or began planning their own horror lines. The boom isn't dead, not by any means, but it looks as if it's finally settled a bit, not unlike a new house shifting and positioning itself to make itself more comfortable on a foundation that's perfectly solid at bedrock, just a little cracked nearer the surface. To be sure, there's still some building to be done, a few new additions, renovations, an alteration here and there, but for the most part it's complete.

The first question is, how long is it going to last this time?

That depends on the publishers and

the editors who are trying to establish themselves in the field. If they all remain cautious - as well they should, after the debacle of the last glut in the early part of this decade - if they don't lose their heads, they might even become more judicious in their choice of which books take up which slots in the chains, the bookstores, the airports, and the supermarkets.

And that, I suppose, is what dreams are made of.

If, on the other hand, history repeats itself and some or all of the above wellintentioned folk perceive there's a bandwagon on a roll here, we're going to be in deep trouble.

Granted there are a goodly number of talented new writers out there who deserve to see print, and granted there are more than a substantial number of proven writers who deserve to be treated better than a category romance: but no matter what the short-term benefits bandwagons provide to the new and the not-so-new, they have a distressing tendency to overload, especially when those climbing on do so without thinking farther ahead than the depth of the cash flow. They become top-heavy, then, with material that never should have seen the light of day in the first place. They lose traction. They ultimately lose momentum.

And the publishers and those same editors who celebrated the bandwagon's coming instantly blame the writers for not producing a better product instead of looking to themselves for not policing the product better and demanding better from their authors.

And **bang!** the baby goes out with the bath water.

It'll happen.

It always does.

It always will.

But let's assume, just for the hell of it, that we're going to see more of the same in the field this year and next, that Bantam, St. Martin's, Charter, Pocket Books, and all the rest of the gang on Publisher's Row have learned a lesson this time around. Is this then a good thing, or is it something we ought to quickly sweep under the bed with the rest of the stuff we stow there when someone comes to visit?

For the most part, I tend to be optimistic — with reservations reserved for the terminally cranky; i.e., people like me.

It's difficult not to be optimistic when the trend toward people-oriented fiction continues more strongly than I've seen it in years.

As when James Herbert breaks his own mold and gives us *The Magic Cottage*, or when Campbell Black, lamentably unknown and unread by most of those who claim to love the genre, comes out with a chilling, moody novel called *The Wanting*.

Or when Ramsey Campbell, fresh from *The Obsession*, gives us a book like *The Hungry Moon*. What might have been yet another grim journey through his previously unrelentingly bleak universe is, instead, a delight. Not that we're going to a party, not by any means, but neither are we going to a rain-spattered funeral either.

The Hungry Moon is Campbell at his most accessible. His characters are people who, in lesser hands, would be nothing more than props for the horror to come. From Diana Kramer, an American teacher filled with ideals she's carried to England, to the child, Andrew Bevan, who only wants to respond to a bit of kindness, to Godwin Mann, an evangelist as sinister as Elmer Gantry and twice as deadly, the population of Moonwell is finely drawn. It has to be. To start with madness only results in boredom before the book is halfway done; to start with the normal and watch it disintegrate into the hands of terror is a ride eagerly sought by those frustrated with the mechanical gimmickry of writers like John Saul.

What Campbell does (as do Herbert and Black) is concentrate on the lives of the people he's created, the people who live and work in their own, real worlds. Love, laughter, jealousies, sharing, hatreds, growing up, growing old — no novel or story worth its salt dare shirk the people who inhabit it. If they don't work, nothing does. So when the horrors finally come, as they must, both from within and without, they're personal, and therefore more effective.

Which is why I also wouldn't mind seeing more from a few writers generally not so closely associated with the field as Campbell is. To this end I immediately think of F. Paul Wilson's The Touch, Kate Green's Shattered Moon, and C. Terry Cline's Prey. These three are about as different as you can get and still stay in horror's house, and yet all manage to evoke and sustain horrors far more personal, and thus more effective, than most can ever hope to achieve.

They all deal forthrightly with moral dilemmas, tricky things at best, and

often gladly sidestepped when the crunch comes and the plot demands that the characters, who by fate or the supernatural (a broad interpretation here, if you will), face choices they cannot avoid.

The writers in this case are much too good to duck and bob and weave, and thereby avoid their responsibilities; they have more respect for their work, and more respect for their readers, than to weasel out like that. As a result, they can offer no easy answers to the problems they consider, and the novels are not entirely pleasant for it. But they are damned good reading. and of the three, I found Prev The most difficult to put down. There is no supernatural here, no Elements From Beyond or hints of same; there's a murderer, a policeman, and a town that has unwittingly created sainthood from somewhat porous clay. Personal horror; you can see it coming, and there's nothing you can do but either close the book or watch. It's not for the squeamish (though it isn't explicitly violent) or for those who want the good guys to rise above the fray and toss roses to the masses while the bad guy(s) rots in Hell, and good riddance to him.

People and personal horrors are Stephen King's stock in trade, and I'd probably be pelted with sour grapes if I didn't stick in my two cents about It. I'll probably be pelted with them, anyway, because a horror writer who praises King is toadying and trying to get in on the action, while one who criticizes him is jealous because he's so rich and famous.

What the hell; damned if you do, right?

So 1986, sour grapes or not, was also the year that a goodly number of reviewers finally became so bloody lazy that their assessments of Campbell or Green or Ryan or Yarbro or whoever have become forever tainted.

Lazy?

Oh sure. You know the ones I mean — whether they're in fanzines or bigtime publications — the ones who don't bother to read anything else but Stephen King when they're reviewing someone else. They figure, you see, that King did it all first, and God forbid that someone else should write a book about a teenager or an animal or a haunted house or a vampire or psi powers or . . . whatever. All of that, you understand, is "Stephen King country/territory/domain," and the rest of us are only slinking around in his shadow.

What a crock.

And what an insult to Campbell and Etchison and Koontz and Anthony and Chesbro and the dozens of others who were writing before him. As if all of these fine writers are around only because they're stealing from King; as if the newcomers are here only because they're stealing from King; as if . . . oh hell.

The thing is this, my friends: if Stephen King should stop writing tomorrow, the field isn't going to go away. And it isn't going to die. And it isn't going to suffer, save for the loss of a unique and special voice. That would be terrible, make no mistake about it, but it wouldn't be fatal.

But would you want King to leave the field with It as his last book?

Not me, but then I'm cranky, remember?

First, let me say that I read It in three sittings (I did have to eat, you know, and do other stuff, like make a living), and I enjoyed myself thoroughly. Most of the time. And when I was finished, and when my lap sprang back to shape, I felt, as I always do when I finish a King novel, that no

one, but no one, does what he does better. Or, for that matter, even comes close to coming close.

But a book this size inevitably has flaws. Most of them can be overlooked in the sheer fun of going along for the ride; a couple, on the other hand, make It considerably less successful than The Dead Zone or Salem's Lot.

I'm thinking primarily of the ending, the last hundred pages or so when all the grief our heroes and heroine suffered, all the torments, and all the deaths of the innocent are stuffed into an explanation that expects us to take a Steven Spielberg joy ride into the universe. The personal becomes cosmic, and the humanity is lost.

And it isn't fair.

When I'm sitting there rooting for Ben Hanscom to take Bey under his wing because they both deserve something better from their lives; when I'm watching Richie try like hell to grow up, and Eddie just try like hell; when there is one of the most sublimely and deliciously evil critters that ever walked the fictional earth; when all this is competing for favoritism in my mind, and I'm loving it, being yanked out of the story and into the cosmos is like someone sticking a pin in my balloon.

Suddenly, it all becomes nothing more than air, and the sound of its escaping is more than rude, it's silly.

And as long as I've cranked up the crank here, allow me to move onto the third trend 1986 fueled with both publisher and buyer acceptance (the chicken or the egg here; my bet's on the chicken).

Las Vegas horror. Glitter and flash, with no substance behind it.

The most obvious, though not the only, example of such writing, by virtue of its heavy promotion and packaging, was The Light at the End

by John Skipp and Craig Spector. It had what I thought was a fine, fun idea - if a vampire can't survive in sunlight, then stick him in the subway system and let him do his worst. It also had, as does their new book, The Clean-Up, a particularly gritty and uncompromising setting - what the cliches like to call the "underside of New York life." That's well done, most disturbingly and effectively so.

What a waste, then, because what it didn't have was someone to sit on these two and make them understand that stylistic tricks are useful and effective only when used sparingly. Use them constantly, page after page, chapter after chapter, and all you're doing is flashing neon signs that don't do a damned thing to move the book along. All they do is bring attention to themselves and the author.

And even that wouldn't have been so bad if we weren't also subjected to the most unsympathetic and unpleasant cast of characters I've come across in years. And these are the good guys, for God's sake. So how are we expected to root for them, care what happens to them, weep and laugh with them, when caring has gone out the window?

We can't be. And we don't.

Las Vegas horror that isn't horror at all.

It's companion, either in form or content, though it's been around a bit longer, is slasher horror (sometimes known as mechanical horror or, in my house, junk). In fact, it's probably become a genre unto itself, but for purposes of the tirade, let's pretend that it's horror.

And it is, to my mind, the absolute worst of the two because it borders, if not downright crosses into, the realm of the pornographic. The people in these books aren't people at all. They are, as they are in the films that

inspired them, mechanical objects to be used as experimentation — how many different ways can we kill someone off, and how explicit can we get in doing it without making the reader laugh?

Admittedly, I'm a vociferous (and some would instantly add shrill) advocate of the more quiet (though not necessarily genteel) sort of horror. To be more specific, I insist that a writer's most powerful tool, talent notwithstanding, is the reader's imagination; without it, without engaging it in some way, in every way possible, no story or novel can ever be fully effective. The reader can fill in the horrors more powerfully, and lastingly, than any single explicit paragraph any writer can ever hope to create.

Put the reader's imagination to work for you, and the term dark fantasy takes on a whole new and more wonderful coloration.

As any child who sees a shadow under a bed.

Which isn't to say that explicit violence has no place in horror fiction. It does. The trouble is that too much of it becomes, ultimately, boring. Impotent. And that, my friends, is a horror in itself — that we become inured to the violence because there's too much of it to make an impact.

The leading proponent of such fiction in the UK is, so far, a man named Shaun Hutson, author of such gems as *Erebus* ("you'll never eat red meat again"), *Relics* (in which a thing uses folks' intestines to leave clues to its mission), and *Spawn* (about, I swear to God, vampiric fetuses saved from abortions). They are so monumentally bad, they're almost funny. As it is, they're merely disgusting.

Their popularity, however, has led to many imitators, some of whom have actually found their way into this country. And if you're in the mood for a truly bad book, one that provokes giggles instead of grimaces, groans instead of winces, you can't do much better than John Halkin's Squelch (the sound a giant moth makes when you step on it) or Slither. There's also Edward Jarvis's Maggots (you have to read it to believe it), and Simon Ian Childer's Tendrils, and anything by Guy N. Smith (whose entire fiction output I admit to having collected; so sue me).

The homegrown product is another story. It's not usually as badly written, so cannot be read in good, black humor; it's not usually as badly packaged, so cannot be bought as a lark. It's intimately associated, incorrectly, with horror, and it seems that Richard Laymon is one of those leading the pack. Night Show, for example, isn't anything else but a slasher film in print, but if you like that sort of thing, it's better than his earlier books. Which is rather like saying a shattered leg is somewhat more tolerable than a sharp stick in the eye.

And this trend will continue as well. As long as films and television and editors who ought to know better mistake revulsion and shock for terror and fear, and as long as special literary and cinematic effects are used to mask the fact that the authors, whoever they are, aren't even coming close to telling a story, we're going to be stuck with it.

And now, if you don't mind, I'll turn the crank off, to mention the final two trends that have made 1986 worth plowing through all the Brandners (Carrion) and Sauls (Hell Fire) and Russos (Inhuman) and Niedermans (Love Child) of the field.

Women.

I haven't the slightest idea why, but last year seemed to me to bring out more women working in short fiction and novels than I can remember. We have always had, of course, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and Tanith Lee to remind us that a good writer is a good writer, no matter the sex — which is as it should be.

Now, however, there are more reminders, more indications that the sex of the author is becoming less important than the writing itself. Good, as I said, is good, and it makes (or damn well shouldn't make) any difference who the creator is.

And so we have novels, first and otherwise, and stories from Maggie Davis and Sheri Tepper, Kim Antieau and Nina Hoffman, Lisa Tuttle all too infrequently, Melissa Mia Hall and Kathryn Ptacek, Mona Clee, Janet Fox, Lynn Biederstadt, and so many more that I've probably already insulted at least a hundred by not mentioning their names.

But they're here. New writers making their presence felt, and writers not so new but finally, at long last, gaining more than token recognition.

Again, I have no idea why it's happening now, why it's been growing steadily for the past three or four years, and why it finally broke open in 1986 and not some other time. If someone out there has a clue, I'd really like to hear it. It may be that it's too soon to do any exploring, that there's not enough perspective; on the other hand, there isn't an editor I know who doesn't think it's about time.

Finally, in the year 1986, the life's blood of dark fantasy and horror became the focus of a boom of its own.

Short fiction.

Anthologies continued to multiply, though I sense without any tangible proof that publishers are somewhat more leery of them than they were years ago, when it seemed like hundreds of SF anthologies came out in less than three years and killed the market for all of us until the end of the 70s. Nevertheless, they show up regularly, and one of the best of '86 was the first volume of Dennis Etchison's Masters of Darkness series. The stories aren't those that are impossible to find elsewhere, but the author's comments, the reasons for revisions, and the reasons for writing them in the first place are fascinating enough to make the price worthwile.

Collections, too, showed up here and there. Since they are notoriously poor sellers in mass-market editions, you had to go to publishers like Donald M. Grant and Scream Press to get them. or discover that folks like Tor package the collections to look exactly like novels (as they did with Elizabeth Engstrom's bizarre novellas collected in When Darkness Loves Us). Either way, you couldn't have gone wrong if you picked up Joseph Payne Brennan's The Borders Just Beyond or R. Chetwynd-Haves's Tales From the Haunted House. If you want to learn how it's done, these are just the men to show you how.

The best news of '86 in short fiction was the realization that there are now more professional and semi-professional magazines devoted to or using horror fiction than at any other time this century. Certainly, much of it is rough, crude, often God-awful, but short fiction is the training ground where many writers learn discipline, and the value and power of the single word. It's also where many novelists, like Robert R. McCammon and David Morrell, have gone to expand their considerable talents and widen their audience.

I must confess to bias here, by the way, because this is where I made my own start umpty years ago; nevertheless, if I were going to make a few predictions, stick my neck out, and point a trembling finger at those I think have the potential to enrich the genre with some of the best writing we've yet seen, this is where I would go.

And will go, to end this piece with some names I hope you will remember, and encourage.

Craig Shaw Gardner, while his first few novels are light fantasy, continues to work the other side as well, and his stories continue to grow in emotional depth and complexity, to such an extent that I'm beginning to wish that he'd try a novel-length dark fantasy, just to see how he'd work it;

Al Sarrantonio, after shaking off the uncertainty of moving from short story to novel, remains unique — his short fiction is weird, disturbing, and his talent is finally beginning to match pace with his ambition, so *Totentanz* is darkly lovely, and *The Boy With the Penny Eyes* is admirable and terrifying;

Nancy Holder, a refugee from another field whose fantasies are at the

last as dark as I've ever seen, and who, like Craig Gardner, will hopefully try her hand at a dark novel;

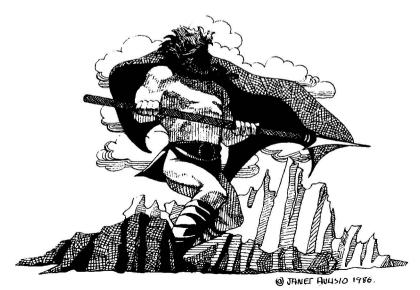
Steve Rasnic Tem, whose first novel, *Excavations*, is now out, not as grim as his latest stories, nor as surrealistic as his earlier ones, but unmistakably his;

Stephen Gallagher, one of the most moving and razored writers to come out of the UK in a long time, following up his novels *Chimera* and *The Follower* with some fine short fiction both here and in Europe;

Chet Williamson, whose first novel, Soulstorm, wasn't perfect, but it was strong enough, and curious enough, to raise a lot of expectations for the next one, Ash Wednesday.

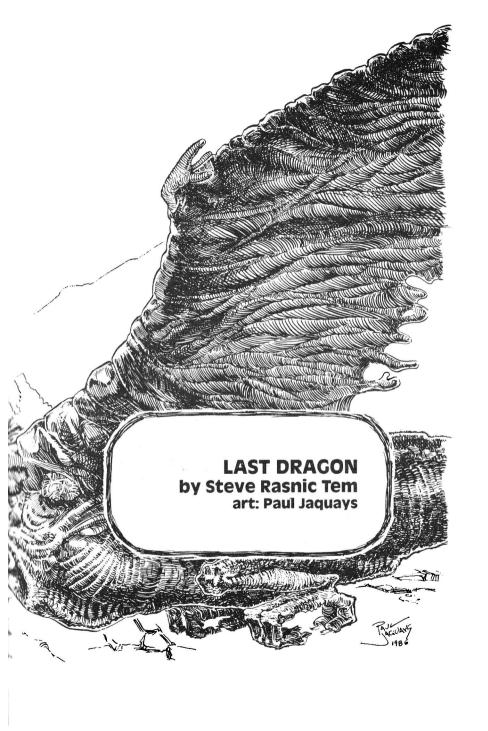
The boom settling, people-oriented fiction growing along with the slashers and the glitters, women making themselves known, short fiction hanging in there —

It wasn't a half-bad year, was it? What the hell — it was pretty damned good.



It Wasn't a Half-Bad Year





This short story marks the author's hundredth story sale. Though he has had several poems published in Amazing® Stories, this is his first fiction sale to the magazine. His first novel, a horror novel entitled Excavations, will be released shortly from Avon Books.

The author is married to writer Melanie Tem, and they have three children.

Alec thrashed in bed. His muscles cramped. His right arm flapped and struck his chest. He had been dreaming that his wife's tongue was scraping at his eyes, his son's fingers clawing his shoulders. So real that his night's sweat was irritating the wounds.

His left fist tightened reflexively and made a painful knot under his lower back.

His body felt huge and unmanageable. It rocked and shook out of control. His eyes sprang open and tried to focus. He coughed into his sheets and, terrified of choking, managed to turn his mouth to the side.

On Sunday mornings, he used to hide in bed until noon. His mother warned him about what happened to lazy boys who didn't go to church.

His father used to toss him into the air, too high. He'd kept his arms rigid and immobile at his sides in fright. This one thing had frightened him, this one thing. He'd never flown before, and it had scared him. No logical power could hold him up. It was magic.

"Daddy! Stop!"

"Fly, Alec! Fly! I won't drop you!"

Then one day his father did drop him. Alec had fallen slowly, trying to push his arms out to break the fall. But he had been immobile. For just a few moments, he had been paralyzed.

Alec was fully awake now. The room was dark; heavy curtains covered most of the walls. "Light," he whispered. Nothing. Someday, as the sclerosis increasingly affected his throat, the house's computer would have to be re-programmed to allow for a wider range in interpreting vocal commands. But this morning he knew it was just fatigue, just a lack of focus. He concentrated, and after a time again said, "Light." Curtains pulled back; ceiling panels began to glow dimly. "Light light light," he said, and the brightness increased almost to daytime intensity. He could feel Earth's sun beyond the sheer yellow gauze that covered the windows, and soothing familiarity chased away the night's last alien dreams.

Earth's sun. He had to remind himself. He saw so little of the outside world that he could have just as easily been on Bennett, sleeping in the corporate headquarters there.

His throat burned from getting the lights on. And there was always this additional strain, not knowing if it was going to work anymore, if he was go-

ing to be left whispering in the dark, his throat aching, a headache blossoming from his attempts. He could have used the timer and saved his voice, but he never did. Each morning he wanted to make sure his larynx still worked.

Rick should have been up by now. Alec hated waiting; it made him feel helpless. But if he complained, the man might quit, and Alec wasn't up for another change.

The entire house could be equipped with personal-care robotic handlers and controllers. It wouldn't cost him much; a few technicians from one of his plants could install the whole works. But he wanted humans around him, touching him, not a house full of metal arms. And robotic amplification wasn't anything like doing it on his own, anyway. At least he did have the choice. He was Alec Bennett. That name had control over people and things, even if the man behind the name did not.

Today, his wife and children were moving out of the house. He hadn't had the power to hold them, the words to convince them to stay. Most of the arguments had stopped this past year — he'd felt relieved. He'd thought things were going to be okay now. But they'd all just been avoiding him, not saying what they felt, not wanting to provoke an argument. They were hiding from him.

The last big argument had been a year ago with his older son, Gene, fifteen at the time. It had been typical — unproductive, frustrating. And frightening, because now Gene was old enough to really hurt him if the argument went too far, if the volatile teenager were to lose control. That had become the peak of Alec's feelings of helplessness: to be frightened of his own son. It made him ashamed, and yet now he missed all the arguing — at least then his son was talking to him.

"You can't tell me what to do!" Gene had looked almost crazy in his anger, and as the boy continued to shout, Alec found himself wondering at what terrible thing he had brought home to them all.

"The aide quit, Gene. And my tube's popped. See, it runs down through the bedding and attaches to the pumps under the floor —"

"Jesus! You're messin' yourself, Dad!"

"Please, just get the tube back in."

But his son had just backed away from him, looking at the body of his origin wasted by the disease. His son's face was full of fear and loathing for the disease. Alec had spent hours explaining the nature of the disease, how no one was going to "catch" it. But now he could see that little of that must have sunk in. His son was seeing his own body lying there on the bed, spent and wasted.

"You're always asking me to touch you like that, and there's machines, Jesus. I mean, you can afford it."

"Gene, the tube!"

But Gene had already left the room. Alec could hear him debating with his brother and sister about whose turn it was to help, and arguing over the personal-care machinery again. They hated him, or maybe they hated the disease, not that there was much difference anymore. And Marie was off at some club meeting again, so she couldn't talk to them.

"Get in here, all of you!" No one answered. He'd shouted for several minutes before giving it up. He'd lost them. He couldn't even tell them to do something as simple as throwing an empty milk carton away, and be sure they'd do it.

A hand was rocking his shoulder. His eyes blurred. Sometimes it seemed that, when he wasn't remembering the bad times, he couldn't recall their faces at all. The hand touched him again. "Rick?" he whispered.

"Yes, Mr. Bennett. Want a bath today?"

Alec looked down. Rick's arms were protected by membranous gloves, a little paler than white flesh, more the color of cotton after it's been boiled. He'd thought the man had finally gotten over the fear of infection. "Afraid of catching a cold?" Rick didn't respond. "Talk to me, Rick."

Rick busied himself with the covers. "Just trying to be sanitary, Mr. Bennett. Now, how about that bath?"

Actually, Rick was braver than most; money could buy a little courage now and then when he really needed it. But it was getting harder every year, and Alec wondered how long Rick was going to last. They all thought they were going to catch the disease, and he honestly couldn't reassure them completely; no one knew enough about Bennett's Sclerosis.

Sometimes Alec imagined tiny cracks appearing in his skin. Sometimes he could swear he could see them, and they would spread onto Rick's arm, flaking the flesh away.

That first year after Alec came back from Bennett the media had been in a state of excitation that was almost sexual. The Bennett story had encompassed a number of topics sure to tantalize and entertain the public. The corporation-owned planet. The father's questionable business deals. And the rich, pampered son who was the first and only known victim of an extraterrestrial disease. Payoffs to regulating agencies. Aggressive exploitation of the strange new landscape. Rumors of safety violations. Rumors of dragons.

An insistent touch at his shoulder. "Mr. Bennett? Your bath?"

"No," he said, staring at the gloves covering Rick's arms and hands. "No, no thanks."

Rick didn't seem surprised. In the best of times Alec had an intense fear of the water. Even taking a bath, Alec would picture himself sinking beneath the surface, unable, even unwilling, to raise his arms to save himself. Whenever he and his assistants drove or flew over rivers or lakes, he'd have to turn from the window.

"Messages this morning?"

Rick pulled the recorder out of his back pocket and pushed the red button. After a squawk of interference Alec could hear the voice of Malcolm, nominal head of Bennett Corp. "... everything's ready. Not much chance of any-

body catching on. Needless to say, I would still like to talk you out of this. We have an entire squadron of pilots ready to send up after this thing. . . ."

"Shut it off," Alec said.

"There's more."

"I don't need any more."

Alec looked at the wall. The polished mahogany beyond his feet stretched a good twenty feet left of his bed, another twenty feet right. Patterns of light and shade moved across the segments of bone that had been set into the wood planks.

The enormous skull had been taken apart; the three plates that had formed the cap of the skull had been spread and mounted here into a broad arch. A six-foot nasal ridge hung from the center. Below these pieces, bolted to the wall a few inches from the floor, were the numerous broken sections of a long, thin jawbone. Alec could slice his hand open with just a careless touch along that bone, but he was far removed from that kind of danger.

Rick followed his gaze. "I don't know how you can stand to look at that thing. Makes my skin crawl just to be in the room with it."

"In fact, I don't think it's that skull making your skin crawl." It was hardly a skull, more like a collection of armored plate, what had been left once the skin had burned away. Alec could picture where the creature's gas sacs had been — in both cheeks and temples, and suspended under the jaw. The eyes had been deeply set on either side of the nasal ridge. Dark red, glowing like the mahogany. The mouth so wide. That last time on Bennett he'd peered directly into that hunger, the jaws steadily expanding until he'd thought the mouth might swallow the ship whole.

It had been night, and his father had insisted that the pilot shield the exhaust so the creature's infrared wouldn't pick them up. His father had wanted to show Alec. He was always showing him things. The crash had been sudden, unexpected. An accident. No one had thought the dragon intended to attack. When the mouth had dropped open and they had stared at the night inside, it had seemed that the beast was showing surprise rather than hunger or rage.

Alec had been thrown out before the explosion. Soaked in the creature's vital fluids, he'd escaped with just a broken leg and a few scrapes. Or so they had all thought.

Watching the shadowed manogany for movement, for the faintest flicker of light, he heard Rick say, "So they think that's the carrier. That thing."

The fire had been nightmarish in its speed and volume. With three to four per cent more oxygen than Earth, the planet was a firetrap. The creature's sacs had exploded. It had roared, its head blazing, wings shrinking in the heat.

Rick's voice continued to intrude into Alec's thoughts. "Why don't you let them take care of it? You've got lots of pilots, and most of them better than you."

Either he had been delirious or the creature had turned its burning skull his way, looked at him, before falling ponderously into the flames.

"You're a rich man, but you're ill."

Alec willed himself to move, but could not. He felt huge, impossibly heavy. He felt his skin burning, imagined catching the sheets on fire. Rick started to move toward him. "Don't . . ." Alec gasped. "Let it be."

Rick stepped away from the bed and stared out the open window. "Just tell me when you're ready, Mr. Bennett." A tiredness was evident in the young healthy voice.

Standing by that window, Alec had first felt the symptoms of Bennett's Sclerosis. He'd had his father buried on the planet.

Rick was pulling nervously at the arm coverings he wore, as if trying to protect a larger portion of his body. As if the sclerosis might reach out and penetrate his skin. As if Alec had brought back from Bennett something more than a viral disease — a native of that planet, an alien that thrived within the house of his body.

"My best people don't think it's contagious, Rick. I've told you that before." That was true — his top researchers thought there had to be actual contact of body fluids — but all the same Alec felt like a liar.

Rick just stood there, his back to Alec, watching the sun through the window. "Just being careful, Mr. Bennett." Rick scratched at his sleeves.

"I pay you enough, don't I?"

"You do that. And I have a family to support. But that's not the only reason I stay." He said the last part almost angrily.

"I had a family. . . ." Alec stopped, embarrassed.

Alec had been back on Earth a month when he had felt the first signs of his illness. He'd been standing in this bedroom he'd shared with Marie and watching nothing in particular, still feeling a little disoriented because Bennett's sun was the same size and color as Sol and because this time of year the climate was similar.

His arms and legs had begun to tingle, a low-grade burn deep under his skin that had made him think at first that he must have stepped onto an exposed wire. No matter where he had moved, the strange, vaguely disturbing sensation continued. He had begun to feel dizzy and had sat back down on the bed for a time.

When after an hour the sensation had passed, he had gone in to work. He'd thought it was odd, but since it went away, he'd chalked it up to a sleep disturbance, the flu, maybe something he had eaten. Then a month later his vision had begun to blur. A month after that, he had lost control forever. The illness progressed like a brush fire.

The disease made him feel, simply, other. It resembled multiple sclerosis in many ways, but MS had been cured over fifty years before. And Bennett's Sclerosis, as it was soon to be labeled, worked more quickly, scar tissue grew more rapidly — like a fungus, some said — and there appeared to be no peri-

ods of remission. People wouldn't touch him, as if afraid something might burst through his skin.

It had been like a machine running down. The immune system backfiring. The alien virus replicating the body's nerve tissue. So his body had become alien to itself, the body had become a dragon, attacking itself. It couldn't help itself — the invader had to be repelled. Scavengers in the immune system ate away at the myelin. First, its layers were pried apart, then nerve transmission began to short-circuit, then the myelin simply disappeared so that Alec became all exposed wires and loose electrical impulses. Scar tissue had crept over the nervous system the way ice sheathed the skeletal branches of a tree in winter.

His brain had been less seriously affected, his thoughts intact. Except sometimes thoughts arose that he did not recognize as his own.

"We're running a little late," Rick was saying, moving toward him. "Let me help you."

He tried to turn himself in bed. His arms flopped uselessly; he couldn't even feel them. He had the sudden, nonsensical fear that someone had cut them off when he wasn't looking.

A tremor began in his right leg. He tried to shut it off, but the mental plea had no effect.

"When are you leaving?" Rick asked.

"Next week."

"You know, I don't understand you. What if this just makes it worse?"

"I made intimate contact with the dragon. I was drenched in it. They think that's where the disease might have come from. Somebody has to get one of those things, dead or alive, so they can study it. Maybe they can find a cure."

"Let them send a professional pilot. Or a full-time hero."

"I have to see one again, myself. There may not be any more. My people have sighted only one the past four years. They think it's the last dragon. I just can't risk waiting."

Rick kept his eyes on Alec. When he walked around the room, he moved awkwardly, his head turned toward the bed. It was obvious to Alec that he was trying to avoid looking at the dragon skull.

"Want to get ready for the day, now?"

"Sure, why not?"

Alec dozed as Rick began rubbing him down with a damp cloth. Rick used to carry him into the bathroom for this. Not anymore. Alec had felt too vulnerable, sitting slumped over on the toilet. He used to fantasize Marie coming to him, taking off her clothes. They hadn't made love in a very long time.

Someone stepped into the bedroom. He could sense someone by the door, just beyond the limits of his vision. He saw Rick turn around.

"Machines and some special clothes can do this, too, you know," Marie

said. Alec felt momentarily disoriented. Rick turned back toward the bed, looking irritated. He bent over, grunted, and pulled up Alec's pants a little too roughly.

Alec tried to clear his eyes. He felt on the verge of tears. "Rick, my eyes..." Rick dabbed at his eyes and cheeks with a towel. Marie swam suddenly into focus. Dark-haired, doe-eyed, beautiful. "Machines have their place. But not here, not like this." Rick was wiping at the metallic caps set into the back of Alec's skull. "Careful, there. I'm going to be needing those soon." He looked up at his wife. "So . . . when are you leaving?"

"An hour, maybe two. You forgot to give me the key to storage."

Alec found himself chuckling mirthlessly. "I haven't been too good with details of late."

"Well, that makes you the perfect pilot, now doesn't it?"

Rick sighed. "He's a good pilot, actually. Or so I hear." He worked so furiously at the clothes that Alec was afraid they were going to rip.

"It's not safe!" Marie snapped.

"I have to do this. If you really still cared, you'd know that."

"They're really going to let you do this, huh? Go back there, find the thing?"

"They're not going to let me do anything."

"Chasing dragons, like some kid."

"There are dragons everywhere, Marie." Alec chuckled again. "It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it."

Marie's voice broke. "Stay here, Alec. We'll stay. I don't really want to leave — you must know that. But I can't sit still while you do this stupid thing. It's bad enough watching you die from something you can't help. But you don't have to go back to Bennett. Stay, Alec. I'll talk to the kids."

Alec tried to control his trembling, but could not. He was broken meat, flopping, ugly. "No."

Alec heard the sound of ripping cloth. Rick cursed and began removing the shirt.

The bedroom door slammed. Alec felt a need to say something, but the silence was suddenly intimidating.

"Mr. Bennett?"

"Yeah?"

"Good luck." Rick gripped his hand, tightly enough that he eventually felt it.

Again he was seven years old. Again his father tossed him into the air. Again his father did not catch him. But he wasn't so afraid this time — he felt himself flying, despite his weight, despite his awkwardness, despite his doubt.

Alec dropped rapidly toward the enormous canyon bisecting the northern hemisphere of Bennett. He was fully plugged — adjusting the intensity of

his more private thoughts against the almost subliminal babble of the computer medium. At last achieving some sort of balance, he felt the mental underpinnings of his ghostlike arms and legs reach out gradually and drift into the composite wings and weave-layered hull of his craft.

The illusion was that these actions were all conscious and deliberate on his part. In fact, the computer's controls had taken over and were leading him gently into the system, allowing him to become part of the machinery with the least possible discomfort and disorientation. Before most of his impulses to act had even reached the conscious level, they had been recognized, evaluated, then accepted or rejected by the computer. Reaction times were crucial on Bennett — with a gravity slightly higher than Earth's, even a short fall could be fatal. The dragon had evolved under those conditions; no human could beat that.

Here, he was as light as a dream.

The compound's staff was down eighty per cent since his father died, for Alec no longer saw the need for personnel largely involved in resource exploitation. They had been all set up for him, the plane fueled, checked and ready, and everyone seemed remarkably compliant to his wishes. Malcolm must have already explained to them that their novice employer was stubborn. But when they first carried him in, Alec did notice a few disgruntled-looking pilots standing around.

He spun the plane upside down, then dropped and rolled to the left. Up here, it was as if his muscles could do anything. The computerized controls made each arm seem to have numerous independently moving joints. At times he was afraid of folding up like a suitcase and plummeting to the ground.

The predominant colors on Bennett were gray, gray-green, and red. Some of the red came from rock formations in and around the numerous canyons and short mountains. Earthquakes brought bits of red up into the gray rock fields.

The other red came from a short, thick plant — a strange amalgam of moss, fern, and shrub — with a brilliant crimson center. It grew everywhere on the planet. Many of these plants were spoiled by spots of black char.

A third of the plain south of Bennett Compound was now on fire, filling the thick air with carbon dioxide and tiny particles of black ash that attacked his windscreen like hyperactive gnats. Periodically, a cleansing spray washed through the microscopic V-grooves which tattooed the hull. Alec was aware of this spray as a vague, ghostlike dampness somewhere in his skin.

But even with the spray, particles occasionally burst into minute flame along the ship's fuselage. A sudden nimbus of white light or a rainbow blazed off the forward canard.

The constant fires were a nuisance, but they destroyed enough plants to keep the oxygen level down. A couple of percentage points more, and Ben-

nett could have been an inferno.

Every few minutes the computer cycled through a systems check. He could eavesdrop when he was in the right state of mind. Electrical schematics overlapped microhydraulic graphic simulations on the undersides of his eyelids. Weaponry alignments multiplied across the mindscreen, then suddenly burst like bright, incendiary bombs.

He could visualize the wide telemetry shield, fielding impulses from his skull plugs and transmitting them to the computer controls, then feeding it all back through his ethereal, yet perfect-looking arms and legs and the parts of the plane his arms and legs had become.

The plane dropped past red-brown walls dirty with gray-green and crimson growth. He didn't see any fires in the immediate vicinity, but they were raging only a few miles away, and he appeared to be dragging the ash down with him. It swarmed over him so thickly that at first he thought his eyes had suddenly grown worse.

Broad plateaus and massive chimney formations rose from a valley floor still miles below him. At times they came close enough together to form their own narrow passages. He was afraid to drop much farther. It would be like a labyrinth down there. And he would need the height when the dragon ventured out, if it did.

The bodies of the mountains were ponderous, spotted with red and green disease. Enormous, infested mounds of alien flesh. He felt sure that, if he broke into them, there'd be alien maggots: blue and green and brilliant silver, star- and cone-shaped heads.

The forward canard helped pull him out of the drop. The sides of the fuselage, his sides, rippled once, then set for better air flow.

Now he had another vista on the canyon: a series of flat places along an ever-broadening series of cliffsides, arranged like enormous steps, rich with the crimson-hearted plants. On some of these steps he could see short, broad grazers, a smaller and slightly hairy version of the hippopotamus. One looked up in a kind of slow-motion startle, then lowered its head again. In the shadowed rock behind it, there appeared to be a wide tunnel opening.

Puff birds, their cheek sacs bloated comically, floated around the plane. If Alec looked carefully enough, he could see blotches of lizard colonies on the canyon walls, their jaws long and broad, crocodile-like. Hand-length insects with bloated wings and clawlike feet landed on the hull of his craft and were immediately washed away.

Wing, fin, and hull surfaces changed shape sixty times a second in a graceful, coordinated ballet.

He felt, to the core, lighter than air, with no care that his arms and legs were dead because he didn't need them any more. He felt the rockets within his dead fingers, the fire inside his eyes straining behind the goggles. Darkness filled his chest.

Then he saw the dragon. At first it was a bit of black ash, turning the cor-

ner of the rock tower far below him. Fluttering and twisting in the wind, it seemed the remnant of some scorched field of alien, vegetable life. It changed shape as it rose, from time to time sending out projections first one way, then another, so that at times it resembled a black, funereal pinwheel.

Then it was a bat, flapping slowly upward out of the shadowed valley toward the heat-baked peaks and plateaus at the top.

Then it was a small black sail boat, floating unsupported in the valley air. A ghost ship. A Flying Dutchman.

And then it was a dragon, resembling everything and nothing.

It was hard to see the thing's wings clearly. They were three times the length of his plane. Vaguely batlike, but with gas sacs lining the top and a doubling of the black-gray mottled skin where more gas might be trapped. The wing span appeared to be about eight times the height.

The dragon wrapped itself in its wings, then unwrapped, furled and unfurled, a dark lady teasing with her lingerie.

A wing dropped down, and Alec could see the dragon's head. The top of the skull was broad and pale, and Alec thought of the extinct condor. The eyes were large and opaque, seemingly without centers. The huge mouth dropped open, loose on its hinges, gulping air, as if hungry for anything that might cross it. He assumed that the large areas surrounding eyes and nose and mouth were gas-filled as well, since they appeared to change shape now and then, going from flat planes to gnarled ridges and swirls, giving the face as a whole an almost limitless expression.

The body was as dark as the wings, dull, and largely hidden.

The dragon lost altitude suddenly. For a moment it wrapped itself tightly for the drop, then unfurled its wings and let them drift up behind it. Alec watched as the dragon rapidly closed on one of the grazers on the steps below. Its wings spread, covering the step from view. Then it was rising rapidly, the grazer struggling in the dragon's jaws, a thin ribbon of yellow fluid trailing from a neck wound. When the dragon let go, the grazer smashed back onto the step and was still. The dragon settled slowly over it and began to gnaw.

The sheer physicality of the dragon was enough to take Alec's breath away. The plane rocked back and forth anxiously. Alec tried to stretch himself, but the wings would not budge. A warning light went off. He felt small and vulnerable, yet drawn to this physical massiveness, this beast of ancient health. Without thinking much about it, he felt the plane drifting down, the altitude readout racing past his eyes, blurring in a way that was almost soothing.

He was at nearly the same level as the dragon. It had finished its meal and winged itself gently off the cliffside. It hung in midair, watching the ship, watching Alec.

The creature's cheeks and neck billowed. Dust and ash shot up from it, as if caught in a thermal.

Alec let the plane ease closer, rocking slightly in the canyon updrafts.

The roaring thunder suddenly filled him, almost shaking the plane out of sync with him, a sensation he thought must be akin to out-of-body travel. A black cloud filled his field of vision at the same time that electrical charges worked at loosening his scalp.

The cloud fluttered and beat at his windscreen. Huge wing edges curled down at their tips. Then he was rocketing sideways, wings shifting, the rear thrust nozzles swiveling rapidly to direct him away from the looming bloodred rock walls.

Now the dragon was beneath him, massive devil's head coming up in front of the plane. The thing was flying upside down, blank eyes watching him, and Alec was suddenly bucking the plane ever so slightly, jabbing his belly fin at the dragon's exposed torso, then rolling out, climbing, banking, and settling back into his altitude once he saw that the dragon hadn't followed this time.

The dragon rose to a point distant and slightly beneath him, allowing him to circle. Its wings shuddered and rippled like a black paper kite. Only the head was immobile, held rigid in the turbulent air like an African mask. It drifted in the currents, watching.

Watching. One night when Marie had stood over him, thinking he was asleep, she'd lifted the covers, touching him hesitantly.

"Alec?" she'd whispered. "I'm . . . sorry. I just can't."

He had been surprised, and oddly touched.

The dragon revolved in midair, wings rising, dropping, paddling forward and back, darkness caught on a wheel.

The dragon was blowing air, or gas, out of cheeks, mouth, neck sacs. It began rising toward him. The instruments were in Alec's head, his eyes. The electronic goggles came up. Air speed, wind speed, and a half-dozen other functions read out along a muted silver band that ran across the bottom of the lens. Prepared to meet the dark, he aimed with the goggles and fired.

A cliff off to the dragon's left exploded into red debris. Alec trembled. A light flashed on his display. He looked out. The dragon was climbing above him

From underneath, the creature's body blended in with its wings. Then the wings began to rotate, the head turned down, the dark mass hesitated, and the dragon was suddenly dropping. In seconds the mouth gaped grotesquely, the jaws unhinged, the gas sacs receding, expanding.

Alec pulled away and began to spin in an evasive maneuver. His sensation that the dragon was with him was confirmed by a ballet of graphic stick figures spinning at the bottom of his goggles. Black flaps slapped at his windscreen. He closed his eyes, felt his stomach drop as he cut the thrusters, tensed his shoulders, and prepared the surfaces for the drop. Swiveling the thrusters and cutting them back in, he roared toward the valley floor until he'd left the dragon behind him, then let his canards and altered surfaces

bring him back up.

He stared at the dragon, feeling fire at the edge of his lips and at the tips of his fingers. The dragon stared down at him. It was terrible in its huge, limp fleshiness, but somehow Alec could not bring himself to imagine its destruction.

He saw the disease moving through his body, growing, reaching out to embrace his beautiful children and his wife. He saw their faces dissolve in slow motion, in blues and greens and reds.

Then he realized the dragon was descending farther toward the canyon floor, going away. And he was doing nothing to pursue it.

Alec watched until the dragon shrank back to a twist of black ash, then he dropped quickly, following the dragon around several twists in the narrowing canyon, past towers, chimneys, and spires. The surrounding cliffs loomed progressively closer, and at times Alec felt compelled to bring the wings in to reduce their span. Vegetation became sparser this far down, the lizards were in more abundance, and the grazers were nowhere to be seen.

Alec maneuvered through a series of swirled rock formations, following the rocketing dragon that now looked eagle-sized as it threaded the bull'seyes, into dragon country.

Part of the wall began to curl overhead, and Alec could see that the canyon here was narrowing, gaining a partial roof. He hesitated, and the plane slowed down, but as the dragon drew farther away from him, escaping, he was seized by a sudden desperation and felt the plane shoot forward.

The wall curled more as he flew its length, forming more than a complete roof over him now, beginning to drop on the other side like a frozen wave. The space here was still hardly confined — a hundred such planes could have flown wingtip to wingtip and could still have had room to spare. The walls danced with broken light.

He was enclosed in an almost seamless tunnel.

Alec suddenly experienced vertigo, imagined himself falling through miles of earth with no one there to catch him. He was too heavy, too awkward. Too ugly. He could not fly.

Bright warning lights tattooed his eyelids. He wondered that the plane had let him go this far, but knew proceeding was better than stalling out.

A message was up on his windscreen: THIS IS A HAZARDOUS FLIGHT AREA. ADVISE AGAINST PROCEEDING.

Alec wondered how long it had been there.

Amazingly, the plane flew on, faster and faster. He wished his wife and children could have seen it. Flying through the dark with no hands to hold him.

But it wasn't at all dark in the tunnel. He looked around. A yellowish growth covered the walls, broken here and there by a grayish, tendriled vegetation. But it was all blurred, blending together.

Up ahead the dragon revolved as if in slow motion, though Alec knew it

was traveling faster than he was. Its wings were glistening panels of silver light that, when looked at, almost hurt the eyes. Rainbow light flowed over its head and down its back, trailed off into a tail of fiery dust, and traveled over the dark form, like hordes of migrating, fluorescent parasites in the dragon's skin.

The tunnel opened up periodically into a necklace of enormous chambers. The dragon slowed down, seeming to float, maneuvering coyly behind occasional spires and hanging lobes of stone. Coquettish.

Alec burned his thrusters lightly, wings tilted upward and the jets along his wing edges straining. So although there was forward progression, it was, like the dragon's, just short of a stall. An encounter between two winged insects.

Dark, concave ridges with sharp rock dividers, like the body impressions of a huge snake, ringed the chambers. Ribbed stone grew along the walls like roots or stiffened entrails.

His instruments detected activity in the recessed galleries, dark patterns of movement. Vague impressions of limbs and wings and unclassifiable appendages, nothing more.

The walls seemed closer, fecund and teeming. He suddenly imagined he could smell the stone.

Minute bits of material were bouncing off the skin of the plane, some of it darting off before it could be misted away.

Occasionally, something raked lightly along the underside of the ship, too close and too softly for stone.

Ahead of him the tunnel split, both branches far narrower than the one he had been in. The dragon floated at the juncture, its glowing wings and face drifting through highly stylized patterns of light, like a woman dancing in a kimono, her face painted a brilliant white.

He stared for what seemed to be a long time before following the dragon into the starboard tunnel.

The bright kimono began to wrap him. The plane revolved once rapidly on its axis, freeing itself. Alec imagined being wrapped within his own sheets, unable to get loose, paralyzed.

Ahead of him the dragon was imitating, making huge loops out of its pliant wings, twirling itself like a pinwheel.

Another tunnel was opening, even narrower. The dragon straightened and dove through it. Alec hesitated, the plane slowed, but there was nowhere else to go. He had to trust the dragon's expertise. He dropped his nose and entered.

The tunnel widened, then began to curve steadily upward, narrowing again. Tilting farther up, Alec could feel the strain. Soon they were almost vertical, facing a dimness ahead. Alec could now guess.

The dragon was racing up the hollow insides of a chimney formation. Alec shifted focus, gritted his teeth, and allowed his ship to follow as if towed. He felt sick to his stomach.

The ship gave him something for the nausea — he could feel the change beginning back in his throat. The center of the chimney was a seamless gray, speckled in red. The warning lights cooled, just in time for Alec to burst out of the chimney and into dazzling sunlight.

As the plane floated out over the valley again, Alec scanned the sky frantically for some sign of the dragon. Nothing. He could see the gleam off the domes of Bennett Compound on the lip of the distant canyon wall. He'd come back to the departure point. Ground vehicles waited along the edge. He soared closer, into gathering shadow.

The shadow wrapped him up with a roar. Dark sheets wound around his chest until he couldn't breathe. A cry caught in his throat, his goggles blazed red, and with a high-pitched whine he pitched over, dragging his mind screaming behind him.

He fired again and again, turning dirt and rock and sky into flame.

His eyes came open with the sense that the plane was folding back its wings. He looked out, straight down, at a fast-approaching ribbon of blue. He was a child falling out of bed, the bedclothes around him so tightly he could not move. He was a child tossed and dropped by his father. He was a dragon too large and much too dark to fly.

The water rose. The aide had left him in his bath too long. He could not move his arms. His legs were gone. And he was slipping fast beneath the waves.

Alec screamed as muscles seemed to tear from bone, as bones bent and snapped. But he was rising, pulling out of the dive, and the disfigurement was only illusory, he reminded himself, no matter how terrible.

He strained for the canyon rim, dragging the plane up behind him. Enough. He had no business here.

And then he slammed into darkness, and the darkness gave way around him, then came back fighting, eating his windscreen, folding wing and fuselage, crushing him.

The devil's head roared above him, blank eyes blazing. Flames coruscated down wings shrinking, turning to silver.

Crazily, the ship's computers began cycling through a systems check. Alec watched microhydraulics multiply and disappear, electrical systems blossom. His perfect cobalt-and-lime legs and arms jumbled, doubled, then faded away.

And on the top edge of the telemetry shield, the dragon's severed muscles and nerves danced madly. He'd speared it, pinned it. He could almost imagine reaching out and grasping it in his hand. It wasn't going to get away.

He could see the edge of the cliff only a few yards above him, in one unobscured corner of his windscreen. Personnel in red suits lined the lip. He'd never make it; he could feel the plane falling.

He reached with his mind, and the thrusters pushed.

He felt his stomach rise, the leap in his thighs.

And suddenly he was lifting both plane and shield-pinioned dragon up over the edge of the cliff to solid ground. Plane and dragon skidded over broken rock, crimson-hearted scrub, and cinnamon-colored soil to a shuddering stop.

Alec thought of his body breaking, the disease spilling out, the disease murdering everyone around him, his beautiful, sleeping children, his wife. He heaved his useless body. He thrashed, palsied, cramping.

"Get him out of there!"

Technicians in black masks were pulling Alec out of his harness and trying to slip a mask over his face. He fought them. Smoke haloed their bulbous heads. He smelled something sharp. Ash began to fill his mouth.

He tried to turn. The dragon roared.

"Get him out!"

His head fell back when they lifted him. He could see the dragon rolling on its side, creasing a cindered wing. Huge blank eyes settled, stared.

Alec was exhilarated. It was like wrestling and pinning the nightmare, even as he was dreaming it.

Great cheeks blew clouds of gas that exploded into flame. Sacs ruptured, flames shot up, dark flesh blistered.

"Tether it!"

The techs carried metal claws to the dragon's trembling, black-gray mottled sides. The devil's head fell forward.

And Alec felt his own head fall forward. He looked down at his feet, caught by the twisted hull. His withered feet. Once grounded, he wasn't much of a bird, or dragon. His people were still trying to pull him out from under the telemetry shield. The dragon sprawled over the rest of the plane and beyond, sides heaving. Yellow liquid bubbled around the wound where the dragon had crashed into the plane, where the telemetry shield entered muscle and nerve, short-circuiting the dragon, becoming a part of the dragon. The dragon was part of his plane.

The dragon tried to rise, but kept jamming the plane wreckage farther into its wound as it struggled. The huge head faced Alec, still terrible, still beautifully dark.

This is wrong, he thought.

Alec was still in range of the telemetry shield — he could still control it, but his people almost had him loose, and then it would be too late.

Alec thought to lift his head. The dragon's head stirred.

Alec imagined his arms raised. Burnt wings fluttered.

Alec visualized the telemetry shield, the dragon pinned there. He tried to make the dragon rise, but it fell back, the wings flapping involuntarily, muscles cramped, its body huge, unmanageable, useless, alien.

What am I doing? he thought.

The dragon might contain his cure. He just needed to allow his people to

drag it away.

The dragon thrashed, wings and muscles powerless. Its huge head turned. Alec stared into dark and found something familiar there.

They might be able to reverse the sclerosis. He'd walk. Marie and the children would come back. They'd all welcome him because he'd be clean again.

Who needs it? He'd changed, and if they'd loved him, they'd have accepted his changing.

The dragon's body flapped and rolled. Oddly lovely, mothlike. The last of its kind, tossed high and dropped, helpless. But still so strong; if it got back to its lair, it might be able to pick the pieces out. It might be able to heal. Again the eyes enveloped Alec, so dark they left him gasping.

He watched as the technicians struggled to attack the grappling claws. The thing bellowed hideously, leathery skin flapping. The beast had poisoned him, changed his life, infected him with its darkness.

The beast had changed him. The beast had brought out a life different from the one Alec had intended.

A darkness ran in his own veins, dragon's breath in his lungs. Another world lay under the bridges between neural synapses, a place where dreamers and their nightmares were the same, where only dragons and their hunters might fly.

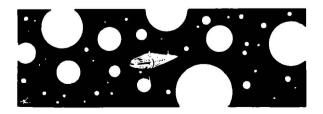
The dragon had made him fly through the dark.

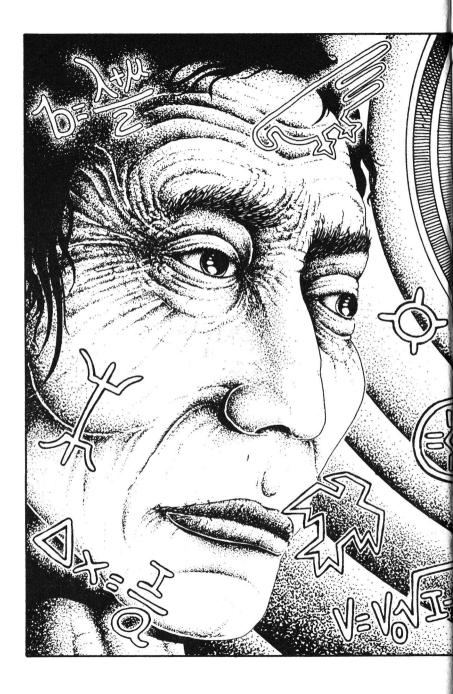
I have a choice, he thought.

Alec pushed with his mind just as his people pulled him loose of the plane, almost out of range of the telemetry link with the dragon. And the dragon rose with the crumpled plane clinging to its belly.

It staggered to the cliff's edge and went over while Alec watched, the technicians holding him back from the lip.

And under the shouts, the frantic scramble, Alec had a brief moment inside the dragon's head as it slipped over the clift's edge, the wind filling broken wings, the darkness filling enormous eyes, heedless of the fire crisping its back as it dived once more into its alien world.





MOON OF POPPING TREES by R. Garcia y Robertson art: Brad W. Foster



"This is how the world will end." Stays Behind showed neither fear nor regret. To her, the end of creation was merely a mathematical certainty. She watched through the leather lodge entrance as the storm shook white feathers of snow from a bitter black sky. The wind that drove the snow cut like blade steel, forcing cold fingers through the lacing holes in the tipi. She pulled the warm, woven trade blanket tighter, to completely cover her calico dress. The dress fabric was thin, but bright and red as summer.

Heat from the lodge fire stirred the air. Its living motion made her warm. Heat was motion — she knew it, and felt it. Stays Behind also knew that when all the heat motion in the world was spent, that was how the world would end.

This was not Stays Behind's tipi, but a tiny twelve-skin lodge belonging to a womanless old Shyela named Yellow Legs. An old tipi, it was fashioned from thin, smoke-stained unpainted hides. All tipis were tattered now, and all hides were old and worn. There would be no new ones, now that the great herds were gone. Kiowas claimed that a Snake woman had seen the buffalo disappear into a mountainside. A tall peak in the Wichitas opened wide, inside was a world brimming with clear rivers and wild plum blossoms, the buffalo entered, and the mountain closed behind them. Neither Snakes nor Kiowas could be trusted to see things straight, nor to speak straight about what they had seen. Most Lakota said it was the Wasichu who had killed the buffalo. Either way, they were gone.

"You have seen the world's end?" Yellow Legs was on the far side of the fire, facing the entrance flap and the dawn. He sat in this place of honor, amid hanging parfleches and skin bags pawed by beaded bear claws. Years had hardened his skin, like old leather left in the sun. In the days when buffalo were many, and in the Spirit World, Yellow Legs had seen many strange sights. He accepted that someone one year into womanhood might have seen the world's end.

"No" — Stays Behind stirred the fire — "but the Wasichu say the world will end in snow and ice."

"Hetchetu aloh, then it is so, if that is what the Wasichu say." When this Shyela meant to tease her, he spoke like an Ogalala.

Stays Behind called the old Shyela uncle, though she was an Ogalala Lakota and no real relation to him. Long ago, before her parents left for the Spirit World in the Winter of Spotted Sickness, this Shyela had done her family some great service. Now he had no wives or daughters, so Stays Behind cooked his food, cut his wood, tended his fire, and mended those things that weren't too sacred for a woman to touch. His needs were few, so the work was light. Since her sister, Antelope Woman, had married Handsome Dog, neither she nor Yellow Legs cared to stay in her family's cabin. Instead, she slept just inside the entrance to his tipi, wrapped round a shaggy camp dog for warmth.

"No, it is so." Stays Behind jabbed her stick into the ashes, raising sparks

and smoke. "Heat is motion. See how the fire leaps towards the smoke hole. Each moon, each day, this motion spreads through the world, like water spreading over the prairie. When all the heat motion has run away, then the world will end."

Yellow Legs looked into the leaping fire. Snow danced past the leather entrance flap, and the rush of warm air drew it into the fire pit. Red embers sputtered, the flakes vanished into rising vapor, and embers burned lower and cooler. "Yes, I see it. The world's fire is always ebbing. Who would think the Wasichu were so wise? Is there anything they do not know?"

"Many things." Stays Behind became excited and authoritative. At one year into womanhood, men never asked her opinion. "The Wasichu wonder about the nature of light, which is like heat, but not like heat."

Leaning back against his buffalo-hide rest, the old Shyela closed his eyes. "Tell me more. I would like to dream of something that even the Wasichu do not understand."

The Red Cloud Agency stood lonely on the prairie. A gray blanket of sky stretched from one end of the world to the other. The wood-frame Agency school was built to army specifications, weather-beaten, and old before its time. Since the Moon of Falling Leaves, none of the boys had come to class. That was the month, November 1890, that the Agent, Lakotas-Scare-This-Lad, had called many soldiers to the Agency. Half of the younger braves had left for the Badlands. The boys took this as a sure sign that school was out.

Teacher Miller could hear them outside, whooping with glee as the girls filed out. Once the boys had feared to defy him openly; now even their skulking was no longer silent. When a Lakota brave-in-training lets an enemy hear him, it isn't clumsiness, but defiance.

Miller was a man of God and science, with sad thoughtful brows and nervous hands. His slender fingers fiddled with the cast iron stove and steel coffeepot. He pretended to ignore the lone girl who remained at her desk. She also looked down, neatly piling papers. Miller knew she could follow his movements without raising her eyes.

Long raven hair framed high earth-brown cheekbones. To Miller, her face was flat and foreign, serious and savage. He had trouble thinking of her as a thirteen-year-old girl. It was easier to picture her as a young animal, or even as a miniature warrior.

Miller banged the lid down on the balky stove, then nudged the coffeepot back over the fire. The stove seldom stayed lit, and the steel pot had a broken handle. Together, they conspired to produce cold coffee and burnt fingers. Today, the stove stayed warm and the coffee was hot. Already it was a special day.

The aroma of burning coffee filled the small schoolroom. The girl lifted her head. "May I have Black Medicine?"

He was already filling her cup, stirring in big crystals of rock sugar. Miller

managed to pass the steaming cup, without spilling or touching her hand. She drank and let the hot dark fluid flow through her, feeling the strength of its medicine. The world was brighter, and she became braver.

"Tell me more about Professor Morley, and why the speed of light is . . ."

She stumbled on the last word.

"Invariant?" Miller suggested, and she nodded.

The teacher smiled, for it had taken months to convince her that women's questions weren't rude, but now there was no stopping them. "As I said yesterday, Professors Michelson and Morley have done a number of exact experiments. These seem to show that no matter what our movement is, relative to the ether, the speed of light appears constant in any given medium. This may imply that the speed of light is a constant which cannot be exceeded."

"Why is that important?"

Miller stopped pacing and pointed to the door. "If you could exceed the speed of light, you could open that door, then race over here and see yourself coming in. Cause could precede effect. Time would appear to run backward. Past and future would both be visible."

Stays Behind studied the dark depths of her cup. Ghost Dancers saw themselves during spirit journeys. Any of the boys outside could have told Miller that Black Elk and Sitting Bull looked into the future. In a Sun Dance on the Rosebud, Sitting Bull had seen "many soldiers falling into camp." Ten days later, Long Hair, who the Crows called Son of the Morning Star, attacked the Lakota and Shyela camped on the Greasy Grass. Long Hair and many soldiers fell.

When a wise man pretends to be more ignorant than any camp child, he must have a reason, though it was often the way with Wasichu that they mixed deep wisdom with childish lies. Out of respect for Teacher Miller, Stays Behind also feigned ignorance.

Instead of speaking, she slid a thoughtfully folded scrap of paper across the unpainted desk top. The paper lay between them, amid the wood grains, till Miller picked it up. He read it, folded it, unfolded it, and reread it, as if the paper were somehow both familiar and out of place.

The paper itself was plain enough. It was torn from a notebook that he himself had handed out. It was the series of equations scrawled across its surface that presented a problem. Their meaning seemed clear. The first dealt with velocity, the second with time, and the third with mass. What Miller couldn't understand was how they'd gotten onto this particular piece of paper.

He looked at the Lakota girl, who seemed to be searching for something in her coffee cup. "Did you write this?"

She shook her head. "Yellow Legs wrote it."

"Yellow Legs? The Cheyenne medicine man that you live with?"
This time she nodded.

"How could he have written these formulas?" The question was not addressed to the girl — any answer she gave would only deepen the mystery.

Stays Behind strove to speak straight. "I told Yellow Legs what you said about light. He listened, and that night he had a vision. Next morning he took my notebook and pencil, and drew what he had seen."

Miller watched heat rise from the stove and waver in the air. Ice was on the windows, beveled bits of frosted crystal that started next to the frames and grew out across the glass. Everything was quite normal, except for the paper in his hand. In a matter of minutes Miller invented and rejected a number of explanations. On his shelf he could see Henry James's new *Principles of Psychology* and two older volumes by Spencer bearing the same name. They gave adequate explanations for dreams and visions, but not for the formulas he was holding.

"What do they mean?"

Miller looked back at the formulas. "The first is a mathematical expression of what I said before. The speed of light will remain the same no matter how fast the observer is moving. The second deals with time and offers a partial explanation for the Michelson-Morley results. It also implies that, if the speed of light were exceeded, time would be reversed. The last formula deals with mass. It says that objects having mass may never reach the speed of light, that objects without mass travel at the speed of light, and that objects with imaginary mass always exceed the speed of light."

Looking up from his hand, he saw that he had lost his audience. "You don't understand any of this, do you?"

She gave polite agreement.

"That's too bad. If you had written this, it would have made me an excellent teacher, and you an even better pupil. Instead, I must deal with a medicine man whose visions make mathematical sense."

The girl looked guilty. "Is that bad?"

Miller paused and lost his chance to answer. The rear door swung open, and a tall, blue-coated Wasichu entered the room.

Stays Behind put down the cup, as though it held poison, and began to back out of the room.

Captain Wallace tipped his hat to the retreating girl, revealing a long lowland Scots face, fair hair, pale eyes, and a sad, drooping moustache. His grin remained fixed on the girl till she was out the door, then he turned it on Miller. "Wasting your time."

It took Miller a moment to harness his Quaker temper. "The government pays me to teach Indians. I was talking mathematics with a pupil. Anything else would have been a waste of time."

Wallace warmed his hands by rubbing them gleefully over the stove. "And exceptional pupils deserve extra instruction? The government pays me to kill Indians, but I make my exceptions, like as not for the same reason you do." His hand went for the coffee. "Since we're almost in the same line

of work, can I bum some government coffee off you?"

Miller shrugged and watched Wallace pour with a professional ease that left him envious and irritated.

Captain Wallace added whiskey to the cup from a field canteen. "Take a word from a fellow who's been at his job longer - don't lift her skirt, you'll end up short an arm."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Ouaker, if you don't, then you're the only one." Wallace swished his coffee and whiskey together. "Savages ain't got our sense of shame. Every kid on the Agency knows she stays after class. Don't they call her Stays Behind?"

Miller hid behind his own cup. "Children will always --"

"Don't let it shame you. Doesn't shame her. But remember she's spoken for. Like as not she'll marry her brother-in-law, Handsome Dog."

"Brother-in-law?"

"Sure, he's Indian Police, getting enough government money for two women. If taking two sisters at the same time shocks you, then you still got a lot to learn about the Sioux. They figure what's good for one sister is good for the other. Just ain't got our sense of shame."

Wallace sipped from his cup and cocked his head towards the door through which Stays Behind had left. "You probably think of her as some little girl, but she thinks of herself as a Lakota woman."

Miller's hand closed around the paper. "That child is modest to a fault." "Sure," Wallace said, nodding, "like any Sioux woman should be, but that's a pose. Underneath that modesty, she's a right proper little savage, without a lick of restraint. Decent parents would have taken a stick to her, and done her some good. Instead, her folks let her run wild when they were alive, and now they're gone. You can bet she's played tipi with a bunch of little bucks. She's always had what she wanted, when she wanted it, and she thinks we're the ones who're shameful."

Miller focused on the crumpled paper. "Here, you know savages so well, explain this."

Wallace was an army engineer, so the form was familiar, but the meaning escaped him. "What do they mean?"

"Yellow Legs, the old Cheyenne she lives with, saw these formulas in a vision. Problem is they make mathematical sense, and they represent a plausible solution to an important problem in physics." Miller paused. "But perhaps the Chevenne are noted for their knowledge of higher mathematics."

"Hell, no proper Cheyenne thinks it's decent to count higher than a thousand." Wallace passed the paper back. "You're making too much of this. The old fellow probably got those figures from some whiskey sutler, then drank enough to get them into his dreams."

The teacher shook his head. "Chances of a whiskey drummer being so

deeply involved in theoretical physics are only somewhat less remote than those formulas coming from a Cheyenne medicine man. I'm afraid I'll have to see this old man myself. Do you think Handsome Dog could take me to him?"

Wallace's smile faded. "Perhaps he would, but God knows if he'd get you back. That Cheyenne lives among the worst of the Ghost Dancers, with Burnt Thighs and Ogalalas who'd take a slow and painful interest in your insides. Yellow Legs talks like a medicine man, but in his younger days he was a Dog Soldier who killed more whites than the cholera. Only mathematics he knew then was counting coup."

The Seventh Cavalry tabs on Wallace's uniform caught Miller's eye. "Most people have forgotten those days."

"Not me. I was with Custer, attached to Reno's battalion. When Reno ran for the river, the gunfire was so heavy that half of my troop never heard the recall. My troop commander and most of the men with him didn't make it back across the Little Big Horn. Yellow Legs can tell you all about it when you see him. He was there. Know how he got his name?"

"A certain discoloration of the lower limbs?"

Wallace reached down and ran his thumb up the yellow cavalry stripe on his uniform pants. "It comes from going into battle wearing the breeches of an officer that he'd killed and scalped. While you're looking into higher mathematics, I'd hate for you to find out why there's more hair than heads in Sioux tipis."

The stove had gone out, and Miller felt chilled.

Wallace watched frost gather on a window pane. "Some nights, Quaker, I close my eyes, and I'm right back in that race for the river, with Sioux and Cheyenne riding in among us, yelling, laughing, and knocking men from the saddle"

In winter, the black road between the Agency and the Ghost Dance camps on White Clay Creek became a twisted icy track. When there was school, Stays Behind walked the many miles twice a day, without thinking to complain. This day she rode home in Handsome Dog's buckboard, feeling every frozen rut. Had he not been her brother-in-law, she would have walked.

A red sun crawled towards its grave, bleeding over the land and leaving long shadows behind. Yellow Legs had told her how the Badlands were made from Uncegila, the great mother of water monsters. Her bones had been pressed to stone by the weight of ages. Miller had even shown her smaller creatures trapped in rocks from times gone by, then had told her of huge monsters that had swum in these parts, in the days when the prairies were warm seas. She could hardly imagine how long it took to turn flesh and bone to stone, or seawater into solid land. But today Uncegila seemed freshly slain: the dying light lay in bloody rags upon her bones. This was an omen for sure, but one with no obvious meaning.

She felt something moving under her calico dress, and the Spirit World faded. Stays Behind brought her quirt down hard on Handsome Dog's hand. He jerked it back, sticking it into his mouth and sucking blood off the knuckles.

"Counting coup, little warrior?"

Handsome Dog had a proud feather rising from his wide-brimmed hat. His breast bore a blue coat and an Indian Police badge, but below the belt he wore buckskin breeches, fringed long to drag in the dust. From the waist down, he was all Ogalala.

Stays Behind stayed silent, striving to keep in the spell of the Spirit World.

"You act like Crazy Horse come again, not like a silly girl with rope between her legs. A spirit like that must find the old Shyela cold company."

"I already have a camp dog to keep me warm at night." It made her mad to hear Handsome Dog name the dead so freely, for that was bound to bring bad luck.

Laughing at her answer, he returned to keeping the road between the horse's ears.

The blood on the bones was drying. Red light darkened into purple patches of shadow. Stays Behind cast about for some sign that would give voice to her vision. Growing shadows and stone-strewn snowfields said nothing. Rows of gaunt cottonwoods lined the draws, pointing bare gray fingers at the sky. Stays Behind looked up.

High overhead, a single goose winged its way north and west. Geese seldom go alone, and this deep into winter such birds should be flocking southward. For a time she watched the lone bird, fixing it in her mind, making sure there was no mistaking the sign. Then she asked Handsome Dog, "Do you see that goose headed north and west?"

Her brother-in-law didn't bother to look up. "Silly girl, no goose goes north in the Moon of Popping Trees."

She wished that she had walked the long way alone, then only the Spirit World would have spoken to her.

It was not Handsome Dog, but Stays Behind who took Miller to Yellow Legs's lodge. She explained on the trip out what was proper in the tipi, and what was not. Sucking on rock sugar, she gave her instructions gravely.

Miller knew to turn to his right, and to sit on Yellow Legs's left. He knew not to look directly at his host, not to cross between his host and the fire, and not to speak directly to Stays Behind within the lodge. She entered after Miller, turning the opposite way. The south side of the lodge was for men, the north side for women.

She couldn't prepare him for the sights and smells. Light came only from a dim half-moon fire pit. Miller was lost in a smoky sea of dog smells, human sweat, old leather, and a pleasant aroma rising from a dark carpet of

leaves. Snow and cold covered over the camp garbage and animal droppings that lay outside.

As his sight returned, Miller noted that the lodge looked larger on the inside than it had seemed on the outside, a curious illusion. Trade blankets hanging from the lodge poles divided and darkened the tipi. Yellow Legs sat in the darkest recess, wrapped in a buffalo robe. There was a doeskin bundle across his knees. It was tanned white and soft with the hair off; painted blue diamonds chased red triangles across its surface.

From the corner of Miller's eye, Yellow Legs looked older than his sixty winters. Lines lay on his face like dark streaks in old oxblood. His eyes were hidden by a hawk nose, high cheekbones, and sad, heavy lids. Graying hair was held back by a beaded headband.

Miller had manners enough not to speak, since his host's mouth was shut tight as a turtle. Instead, he allowed Stays Behind to serve him a miserable mush made from dried meat and chokecherries. The meal was hard to stomach, but each bite Miller forced down encouraged Yellow Legs. Had Miller meant him harm, he would not have eaten inside the tipi.

"Greetings, Teacher Miller." Yellow Legs stressed teacher because Miller was a dead word with no special meaning. Miller had been warned that Yellow Legs spoke English, though no one knew where he had learned it.

The teacher returned the greeting, and there was an awkward pause. Yellow Legs looked past where Stays Behind knelt, speaking to no one in particular. "I knew the teacher would come when she took the paper."

Miller took the words as meant for him, forgot his manners, and began to question as quickly as any Wasichu would. "Yes, I came. Do you know what these formulas mean?"

Yellow Legs drew a red clay pipe from the bundle. He filled it with tobacco and red willow bark. After offering the pipe to the four directions and smoking some himself, he passed the pipe to Miller. It was dangerous to tell power stories in daylight, but smoking together would make it better.

As Miller puffed on the pipe, Yellow Legs observed, "It is often the way with visions that their meaning is not clear. What I wrote was like the words of the Wasichu. Perhaps you can give them meaning."

Miller decided not to attempt an explanation of mass, velocity, and acceleration in the middle of this murky tipi. "They represent a possible solution to a particular problem that interests me."

"Good, then my vision has been of use to you."

"Yes, but what I really want to know is where the vision came from?" Miller was off on another question, without thanking Yellow Legs for the vision gift, but that was often the way with Wasichu.

Yellow Legs drew smoke and power from his pipe. "I have had visions for many winters, and that question has also interested me."

"But, do you always dream in mathematical symbols?"

"My other visions had shown me many strange things, but never such

symbols. Perhaps they were meant for you, not for me." He was hinting again that Miller might thank him.

Miller weighed the paper in his hand. "Have your visions always turned out to be true?"

"Truth is not easy to know. I was at the Sun Dance on the Rosebud when Sitting Bull saw many soldiers falling into camp. The world knows what followed. Was it a true vision or not?"

As clear as if Captain Wallace were in the lodge, Miller could see the Seventh Cavalry insignia. He pushed the memory from his mind. "Do you also believe in the Ghost Dance?"

"The Ghost Dance is a thing beyond belief or disbelief." The clay pipe was cold, so Yellow Legs began to repack it. "Wovoka, who gave us the Ghost Dance, once made a vision. He asked each person present to look inside his hat. Many looked inside and saw blue water and a green land where the dead lived again and the buffalo had returned. All saw this except one, who saw only the inside of a hat. Which would one not believe? Would one tell the many that they did not see the Spirit World? Would one tell the one man that he did not see a hat? Visions are real — their meanings remain hidden."

Miller stared straight at the medicine man. "What did you see in the hat?"

"I saw the green land, with the Wasichu gone and the buffalo come back, but I did not see the loved ones I have lost. What that means, I do not know."

He paused, balancing truth and trust against possible betrayal. "Sitting Bull is coming to the Agency. Perhaps he will have an answer. His visions have always been strong."

Letting go of the doeskin bundle, Yellow Legs warmed gnarled fingers over the fire, which had sunk to embers glowing like cracks into the earth's core. "I will tell you my oldest and strongest vision so you may judge its worth." He waited till Miller nodded, then went on. "When I was young, I feared to be brave in battle. I feared to meet a Wasichu's bullet, or to be tortured by the Crows. A medicine man told me that I must seek my own death in a vision, then I could know it and prepare for it in life."

Miller saw the firelight in Yellow Legs's eyes, burning brighter and stronger than his body. "I had a most powerful vision. In this dream I saw my own death. I saw my body laid out for burial — a worn husk, wrapped in wrinkled skins. Overhead, six stars shown down, four were white and two red, yet it was full daylight."

Miller shifted closer to the fire also.

"This dream gave me courage, for I felt that I might never meet death till I saw these six stars shine in daylight. From that day forward I counted many coups, feeling neither fear nor pain in battle. In the Winter of the Hundred Slain, we rode against the Wasichu. When others held back for

fear of the bullet storm, I rode right in among them, seizing a Wasichu's many-firing rifle, though he aimed and fired at me as I came up. Every dawn as I saw the stars fade, I knew this was not my day to die."

"Do you expect this charm to always protect you?"

"Protect me?" Yellow Legs stood up, letting slip the buffalo robe. His body was bare to the waist, glowing red in the firelight and filling the rear of the tipi. "Look, I am without a wound. This is not a kill talk, so I won't recount my many battles. Almost all were losing battles. I lost my family, I lost my friends. My people are gone, the buffalo are gone. Even as we speak, Wasichu make ready to cut the tall grass and plow up the prairie. The world I was born with will be no more. Yet still the stars will not shine in daylight. Each dawn I watch them, hoping that this will be the day when they do not fade."

Despite the cold December air, sweat pooled along Miller's spine. Yellow Legs would say no more.

Later, over cards and whiskey, Wallace dragged the story out of him. "So, the old Cheyenne charlatan got to you. I guess that's what makes him a medicine man."

Miller refused to be drawn. "Are we playing straights?"

"Not if you got one." Wallace thumbed broken nails over thick cards. "Dance back the buffalo, and dance us all away. Miller, your head's so full of formulas, you no longer hear plain speech when it's spoken at you."

Cards rose and fell, and money changed hands.

Wallace tapped the bottle before him. "If you drank some, you'd understand Indians better. When my troop was pinned to the wrong bank of the Little Big Horn, with Sioux and Cheyenne crawling up on three sides, what's the first thing Frank Girard and Lonesome Charlie Reynolds did?"

"Begged forgiveness from their maker?"

"Opened a bottle, Quaker. Who'd want to be sober in that spot? A white man drinks to forget his fear and then buckles down to business, but an Indian drinks to get rip-roaring drunk. Wants to start seeing things, visions and whatnot. Which is why they call it 'Holy Water.' We won't give 'em whiskey, so instead they starve and dance themselves into a trance."

Miller combed through his cards. "Where's the harm in that?"

"It'll be more harm to them than us. Those ghost Dancers are getting ready for one last war party. Don't blame 'em either. I'd want to go down fighting. They figure with visions to guide 'em and ghost shirts to stop our bullets, they just might make it."

"Come, the only weapon I saw was a thirty-year-old rifle, done up with feathers. Looked more like an objet d'art."

The soldier shook his head. "That gun is gonna get Yellow Legs into trouble. Handsome Dog told me about it, an original Henry repeater. Two of Fetterman's men were carrying brand new Henrys."

"Fetterman?"

"Captain, assigned to Fort Phil Kearny, the fort Red Cloud burned down. Fetterman claimed he could ride through the whole Sioux nation with eighty men. He went off without orders to prove it, rode over Lodge Trail Ridge, and ran into a mess of Ogalalas, and into Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, and his Bad Faces, all backed by Cheyenne and Arapaho. They found Fetterman and his command, stripped, scalped, and stuck full of arrows, but they never recovered the rifles."

The sputtering oil lamp cast swaying shadows. "That must have been a long time ago," muttered Miller.

"Too long." Wallace frowned into his cards. "We've gotten lax. Letting them have weapons. Letting hostiles like Yellow Legs stray off their proper reservation. It's gonna stop right here. Ghost Dancers that don't find proper work won't get government rations. Soon it'll be work or starve at this Agency."

A north wind whipped round the cabin, pressing night against the windows. Miller didn't bother to ask where the Ghost Dancers would find work, out on the frozen prairie, in the dead of winter.

The Tachyon rode behind the eyes of a circling hawk, watching the world whirl backward. The snowbird lost its hunger as it hunted through the frigid air. It remembered a missed kill. When that moment returned, the Tachyon was gone, faster than the hawk's keen eyes could follow.

Then the Tachyon listened with the ears of the hunted, a shaggy mouse scurrying backward across the snow. Wind whispered, dragging tinkling snow crystals up into the sky. Footfalls froze the mouse in midstep. The Tachyon was gone again, into the lynx that had stalked the mouse, then into the bird the lynx had missed, catching the world in quick wary glances.

Crow, mouse, rabbit, owl — the Tachyon flew from one to the other. From bird to beast and back again, faster than thought, faster than sight. Finally, the Tachyon rested in a lone wolf, loping out of the hills toward the flats. Fresh in the wolf's memory was the creature that the Tachyon sought. Together, they ran toward that remembered rendezvous. Looking down through the wolf's eyes, the Tachyon saw four fresh legs flashing backward over the frosted ground.

Behind them, stretching south and east, was a great chain of beings. Many minds that the Tachyon had made use of. Each for a moment had been in the grip of an unseen traveler; now each went its separate and opposite way.

In the half-light of dawn, hunters returned to the lodges empty-handed. The Agent, Lakotas-Scare-This-Lad, had decreed that Ghost Dancers must work six days a week, then cut the rations for those who remained in the dance encampments. Some straggled back to eat at the Agency, but most Ghost Dancers took up guns or bows and went looking for food. The Black Hills still held game, but this sacred hunting ground was gone, pinned be-

hind the iron-fenced flatlands. Hunters scoured the Badlands instead, and found that Uncegila's frozen bones had been picked clean.

Hungry men dispersed through the encampments, finding women to beg food from. Yellow Legs smelled simmering meat as he neared his lodge, the aroma making him think he was dreaming on his feet. Kneeling at the entrance, avoiding the place of honor, he laid his feathered Henry down.

"I have brought nothing for the pot."

"Then you shall feast on what we have here."

Stays Behind had started the cooking fire, then called the camp dog which had warmed her for half of the winter. The cur came wagging its tail, hoping to eat its fill. Stays Behind scratched the beast behind the ears, then bent down and cut its throat. The hound was now cooking in the hide pot from which it had hoped to feed, its paws peeping over the edge.

Dog was a delicacy among the Shyela. A failed hunt would not keep Yellow Legs from eating his fill. Greedy hands scooped dog meat from bowl to mouth. The aroma ate at Yellow Legs's stomach, while biting at his conscience. He noted that Stays Behind had only boiled army beans and bits of rabbit in her bowl. When the buffalo were many, only Snakes and Desert Utes ate rabbit, stealing their meat from the mouths of coyotes. Now nothing with four legs and a tail was safe from Lakota cooking pots. Yellow Legs invited her to have some dog. She declined. He sensed that this meal would have to be paid for later.

The first tasty hunk of dog rolled round his tongue. Yellow Legs closed his eyes, and the smells and sounds from lodge and fire faded. He felt himself in a still dark cabin, smelling cold damp corners and rough-hewn wood. Yellow Legs swallowed slowly and relaxed his lids, and light brought the lodge and fire rushing back.

He took another bite. Voices rang in his head. His brain became clouded, as if just dragged from sleep.

More bites brought chills that prickled like winter wind on naked skin, a wind that wailed with the voices of women.

The last bite made his own voice ring out, though the words were foreign. Rifle fire exploded in his head. Pain passed through his body, back to front, followed by sharp reports, like two pistol shots close at hand. The vision sank into blackness.

Yellow Legs found himself staring into an empty bowl. "What did I say? What speech did I use?"

Stays Behind looked up from her beans. "You spoke like a Hunkpapa Lakota, and you said that you weren't going."

"Like a Hunkpapa?" Yellow Legs sighed, looking back into his bowl. "This was a very small dog."

She laughed. "You brought back no meat; by rights I could have returned to my sister, but I fed you instead."

Her words were straight and strong. "I have had a vision, and you must

help me complete it." This soft strength reminded him of Crazy Horse, though Stays Behind could never have heard that voice. Crazy Horse had been murdered in the Moon When Calves Grow Hair, during the Year the Wasichu Chased the Nez Perce. She had been born that next spring, in the Moon of Grass Appearing.

The dog had put him in her debt. He could not say, "Impossible," so he said nothing.

She described the way the day had faded over Uncegila's bones, and how she must follow the lone goose that had gone north and west, follow it into the Black Hills. As she spoke, Stays Behind became bolder, pulling bundles' and anything-possible-bags from behind her buffalo-hide rest. She produced a white doeskin dress and several wolfskins. Then she sprinkled sacred sweet grass onto the fire, saying, "We must become wolves and scout into the Spirit World."

"It is not lucky nor lawful for a woman to say that."

She stamped her beaded moccasins and snorted. "Where is your luck old man? Is it waiting here to die, to see stars in the day sky? Is it coming with Sitting Bull? We must make our own luck now, or it will never come."

Yellow Legs fingered the soft, silver wolf fur. "I have been waiting for the Hunkpapa, but now he will never come here."

When Yellow Legs didn't say Sitting Bull's name, Stays Behind knew the Hunkpapa medicine man was dead.

"I felt his death. It was the Hunkpapa you heard, not me, speaking his final words."

Stays Behind lowered her head, hiding sadness behind determination. With Sitting Bull gone, there was even less reason to stay. She heaped more sweet grass on the fire till the tipi steamed like a sweat lodge. Behind this screen of smoke and magic, she stripped off the calico dress, rubbing white clay over limbs and face, donning the white doeskin.

Taking up the white clay, Yellow Legs slowly began to smear it on himself, thinking that the whole time she had shared his tipi, he had never before seen her body. The limbs she whitened were long, almost a woman's. There were young breasts beneath her shirt. Such thoughts were shameful, and he set them aside.

He brought out his ghost shirt, with Moon, Morning Star, and Magpie painted in black on white. "Hetchetu aloh, whatever waits to the north and west, it cannot be worse than waiting to see six stars in daylight."

Grinning to hear him talk like an Ogalala again, she painted her hair parting white as well. Taking ashes from the fire, she added black streaks over her nose and eyes. White and black were wolf colors — white for the north, where snow and winter dwell, and black for the west, the direction of death and sunset. She hung a wolfskin over her shoulders, letting the head come up to cover her scalp. She was now more wolf than woman.

The wolf that was Yellow Legs knelt and filled a weaselskin pouch with

flint, steel, tobacco, and his most powerful pipe. Then he hefted the Henry rifle. The oiled wood and polished steel felt cold and heavy. Finally, he set the feathered gun aside. The rifle had been in his hands half of his life, but it still bore the power of the people who had fashioned it. On a vision quest, he could not weigh himself down with too much taken from the Wasichu. He selected a bow and several arrows instead.

They cut two horses from the pony herd: a black mare for Stays Behind, and an appaloosa who knew his rider so well that Yellow Legs never bothered with bit or bridle. Silent as a war party, they slipped out of camp, whispering their purpose to their ponies. For food they took the beans and dog meat in their bellies.

Tipi ears poked into the gray sky, between fading stars. Dawn broke as they topped the bluffs above White Clay Creek. A morning wind from off the flats swept snow into drifts and piles, baring patches of dead and dry prairie grass. Above the grassroots, the world was lifeless. An infant sun rested on the horizon, driving back the night, but bringing with it only a bleak half-day.

Keeping White Clay Creek on their right, they went downstream till it ran into the Smoky Earth River. Swinging south, they crossed the frozen Smoky, then they turned north and west again, skirting the edge of the Badlands. By dusk Uncegila's bones were behind them, and the banks of the Good River were before them. They had done a hard day's ride on little water and less food.

An old Minneconjou Lakota, Crooked Corn Woman, had planted herself by the waters of the Good. She farmed the east bank as close as the Wasichu would allow to *Pa Sapa*, the sacred Black Hills. She fed them, rested them, and agreed to care for their horses.

At dawn the next day, they walked dry-shod over the frozen Good, entering the forbidden lands. The west bank was strung with the spiked wire that circled the Wasichu's world. Crossing these fences was a crime, for which some had died, but the Black Hills lay beyond them. After helping each other through the wire, they walked without speaking: white ghosts in a gray world, their breath puffing before them. Stillness was everywhere, the water in the draws was frozen, and sap was sluggish inside the leafless trees. Bird tracks on fresh snow were the only sign of life. Stays Behind was sorry to have shamed Yellow Legs's hunting, but she said nothing. Words were not needed on a vision quest.

As the wane winter sun went to bed, Stays Behind dragged brush into a gully. Yellow Legs lit first the brushwood, then his pipe. He offered the pipe to all four directions, then to Stays Behind. It was the first time she had touched a man's pipe. The black clay and antelope bone felt light and alive with power. Smoke from tobacco, red willow bark, and sumac leaves stung her lungs.

The bushwood burned low. Darkness covered over the Ironlands.

They slept sheltered by this cleft in their Mother's breast, warmed by the wolfskins. Four times they rose in the night, to smoke beneath the dancing blue lights of winter and stars spread like frozen sparks overhead.

A warm young sun climbed over the east edge of the world. They smoked and prayed with it, then set out again. Now the Black Hills stood up before them, bristling with black pines. The land itself rose up under their moccasins. In a day they were through the foothills, and the next morning they turned north towards Vision Peak, where Black Elk's great vision had come. A warm wet wind blew into their white wolf faces. Mist mixed with sweat, cutting channels in the white clay paint.

Though his eyes were older, Yellow Legs was the first to see the thin black fog boiling through the passes ahead. Light lay like water on the slopes around them, but the fog billowed up into a cloud that blotted out Vision Peak. The wet wind grew, turned gray, then began to hurl sleet at them. Sleet became snow, so thick that it whitened the sky. By noon the sun was gone, and they were no longer walking. A white world whirled round them, clinging to their furs, climbing up their high winter moccasins.

"Which way should we go?"

Yellow Legs made no answer. She was the one with the vision.

"I don't want to stand here. I want to keep going." The words left her mouth high-pitched and urgent, but were softened and muffled by the snow.

He studied the white wall around them. To wander blindly in the storm would turn the spirit quest into a death march. Suddenly, Stays Behind was tugging at his buckskins. Standing patiently beside them, with snow clinging to its shaggy hump and long, soft eyelashes, was a full-grown buffalo cow. The beast might have sprung from the soil, for neither of them had seen it emerge from the storm. She was simply there, perfectly still and impossibly solid.

Once their attention was seized, the buffalo turned and started to shuffle off, without bothering to look back. They followed for an almost endless time.

When evening returned, gray was winning over white, and the buffalo became a dark patch in the singing snow. The land turned farther upward, and the snow deepened round their feet. The great beast broke a path for them, beating down the waist-deep drifts with sheer bulk. The two humans floundered forward in her wake.

Suddenly, the buffalo was gone as quickly as she had come. Cold and fear closed round them. At the spot where the beast had been, they came to the edge of a deep canyon. The buffalo had turned down a narrow trail. They followed, descending between canyon walls that curtained off the wind. Small flurries replaced the heavy flakes that had cut like gray flint knives.

Halfway down, the buffalo halted under an overhang, where the trail widened into a spacious sheltered ledge. The buffalo laid herself down on the

edge of the ledge. Stays Behind and Yellow Legs wedged themselves between beast and rock. There, they were warm and dry, the buffalo's heavy breathing filling the space around them. This breathing grew rhythmic, and the silky lids shut. As the rhythm lulled them, words formed in their minds, Sleep, children of my sisters. Tachyon was talking through the buffalo.

They slept curled against the warm bulk of the buffalo.

When they awoke, the world was new, and wind and storm were gone. Snow lay on the ledges and filled the canyon floor, each twig of brushwood bending under its white weight. Shining and cruel day flooded down the canyon, forcing back the shadows. Vision Peak reared above them. Lights and colors burned even brighter on empty bellies.

The buffalo rose, shaking snow from her back. As if this were a signal, sharp staccato barks came from farther up the canyon, followed by a howl that shivered over the snow. A coyote was calling. Turning its broad back to the world, the buffalo fixed soft brown eyes on the hungry humans. If my sisters' children need meat, they may eat of me. Tachyon turned the buffalo away from the morning sun, into the direction of death.

Yellow Legs packed his pipe, then offered it to the four directions. He prayed to the first buffalo, Slim Walking Woman, and to Yellow-Headed Woman who brought the buffalo, and to Sweet Medicine who taught the People to hunt buffalo with bow and arrow. Then he placed his pipe aside and picked up his bow. He aimed the arrow between the ribs, just behind the hump, where it would go straight to the heart. The buffalo didn't flinch, but as her knees buckled, dimming eyes seemed to reproach him.

Sitting down beside the dead beast, Yellow Legs smoked and studied the zigzag pattern of snow-covered ledges on the far canyon wall. Stays Behind bent over the carcass and was soon elbow-deep in the work of skinning and butchering. The work was new to her, but when she was younger, Stays Behind had spent days watching older women at work. Her keen knife slid through the layers of skin. She peeled these layers back till the skin covered the ground on both sides of the carcass. Blood climbed up the knife's bone handle. Clay-whitened arms were veined with red, but the butchering itself was neat, and no meat touched the ground. When the warm insides were bared, sweet smells steamed up into the canyon air.

Padding footfalls came across the snow, and Yellow Legs looked up. Coyote seated himself boldly at the edge of the ledge. Since he made no move to steal the meat, Yellow Legs was polite. "Greetings, brother coyote."

Coyote ignored him, sniffed the meat, then said to Stays Behind, Farewell, sister. Like the buffalo, Coyote didn't say these words aloud, for Tachyon was speaking through him. To Stays Behind, the words were Ogalala; to Yellow Legs, Shyela.

Yellow Legs knew coyotes were lechers and tricksters, but this one was being utterly mannerless. If coyotes could be rude, so could he. "Why do you speak to this woman instead of to me? And are you a Contrary, to great us

with good-byes?"

Coyote cocked his head. Your world is contrary. First for you is last for me. This is the last I will see of Stays Behind. Yellow Legs and I have met and will meet many times.

Stays Behind set down her knife, though she had just gotten to the liver. "Coyote, your speech is very confusing."

To me, I am talking backwards, which is even more confusing.

Yellow Legs puffed hard on his pipe; neither women nor coyotes seemed to know their places anymore. "I can't recall meeting such a mannerless coyote before."

Your memories are in my future, so I can't be exact. Perhaps I will learn manners, but we will keep meeting till you dwindle down to a baby and vanish inside your mother.

Animals had spoken in his visions, even coyotes, though none had looked like this one. Yellow Legs decided to smoke some more on this.

Coyote scratched, then eyed the buffalo meat. In your past, my future, I will and did bring that buffalo to you. Now is the time to offer me some meat, for this body I inhabit is a hungry one.

Stays Behind sliced the still warm liver, squeezed gall on it, then offered bits to both man and beast. Yellow Legs refused, but Coyote snapped his down.

Much better. It's hard to hold a body that is both scared and hungry.

"Why have you come?" Stays Behind cut more liver for the scruffy beast.

To bid you good-bye, and to offer you passage to another Earth, which you call the Spirit World, where we spent much time together, where you opened your precious memories many times to me.

"I don't remember this."

For you, it hasn't happened yet.

Yellow Legs set his pipe aside. "You come from the Spirit World?"

The beast licked his lips, begging with its eyes for more. What you call the Spirit World is merely another Earth, not even far away in this shrinking Universe. It lies beyond the Moon and Morning Star, beside one of the Twin Stars in the winter sky. We offer your people passage there, to thank you for the memories that foretell our future, for the future frightens and fascinates us.

"Why fear the future?" Stays Behind cut Coyote more liver.

The Universe shrinks smaller and burns brighter. Entropy decreases, stars burn hotter and burst into gas, and planets melt and break apart. We are all shrinking towards a single fiery implosion. Who wouldn't fear that?

Stays Behind looked bewildered, but interested. Yellow Legs snorted. "Speak this way to the Wasichu; they would love to argue about such things."

I have had wonderful conversations with them, and no doubt will again. To them, I am Tachyon because I travel so fast. But at this moment in space-time, speaking to animals or other worldly beings is out of style among them. Those that I approach act very alarmed, weeping and praying, pretending not to hear. Yellow Legs agreed. "Not many of my people will wish to leave this world on the word of a rude coyote."

Yes, yes, Coyote yawned, it is very boring to know what will be. I will let you look again at the Spirit World. When you like what you see, bring as many people as you can into the Badlands, in the Moon of Frost in the Tipis.

Coyote rose, shaking snow from his haunches. Remember, what you see is only a vision. To move your bodies will be much harder. To move metals is hardest of all. As you measure distance, the Spirit World is far away. Moving only as fast as light, the trip would take almost a lifetime, though it seemed only an instant. Your bodies may never return to this point in space-time. You may take with you only the metal that is in skin and hide, wood and bone.

Stays Behind looked down at the dissected buffalo. The only metal she saw was the knife in her hand. "I don't understand."

Never mind, I will send formulas outlining the principles. Take them to Teacher Miller, and he may translate them.

The contrary coyote turned to Yellow Legs. When you see the other Earth, you will give up anything to be there. We have seen that it holds everything. Greetings. Coyote became a coyote, and the Tachyon was gone.

As the beast backed away, Vision Peak seemed to grow. It became a great ghost mountain splitting through the layers of creation. Its roots ran down into the Deep Earth, its slopes thrust through the Air and Near Sky Space, and its peak stretched into the Blue Sky Space that holds the sun and stars. When the mountain reached its full height, a crack opened in the base, and rock and stone peeled apart like a leather lodge entrance. Yellow Legs and Stays Behind saw a brightly lit world within the mountain. They stepped toward it.

Instantly, there was no earth beneath their feet. Their hands reached out to stop them from falling, but instead their arms bit into the air, becoming wings. Feathers sprouted from their bodies, and they became a pair of hawks circling over the vast earth inside Vision Peak.

The land inside the mountain lay like a blanket tossed into a tipi. Much of it was flat, with little folds for hills; other parts were bunched into high mountains that ran in all directions. The plains between were filled to overflowing with herds of wild horses, red deer, antelope, and giant antlered elk. Shaggy brown carpets of buffalo covered the prairie. Even the air felt new.

They flew over many camp circles of tipis. One such circle looked familiar. The hawk that was Yellow Legs glided toward it. The women in the camp circle worked the old way, with stone and bone tools. The men smoked, ate, and danced, taking time to greet the two hawks that settled on a tipi top. They spoke a Shyela tongue, and gray-haired children ran among them. This was the Flexed Leg band of Yellow Legs's people. Everyone had thought them long dead, killed by a stomach sickness when the Wasichu had first poured over the plains.

Yellow Legs wanted to stay, to watch them at work and play, but the hawk that was Stays Behind was eager to fly. He followed her into regions where the air grew chill. Cold breezes blew off white sheets of ice that reared more than a mile into the sky, crushing continents with their weight. Dimly remembered monsters roamed the bases of these white cliffs. Woolly beasts with long horns and ivory tusks, such as stalked through power tales told round fires in the dark of winter.

Green forests, mighty rivers, meat on the hoof — it was a world holding everything that one might want; all things but one. It had no sun. Light rained down from six stars, four white and two red, that shone in full daylight.

The vision ended, and they were back on the cold ledge, beside the still-warm and half-butchered buffalo. Though they had flown as hawks for days, no time had passed at all. Yellow Legs said nothing. He loaded his pipe and smoked, staring again at the far wall of the canyon. Stays Behind went back to her work, cutting meat into strips and setting the strips out to dry. She cleaned and scraped the paunch, filled it with snow, and hung it over a fire.

By evening, the meat that wasn't drying was cooked. The hide had been scraped clean, rubbed with brains and liver, and left to soak overnight. Stays Behind invited Yellow legs to eat. He barely picked at the roasted flesh, though nothing was sweeter than fresh-killed buffalo meat.

Finally, she broke the silence. "So you have seen stars in daylight."



He nodded. "The land was bountiful; it gives me reason for living. Yet when the coyote said that I would give anything to go there, I did not think he meant the power that has protected me for so many winters."

"In the Spirit World, we would die as we were meant to live."

"You are young, your body is new, and your death is far off. After coming through so many fights, after seeing the world of my dreams, it is hard to say like the Kiowas, Rocks and mountains, you alone remain."

She stood up, standing taller in the waning winter moonlight than he had ever seen her. Slipping the white doeskin off, Stays Behind twined arms washed clean with snow round his neck. She rested her young breasts on his chest. "Forget death, and share this young body."

It shocked him, but he did as she said, untying the braided rope that ran between her thighs, the rope that no man should even touch. He did it because it was what Stays Behind had wanted from the start, and because the hawks in whose bodies they had flown were birds mated for life. Coyote had seen to that.

It would have been bad to waste the buffalo, so they camped on the ledge till the robe had time to tan and dry in the weak winter sun. Stays Behind pounded the dried meat and worked the hide into leather. Even after that, they lingered, for the Black Hills dragged at their moccasins, and when they left, it would be forever. Rested and fed, it still took them longer to follow French Creek down into the flats, longer than it had taken them to climb up on empty bellies. Besides, they now had much buffalo meat to carry.

In the iron-wired flatlands they moved faster, anxious to avoid Wasichu and get across the Good. They crossed the Good River at Crooked Corn Woman's camp. There they feasted well, for Crooked Corn Woman was a Christian and the day before had been Christmas. She listened to their vision of the Spirit World, and in return gave them the news among the Minneconjou.

The news they got was bad. Sitting Bull was indeed dead, murdered by Metal Breasts. Fighting had spread to the Good. Hump and his Minneconjou had surrendered to the Wasichu. The last of Sitting Bull's Hunkpapas had come south from Standing Rock. They had joined Big Foot's band on the Good River, then fled into the Badlands. Many Wasichu soldiers were out hunting Big Foot, armed with wagon guns that fired faster than a talkative person could speak.

Stays Behind and Yellow Legs offered to take Crooked Corn Woman with them into the Spirit World, but she said she would rather die where she'd been born. When Jesus raised her, then she promised she would join them.

At dawn they took their horses and rode off across the south face of the Badlands. They rode beneath a great blue bowl of sky. Here, there were no iron fences, and the prairie rose and fell like a living thing, free for as far as eyes could see. Strands of pale grass, slippery with frost, clung to the brown earth.

Late in the day, they came upon a Burnt Thigh. Climbing off their horses, they sat on the frozen prairie, sharing their food with him.

By their wolf faces and the ghost shirt, the Burnt Thigh knew they had been scouting in the Spirit World. Politely, he warned them that the Wasichu were hunting Ghost Dancers. Soldiers said that Bear Coat Miles himself had ordered Sitting Bull and Big Foot arrested.

"We were camped with Black Elk and his Ogalalas on Wounded Knee Creek. A Black Robe Wasichu found us and tried to bring us back to the Agency. This Wasichu was good, so we listened, but only a few Ogalalas went back with him." The Burnt Thigh pointed his chin towards the Badlands. "We went and hid near Top of the Badlands. The next Wasichu might not be as respectful as this Black Robe. It is not so easy to hide from the Lakota. Two chiefs, American Horse and Fast Thunder, found us and ordered Black Elk's people back to the Agency. They went, though we beat them and told them not to go. Some Burnt Thighs went with them."

There were tears in the Burnt Thigh's eyes, but he said it was from eating buffalo again. "There is no game in the Badlands, so everyone is hungry. Big Foot is so sick his people must carry him. Fasting is fine for visions, but it wastes the body."

As they rode off, Stays Behind asked Yellow Legs, "Will things be as bad as that Burnt Thigh says?"

He kept his face fixed on the line where earth and sky become one. "All Lakota talk like noisy birds, and Burnt Thighs are bossier than blue jays." He was thinking that things had gotten worse since he had taken comfort in this girl's body, and that he should have faced his death alone.

At the Smoky Earth River, they found signs that Ogalalas and Burnt Thighs were a half-day ahead of them, probably Black Elk's people. Atop the pony tracks were ironshod prints, showing that Wasichu were trailing Black Elk, too. Many people were passing like cloud shadows over the prairie. Yellow Legs and Stays Behind waited, letting the Wasichu get well ahead of them, then they camped farther up the Smoky. This would be their last camp alone, under the winter stars.

The new day's sun was high in the sky when they saw the banks of White Clay Creek dip down toward the Ghost Dance camps. Like gathering storm winds, Ogalala Bad Faces were riding up from Red Cloud Agency, bringing with them more bad news. Big Foot's band had been captured by Wasichu soldiers and moved under guard to Wounded Knee. Two Strikes, Kicking Bear, and Short Bull began to gather together Ghost Dancers from among the Burnt Thighs.

The morning after soldiers brought in Big Foot's band, Miller was aboard Handsome Dog's buckboard, headed towards the White Clay Ghost Dance camps. It had been an uneasy evening at the Agency, with Lakota riding in and soldiers marching out. In his mind, Miller went over his last argument

with Wallace, putting in every word he should have said. He had let Wallace lord over him, like a High Church Scot preaching to a poor, blind Quaker. The Ghost Dance was going to be broken. Yellow Legs was marked for arrest, just as Sitting Bull and Big Foot had been. Miller couldn't sway Wallace or the army, but he was going to warn Yellow Legs.

The buckboard bounced beneath a bright young winter sun, but even Miller could smell snow in the air. When the first booming came from the east, Miller thought it might be thunder and said as much to Handsome Dog.

The Metal Breast kept his face fixed on the road ahead. "It is wagon guns."

Miller made no reply. He wasn't ready for another argument, though he knew it couldn't be cannon.

As they topped a rise, they saw riders and ponies streaming out of the White Clay camps. Some were headed south, toward the Agency; others were moving east, over the hills. All of them were armed, carrying more guns than Miller thought the Indians owned.

Spinning wheels rolled them right into camp. To Miller, it seemed he was sitting in an open-air theater, watching some strange show. Barren hills appeared ahead and disappeared behind. Armed riders in feathered buckskins flicked past. The camp grew into a tapestry of bare tree limbs, dirty brown tipis, and pine-bough shelters. Blue camp smoke rose from the lodges, where blanketed women worked and talked. Children, skinny dogs, and surly brown faces looked up at him. As long as the buckboard was moving, Miller felt removed and immune. When the buckboard stopped before Yellow Legs's lodge, hard hands seized him and Handsome Dog, pulling them both down to solid ground.

Burnt Thighs pinned their arms. An angry Bad Face began yelling at them in Lakota, waving a razor-edged skinning knife.

The knife flicked out, slicing the metal badge off Handsome Dog's blue uniform jacket. "Metal Breast, you killed Sitting Bull. Your Wasichu friends are killing Big Foot's people."

The Burnt Thighs pulled the jacket back; the next flick of the knife drew blood.

Handsome Dog laughed. "Was that supposed to hurt? Bad Faces and Burnt Thighs are women."

The Bad Face lashed out with his knife, leaving a long strip of flesh hanging from Handsome Dog's chest. "That's for serving the Wasichu so well." He thrust his chin towards Miller. "We're going to skin you and give you a Wasichu skin to wear."

The Burnt Thighs began to strip Miller's clothes off, and Handsome Dog laughed again. "Do it, and you will still be women. I serve the Wasichu, but have the Bad Faces done better? Where was Red Cloud when we rubbed out Long Hair on the Greasy Grass?"

Twisting round, he sneered at the Burnt Thighs who were holding him. "Where was Spotted Tail when we rubbed out Long Hair? Your chiefs were cowering on the agencies, hiding among their women and eating Wasichu cattle."

The Bad Face held his blade in Handsome Dog's face. "You hope to make me mad, make me kill you quickly." He jabbed the blade at Miller. "Your words will be different when you wear this Wasichu's skin."

The tipi entrance opened behind the Bad Face, and Miller barely recognized the man who emerged. It was Yellow Legs, his face covered with paint and half-hidden beneath a war bonnet of black-tipped eagle feathers. He wore his white ghost shirt, with the Moon, Morning Star, and Magpie. Like Wallace had said, his leggings were made from cavalry pants, seat and crotch cut out, a yellow stripe running down each blue leg. His paint repeated those colors — yellow from chin to forehead, a blue band across his eyes. His arms craddled the Henry rifle, hung with still more black-tipped feathers.

He shook this feathered rifle in their faces. "Bad Faces and Burnt Thighs, why are you here? Black Elk has gone to face the Wasichu wagon guns with only his Medicine Bow. Can you be as brave with rifles?"

Silence fell like a heavy snow. They could plainly hear the dull roll of gunfire from Wounded Knee, like far-off pounding on buffalo-hide drums.

He pointed the rifle at Handsome Dog and Miller. "Must you have guns and knives to face one unarmed Metal Breast and the teacher who came only to bring us the wisdom of the Wasichu?"

The Burnt Thighs let go their grip. Handsome Dog's grin turned smug. "These are my guests." Yellow Legs spoke straight at the Bad Face. "Go count coup at Wounded Knee, and we will all come listen to your kill talk."

Miller hadn't made out a single word, but when Yellow Legs stepped aside, he was delighted to have Handsome Dog hustle him into the gloomy tipi. Stays Behind emerged from the shadows, setting bowls of buffalo meat and chokecherry mush before them. Her calico dress shone like sunset in the firelight, and her hair part was painted to match it. She ignored her brother-in-law and greeted Miller with a shy grin. Both men ate quickly, anxious to make themselves guests in deed as well as word.

Yellow Legs entered and ambled over to the place of honor. Folding his feet beneath him, he sat facing the sunrise. Handsome Dog looked up from his food. "It will be hard for me to return this honor, if you still shun my cabin."

"My sister's cabin," Stays Behind corrected him. "If you wish to do your host a service, honor him as your new brother-in-law."

Handsome Dog rocked back on his heels, laughing. "Such a meal would choke a man. How could my host want a silly girl who jabbers out of turn?"

Yellow Legs packed the red clay pipe and passed it to Handsome Dog. "Things have gone too far. I may no longer refuse her and keep my honor." Handsome Dog's gaze flicked from host to sister-in-law. "Hetchetu aloh,

there is something here that needs smoking on."

"If you are insulted, we will not keep you." Stays Behind sat herself at the entrance, untying the tipi flap.

Burnt Thighs stormed back and forth outside, their anger audible through the thin hides. "Look, I'm smoking," Handsome Dog said, putting the pipe to his lips. "May men not smoke without having to hear women?"

When the pipe came back to him, Yellow Legs passed it to Teacher Miller. "I thought badly because you didn't thank me for my vision, but I was wrong. The vision with the Wasichu signs was not meant for you. It was meant for Stays Behind."

Miller was bemused. "How do you know?"

"A coyote told us."

"Coyote?"

"Yes." Yellow Legs sighed. "I know coyotes are hardly to be trusted. But this one sent us past the Moon and Morning Star, to a Spirit World that lies alongside the Twin Stars in the winter sky. Soon, we will all go there for good."

Miller gave polite agreement. Like Handsome Dog, he found it politic to humor his host. They smoked, talked, and ate while snow began to blow down from the sky. As night won out over day, word rode up White Clay Creek that Black Elk's Ogalalas had been driven from the Agency without food or tipis. Few had meat to share, but Stays Behind packed the last of the buffalo meat into anything-possible-bags and lashed them to their ponies.

She also painted Miller's face black and wrapped blankets round his Wasichu suit. Stepping back, she laughed. "You don't look like a Lakota, but neither do you look like a Wasichu. No one will shoot you without asking first what you are."

They set off through the snow, with Yellow Legs leading and Handsome Dog coming along behind, wearing wolfskins over his uniform jacket. It was a good night to be all Ogalala. On the east bank of White Clay Creek, they found red fires on the prairie, flickering through the gray snowfall like broken bits of the setting sun. The dark wind carried a woman's voice, wailing out a death song. As they drew nearer, they could hear that it was Black Elk's mother, singing for her son. He had gone to face the Wasichu with the Sacred Bow of the West, and had not returned. Stays Behind offered her meat, but she wouldn't eat and went on wailing into the wind.

Suddenly, the singing ceased, replaced by the slow beat of tired horses' hooves and by babies crying. Black Elk came riding out of the snow on a weary buckskin, still carrying the Sacred Bow of the West and cradling a crying baby girl. Red Crow was right behind him, with another crying child. Eager hands helped them dismount, and women with milk took the babies. Soon, the only crying round that campfire came from Black Elk's mother, sobbing now that her son was safe.

Black Elk was not the venerable medicine man Miller had expected. In-

stead, he was a serious young man, with a flaming rainbow and red streaks of lightning on his ghost shirt. When he wasn't having visions, he worked as a clerk in a Wasichu store. His face was red with paint, and eagle feathers hung from his shoulders, wrists, and elbows. These feathers fluttered in the wind, and the red lightning flashed in the firelight. "Big Foot's people have been butchered near Wounded Knee, in the twisted creek that has no name. We scattered the soldiers, saving some women and children. My Medicine Bow protected me, but for many it was too late. These babies have no mothers, and there are many babies lying frozen on the prairie."

Wind and snow whipped between the fires. Everyone talked till dawn. The story of Wounded Knee was told again and again by those who had been there. Yellow Legs and Stays Behind told about their vision. At first light a war party was forming. Men began to rub dirt on themselves, showing that they were nothing without the Earth Mother's help. Black Elk's mother had ceased crying and brought him his rifle. Black Elk set aside his Medicine Bow, mounting his buckskin again. He was still wearing the red war paint. "Yellow Legs, your visions are strong and your buffalo meat good, but I must answer yesterday with bullets. If I do not see you again, seek me in the Spirit World."

The war party crossed White Clay Creek and was gone. Everyone else began the long march into the Badlands. By nightfall they were camped on a high platform in the Badlands, called Sheltering Place. Sheer cliffs fell away at every side. The campsite could only be approached across a narrow neck of land, which was easily swept with rifle fire.

No Wasichu soldiers came to get them, but a Lakota named Little Soldier brought Black Elk back to camp. His rainbow shirt was ripped and bloody, a bullet had torn open his stomach, and his intestines were held in by strips of torn blanket. Old Hollow Horn, a Bear medicine man, was called to heal him. Stays Behind felt strange, for she was no longer able to help Old Hollow Horn with his healing. That was work for virgins. Instead, she sat on the edge of the precipice, watching the cliff fall away beneath her feet cascading into deep shadow.

Miller came and sat beside her, warmed by a blanket, but without his black paint. Everyone here knew he was a Wasichu. During that day's fighting, Black Robes and Sisters from the Mission had worked among the Lakota, helping the wounded and praying for the dead. The Lakota's war was against soldiers. "What will you do?"

Stays Behind looked down, smoothing the creases in her calico dress. "What can I do, besides follow my vision?"

"Medicine visions won't stop machine guns. Look what happened to Black Elk."

She looked toward the Twin Stars, marking where the sun and Morning Star would rise. "Do you still have the paper I gave you?"

Miller fished into his pocket and pulled out the wrinkled scrap of note-

book paper. The formulas were smudged and faded. He could no longer read them under the winter stars.

She smoothed the paper against her knee. "Coyote said you could explain them to me."

"These formulas might mean a lot, a new approach to the physics of light, a new way of looking at the world. But first science has to test them. That will take time. No one can say what they really mean. Not right now."

For the first time ever, she looked him straight in the face, her dark eyes deep wells of starlight. "We don't have time. Your science is crushing us with wagon guns and iron wire. Last year, we lost most of the land between the Smoky River and the Good. Now, we are losing the Ghost Dance. By the time you decide what everything means, my people will be gone, gone like the buffalo and the long grass."

Miller nodded. "I told you that everything passes and that one day the whole universe will die the heat death. All science can do is make the best of what is. Study, learn more mathematics, and you can be the one to test these formulas."

Stays Behind folded the paper and fit it into her medicine bag. "There's another way." She pointed away from Sheltering Place, toward the Twin Stars. "Out there is another world, and Coyote is going to take us there. He has collected people and animals from our past and has brought them to a great world, larger than this one. He says that he has already been with me there, talked to me, helped me explore the universe."

She no longer seemed a girl, but a grave and distant young woman. Miller measured the space between them and found it was only a matter of inches. Wind stirred the stars overhead, and he would have liked to touch her, but the gulf between them was too great. Instead, he pulled the blanket round his knees. "Maybe you can mix mathematics with talking coyotes, but I can't."

When morning came, Yellow Legs led all who would follow away from Sheltering Place, deeper into the Badlands.

The man who finally rescued Miller was a Wasichu, though he wasn't a white man. He was a corporal from the Ninth Cavalry — "colored" as the Wasichu would say. This Black Wasichu had been scouting for hostiles beyond the Smoky, but he found only Miller, resting in a pine-bough lean-to near Top of the Badlands. The Moon of Popping Trees had given way to the Moon of Frost in the Tipis. Miller was exhausted and hungry, but no worse off for his stay among the Lakota.

The corporal explained that the Ninth was searching for Yellow Legs's band. Miller said only that they'd better be ready to go some distance.

The Black Wasichu shook his head. "Don't matter how far, we'll get 'em sure enough. We've got a way with Indians, comes from not being white. No offense meant."

The Quaker said that no offense had been taken.

After helping Miller onto his own mount, the corporal began to lead the lone horse and rider back toward his troop. "Hell, if the old Negro Ninth hadn't shown up, the Seventh would have had another Little Big Horn on White Clay Creek. The Lakota chased them all the way back there from Wounded Knee."

They topped a dun-colored fold in the earth, and the corporal's narrative was cut short. Metal flashed in the frigid morning sun. The corporal pushed back his cap for a better view. "God Almighty, this piece of prairie looks more fit for a church sale than a fight."

From his seat on the horse's back, Miller scanned the litter of abandoned guns, knives, cooking tins, cups, pots, wash buckets, belt buckles, and tent pegs.

The corporal rested his weary arm on the saddle. "Looks like these poor Indians just tried to get rid of everything the white man gave 'em."

He turned a sage eye to the teacher. "You know a lot of them are just crazy with grief, going around seeing things. Back by the Agency, when Red Cloud told his Bad Faces to lay down their guns, a bunch of them ran wild, shooting their own dogs and ponies, just 'cause Red Cloud wouldn't let 'em shoot us no more."

It shook the corporal to see such suffering. He led his horse and Miller through the mess, searching for tracks and stooping to pick up anything that might prove useful. There was a fair amount of silver trinkets to be found, and even a few coins.

Miller watched the cold wind play on a single patch of color — torn, red, and flapping in their path. Even before they reached it, Miller knew what it would be. A crimson calico dress, wrapped round an old Henry rifle from the Fetterman fight.

The author claims that his interest in fusing the elements of fantasy and science fiction is one of the thrusts of this tale, as is his desire to demonstrate the opposing viewpoints of natural laws are often simply that: different interpretations of the same thing.

His first story, "The Flying Mountain," appeared in our May 1987 issue.

THE WATERS FROM TIME by Steven G. Oliver art: George Barr



The author informs us that he works for the federal government in San Francisco as an operations research analyst. He is married and has twin ten-year-old daughters, Margaret and Cathy.

His first professional story sale was to If Science Fiction magazine in 1969. "The Waters from Time" is his first sale to Amazing® Stories.

It was a tremendous movement toward unity when the Saudis turned to the most famous of the Israeli scientists, even more notable because the scientist was a woman.

Using American computerization, most of it donated by the Apple-IBM conglomerate, and Japanese miniaturization, the scientist created the world's first water maker.

The Saudis set the unveiling in the Rub Al Khali desert. The Saudi Prince for Water Conservation threw the switch, and the water machine began humming. The scientist delicately turned dials, backsearching for prehistoric water sources.

A small trickle dripped slowly from the six-foot-diameter pipe built into the base of the machine.

The scientist frowned, then turned a major dial more violently.

Water gushed!

It was as if a plug were pulled. Had the machine not been on a platform suspended five feet above the desert sand, one might have suspected fraud.

The media recorded the event. A world watched. The space-station crews gathered at their screens. Even the moon-base workers stopped construction of the first lunar dome for an hour to see this Middle-East unity.

The delegates started clapping. It spread to the ranks of the estimated 100,000 tourists. Soon, even the media crews joined in the thundering applause.

It was then that a woman with exceedingly long hair splashed out of the suspended pipe into the growing pool of water.

As she rose, all saw she wore no clothing. Her skin was of a color and hue that none could recognize, and her face reflected a conglomerate of racial mixtures. She looked around herself with an air of innocent wonder. It was as if this woman had never before seen so many people.

Then the scientist and the Saudi prince faded. As a world watched, the two vanished from sight. They were the people nearest to the strange woman.

The delegates faded. The media, too. And the tourists.

The space stations no longer circled the world. Nor the satellites of the many nations.

The moon was empty of human life. The half-finished dome was no more. There were not even footsteps in the lunar soil.

The platform vanished from beneath the water machine, and it fell to land in the soft sand.

The water ceased pouring from the pipe.

Then, the machine, too, vanished.

The strange woman looked about herself. She gazed at the sand dunes where the mass of people had stood. She looked at the water that came to her knees.

Cupping her hands, she called out in a language not heard on Earth since

the first days: "Adam! Where are you?"

But he answered her not.

Eve stood alone in the waters from time.

IBM, MY SHIPMATE; OR, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ORBIT AND OBIT

Off for Mars our rocket thundered One balmy June in 2000 But hark! Avast! We're spinning round And now my heart begins to £

6

Lest mortal man not stand the gaff Among the crew I'm only 1/2 He's got a short, my 'trepid hero! Our chances now are less than 0

My shipmate is a little gem Whose only name is IBM My shipmate's mad! I've knocking knees. . . . He consoles me with ()

Flash the news from Aix to Ghent No worse a mate could they have \$\partial\$ But still he will not yield command, Oblivious to but or &

(He's symbol-mad, this wired gent; I write it sent — he writes it ¢) He whirs, his wiring all askew; Thinks 2 is 1 and 1 is 2

No fear of wand'ring in the dark,

We're heading starward, Holy Mama, Doomed to death by a misplaced,

As I say, no fear of that; He always knows where we are @ Thanks to his warped concinnity We're heading for ∞

He logs our bearings ev'ry night, Not trusting me to ©

Good-bye, World, so proud, so free; I loved you to a great °

I sometimes think we must be there But he says no, cites πr^2

Now none will get my autograph — I'll be gone in a \P

Men like me have need of slumber But wakeful e'er's my opposite #

Here we go now, show'ring sparks — R.I.P., ""

— Richard Wilson

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IBM, My Shipmate



Exhibit

Bob Eggleton

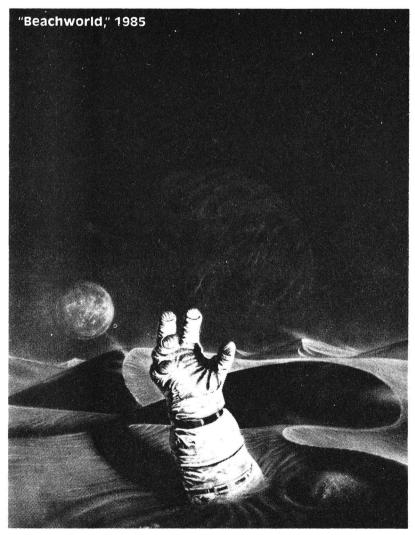
As a fan, artist Bob Eggleton's fore-most love has always been science fiction. 2001: A Space Odyssey, Star Trek, and the Gemini and Apollo space missions were all early inspirations for his becoming a fan at SF conventions. Bob finds it intriguing to attend SF conventions because he enjoys meeting and talking to others who share his curiosity of science. "The thing that really fascinates me about the field is how yesterday's science fiction is becoming today's science fact," he tells us.

Though largely self-taught, Bob has taken fine art courses at Rhode Island College, where he refined his drawing techniques and painting style. Currently, Bob uses acrylics, gouache, and scratchboard for preparation of blackand-white illustrations. He enjoys using acrylics as they can be used with an airbrush. With gouache, which Bob claims is essentially a refined poster paint, he can create deftly sharp edges as if he were drawing instead of painting. "However," Bob informs us, "scratchboard for interior artwork is somewhat of a lost medium. In the 1960s, John Schoenherr was a master with this technique, creating some stunning pieces for the magazine Analog. Much to the editor's delight, it also reproduces excellently, as it is

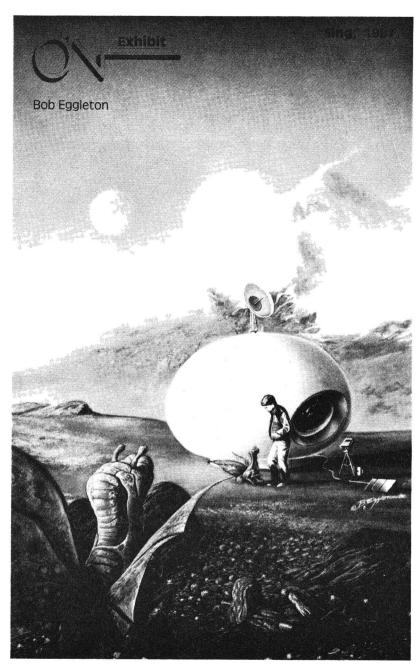


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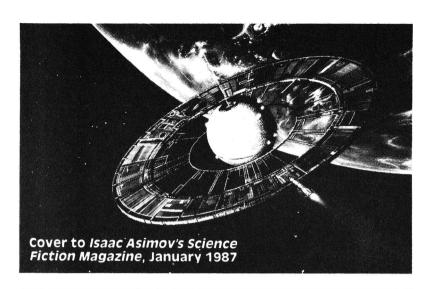
Those who are interested in commissions or purchases, or in finding out more about Bob's artwork, can contact him at his studio. Write to: Bob Eggleton, 57 Eddy Street, Suite 513, Providence RI 02903.

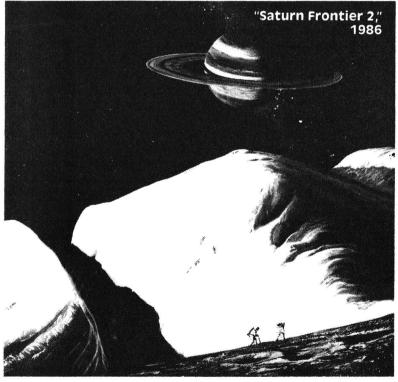


On Exhibit



116 AMAZING





On Exhibit

THE SWORD THAT WEPT by Sandra Miesel art: Paul Jaquays

Sandra Miesel holds master's degrees in biochemistry and medieval history, and she is now pursuing a doctorate in medieval history at Indiana University. She has identified medieval manuscripts for fun and profit. And as a widely published SF critic with three Hugo nominations, Sandra specializes in the science-fictional uses of myth, religion, history, and art. She is a leading authority on the works of Gordon R. Dickson and Poul Anderson, and she has edited collections of stories of both these writers. Her first novel, Dreamrider, earned her a nomination for the John W. Campbell award.

When not attending to her husband, three children, and cat in their Indianapolis home, she collects art and stitches original needlework creations

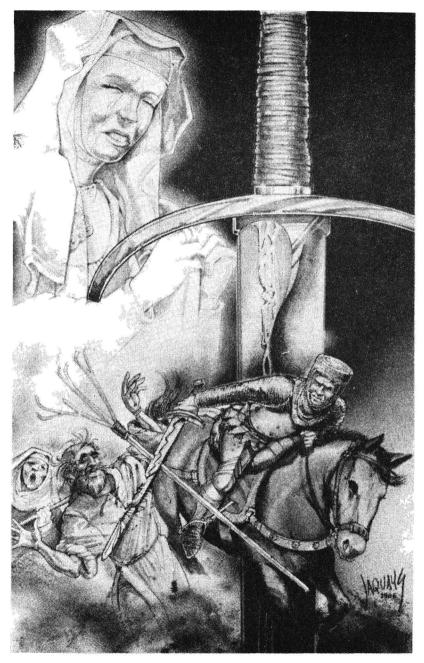
PRIMUS

Emptiness weighed on his left side heavier than the blade that used to ride there. It was gone, the sword his father had borne at Crécy, the sword his mother had belted on him at their parting. Gone. Snapped off, striking at a whoreson of a Breton peasant unworthy of its steel. Having already exhausted his plaints to Heaven, he addressed himself to Hell.

By the quenchless fire, what sort of life was this for one gently born: penned in a damp, stinking garrison, peddling immunities and safe conducts, and squeezing meager tribute out of a countryside stripped bare by nearly a generation of war? Though the very bowmen had come home from Poitou draped in cloth-of-gold, there were no fat ransoms for an English squire to win in Brittany. Neither would today's action bring him any nearer to the knightly spurs he craved. Memory kindled curses.

His troop had been dispatched to discipline a remote hamlet that had fallen behind in paying its levy. Unlike previous forays, this one met with resistance. Armed with farm tools and homemade billhooks, clots of dark, surly folk lurked behind slabs of woven fencing and overturned carts. Although the first volley of arrows drew only screams of pain and defiance from the rebels, they still broke at the charge.

He spurred his mount through the flimsy barricade to close with the foe. But when he swung at a scythe-wielding gaffer, he struck the rim of a well



The Sword That Wept

instead and broke his blade on the stone. He would have cloven the bastard asunder with the stump, if he could have caught him. Quick as curs, the peasants dashed around their clump of huts and raced through an adjoining orchard, where the pursuing war horses slipped on fallen apples and shied at low-hanging branches. At some point in the chase across newly sown winter wheat fields and into the nearby woods, he had dropped his broken sword.

He rode more cautiously now, letting his horse pick its own way through thick stands of oak. How had the forest closed about him so swiftly? He could not recall when he had last heard noises from his party or their prey. He listened carefully for the call of a horn, but none came. Even the normal rush of the western wind was stilled. He, too, chose silence lest a rash outcry draw some unwelcome attention to himself or, at the very least, the scorn of his compagnons.

Haze hid the sun. Surely, it had not been this hot when they rode forth from their camp this morning? He felt near to smothering despite the shade, yet he dared not remove his helmet. The sweat drenching the gambeson beneath his body armor made him almost wish for rain. (And since when did it not rain daily in the godforsaken wilds of Brittany?) The only sounds were those of his own passage, for the birds were hushed, as if some predator were near.

Unwilling to ride all the way through the Monts d'Arrée looking for landmarks, he sought higher ground to get his bearings. Mercifully, the dense forest thinned as upland birch and hazel supplanted the heavier oaks before giving way to impassable swaths of gorse along the slopes. A purple bruise of heather spread across the farther hills, where stark heights showed granite crests like shards of ancient bones. Yet he still could not spy anything familiar.

Since he had unaccountably lost his flask, water for himself and his lathered mount had become a more pressing concern than refuge. Finally, at the base of twin hillocks, he found a brook where he and his beast could quench their thirst. Then he followed the flow downstream for a distance until he encountered a huge weathered rock overgrown with briars.

Past this obstacle appeared a path that led away from the water. He greeted the apparition with a glad cry and drove his steed onto the broad, smooth track. Because it was uncommonly well tended for a woods' trail, he was certain salvation lay near at hand.

After several hours spent wandering among a maze of ridges, he was less sure. At length the road wound along a deep, curving cleft, then rose abruptly as if crossing an earthen rampart. The screen of giant oaks ringing the summit parted to reveal the sprawling ruins of a manor house that must have been splendid in its day. Since he had seen no sign of its tenants' holdings, the forest must have already reclaimed them. There was no telling how long the place had lain desolate while brush and scrubby trees engulfed its charred and tumbled walls.

Disdaining to trouble remains the original attackers would have picked clean, he circled the rubble in search of his interrupted road. Instead, he found the remnants of a wall that had enclosed the manor's flower garden. He paused to peer through its gateless entrance. Naught but weeds and vine-strangled saplings now grew in the beds ringing a tall, rough pillar and the round stone basin of a dried-up spring. The sculptured woman's face that formed the outlet of this fountain gaped open in a silent scream. But ere he could investigate this sad relic, a belch of smoke rose beyond the garden's opposite wall. Reining his horse so swiftly it reared in alarm, he sped to investigate.

What the ruins had previously hidden from his sight was a crudely built smithy. The structure was little more than a shed propped against tottering stones. But the bare and heavily tracked earth that stretched before it all the way to the encircling trees argued that the establishment did not lack for customers. Perhaps a pack of routiers denned nearby. His hand instinctively sought the sword that was no longer there.

The smith whom he had momentarily overlooked emerged from the shadows behind the newly kindled forge. He was a swarthy, bearded fellow of indeterminate age who limped heavily as he walked.

"A good day to you, Sir Knight," he called in passable French. "My service is yours for the asking."

The smile in that sooty face was almost too white, yet to be hailed as knight rather than esquire rang so sweetly in his ears, he did not correct the stranger.

"Showing me my way would be service enough, Master Smith."

"Your way, noble sir? The only way I can show you is my own, such as it is. But nearby there are others of your kind who have been harrying the banks of the Aulne. You need only continue along the path that led you here to find them and join in their mighty feats of arms."

His excitement at the prospect of rescue was tempered by the desire to reprimand the churl's insolence.

"Out of gratitude for your singular helpfulness, I might perhaps be moved to purchase some trifling article from your stock." A certain outland-ishness in the smith's bow of response fanned suspicion. Weaponsmiths were ofttimes footloose folk. He continued sternly. "I might be so moved if you will tell me what you think of Christians trafficking with heathens."

"Does milord take me for a Moor?" The other could not restrain his mirth. "Dark though I am, no man living has such knowledge of the Faith as I."

"It comforts me to hear that, Master Smith. To business then. I'm in need of good steel."

"Steel I have aplenty - and other goods besides."

"No end of marvels in the East, is there?" He could now permit himself a knowing smile.

It drew a shrug. "Milord knows best. Would he care to inspect my wares more closely?" The smith waved a powerful hand to the rear of his shelter, where racks of gleaming arms reddened in the forge's glow. Then he fanned the bellows a few times to brighten the coals.

Driven as much by curiosity as need, he accepted the invitation and dismounted for a closer look. He stepped past forge and anvil to where the weapons hung like so many carcasses in a butcher's stall. There were cunning daggers, heads for every sort of polearm known, and splendid-looking swords.

"Take and wield what suits you," said their maker.

He scanned the array hungrily, nearly forgetting which piece he required. His eye was soon drawn to the longest blade of the lot, one of the newly devised bastard swords with extended hilt and quillons that curved like wings bent down. It shimmered brighter than any other armament there, but its sole decoration was a wavy line drawn down the central rib. After the briefest reflection, he grabbed it off its pegs.

The wonder of the thing flowed through his gauntlets to his very flesh. Whether held with one hand or both, the sword felt like an extention of himself. Heedless of the smith, he strode out into the open and tried the usual strokes and passes with his choice. Although astonishingly light for its size, its balance was so faultless that it might have been forged for him alone.

"So that one pleases you, does it, milord? Now you will want something to strike at." The smith pointed to a nearby man-shaped wooden post that had been hacked and slashed by many blades.

He struck the armless mannikin again and again, shouting as each blow sent chips and splinters flying. A joy he had yet to feel in battle stirred his blood like wine. Renewed strength surged through him washing away all weariness and care left by the day's misadventures. The prospect of future glories sparkled before his eyes. He could not bear to sheathe the sword, much less surrender it.

He sighed. "This blade's stouter than it seems."

"And sharper, milord. See, the edge has taken no hurt from your use," said the smith, calmly approaching the war horse. The beast shuddered and rolled its eyes, but stood still as if nailed in place. "Now try it for keenness on a horsehair," he said, holding out a single strand of mane.

As the smith suggested, he put the blade to this test. It clove the proffered hair so easily that he barely stayed his hand in time to keep from cutting his horse's neck. He gleefully whirled the blade away through a full shining arc and cried: "Truly a sword worthy of a champion!"

"A man might do anything with that blade in his hand," the other replied. "I am sure we can come to some agreement as to the price."

They haggled a bit in deference to custom. But in the end, he paid for the sword with the only share of loot his company's butiner had seen fit to award him — a battered golden crucifix.

SECUNDUS

He crossed himself again, but the weeping did not stop. Could anything halt it? He had long since given up hope. Though he wore out his arm tracing blessings and lost his voice shouting prayers, the weird keening kept echoing in his ears. Hour after hour, day after day, it jabbed at his brain and throbbed in his bones. He expected to go on hearing it in Hell.

His steed would never have that privilege. How lucky it was to be a soulless beast! It simply plodded on undisturbed, making cautious progress along the rutted forest trail. The innocent, commonplace sounds of its hooves splattering mushy ice and heavy mud made the cries within all the more horrid.

It was the sword's fault. The same sword that now hung so lightly at his armored side and sparkled in this winter morning's sunshine had brought grim doom upon him. He cursed his fate awhile in terms so fiery that the weeping seemed to ebb a bit. But of course, it surged back as it always did since the baleful weapon first shed blood. Though the cycle of the year had turned round and more between that moment and this, he still remembered the dead youth's face and the sourceless groan, sharp as a sudden indrawn breath, that had followed on his dying. Every time the sword struck thereafter, fresh wails of sorrow pierced his soul. And after that peasant wench had run upon his blade because she had no place to run from him, mourning haunted him without respite.

It never entirely left him now, waking or sleeping. Lately, in his dreams he saw the one who wept, a woman in shimmering garb whose form always dissolved in a flood of tears. She looked like that silver image of the Sorrowful Mother in a miniature Calvary he had seen in a Tregorrois church last year. Briefly slowed by awe, he hesitated to break her away from the foot of the cross. Then an older armsman shoved him aside and seized her instead. So she went to the melting pot with the rest of their plunder. Would that someone would steal the sound of sobbing from him and melt it into something else. But the fields behind the leafless hedgerows were empty. He might as well ask favors from one of the great standing stones hereabouts.

Just as none but he could hear the crying the sword caused, none other could see the tears that flowed down its blade after battle. Whether he tried to wipe them away or let them stream unstaunched, they never caused the slightest fleck of rust to mar the gleaming metal.

Although he had the wit to keep his misery to himself, his compagnons were leery of his weapon. Any man who tried it complained of how ill it felt in his hand. The judgment became a bitter joke throughout the garrison. Thus, he was unable to sell the sword, give it away, or even encourage it to be stolen. The one time he attempted to lose it on a raid, a scrawny urchin found it and returned it to him. But all the wheedling imp got for a reward was a broken head.

Cautiously, he rubbed his brow where the edge of his bascinet was making his latest scar itch. Odd how few brawls there had been with the other squires, given his general ill repute. But the sword had branded him as clearly as Cain ever was. Feats of prowess wrought with it seemed to earn him less rather than more regard. His name was spoken with contempt at muster, and his captain's face actually clouded when he returned unscathed from perilous missions. Knighthood was never to be his, nor wealth.

Riches had almost seemed within his grasp last summer during a thrust near Rennes. While the main French force stayed cravenly within the city's walls unwilling to give battle, a few bannerets led their knights out in brief sorties. Here was the stuff of romance! It warmed his blood even now remembering it: straining stirrups and plunging steeds, the clash of steel and the reek of sweat. He scarcely felt the blows he took, but the blows he dealt struck home. The Frenchman he downed might have brought a fine ransom, had he not bled to death. Afterwards, the purseful of profits from the sale of his captive's armor had vanished during the fording of a stream.

Further prospects had ebbed with the close of the campaigning season. Christmas had brought scant cheer, only whispers and sidelong looks while the yule log blazed. Three days afterwards, on Childermas, he had sought and gained release from the company.

A fortnight later, he was on the road with no fixed destination. He would never go home as long as he had the sword. Better his family should think him dead in the king's service than see his present state. He could go to the routiers as other outcasts did. Perhaps in time he might rise to a captaincy among those ruffians, become an infamous éscorcheur ready to flay the miserable folk of any nation under Heaven.

Or perhaps someone would slay him before he realized that ambition. Even starving peasants might be able to overpower him in his sleep. (What gifts had been exchanged here on Epiphany morn? Entire slices of bread mayhap?)

He spied the mangled carcass of a doe beside the muddy track. Four-legged wolves commonly throve where two-legged ones did. The signs bespoke a sizable pack, but he took no alarm. While the sword was in his hand, they would find him a costly meal. Then would his blade that wailed for brutes as well as humans spare a sob for him?

Despair was fueling his fancies. Neither brigands nor beasts could seriously threaten his charmed life. But he refused to consider falling on his sword like some heathen sinner of old. Too much chivalric pride coursed in his veins.

The day stayed bright as the hours passed. Icicles dripped steadily from the branches of the huge oaks and beeches along the path. He could not ward himself against the drops. They ran in rivulets down his bascinet and soaked through his camail to chill his skin and make his gambeson chafe. Cursing the thaw and the sun that caused it, he glared at the dazzlement

about him. But he squinted dry-eyed for only his sword could shed tears.

He was desperate to hear a bird sing in this sere and barren land. Any sound that did not resemble weeping would be welcome. Although no song came, a curious faint roaring in the distance turned his mind from his misery. The answer lay beyond a sharp bend in the road where a stream set free by the thaw tumbled over jagged rocks. This icy freshet was too cold for him or his steed to drink safely, but a shallow pool of meltwater nearby served them both.

It was good to dismount for a bit and ease the saddle sores that had already begun to form. He took some bread out of his wallet and ate it while he led his horse slowly along the slippery bank. He had to find another path, since the original track had disappeared in a hazardous ford. There was barely room to pass where the stream had cut steep gorges. Layer on layer of wrinkled gray rocks reared up on either side of the water like Hell-mouth's gaping jaws.

Yet a drop of hope welled in him when he spied a certain massive boulder. Its wall of briars lay withered and bare, but surely, this was the same landmark that had led him to the forest forge. He studied the site with narrowed eyes and knew it once again.

Finding the smooth, broad road beyond it sent hope surging higher. If he retraced his steps, could he undo what he had done? Could he unmake the accursed blade in the place of its making? Though it was madness to imagine any smith would be working alone in the wildwood at this season, wielding a sword that wept had well-nigh driven him mad.

Eager to be off, he remounted clumsily. Then crying his défi at fate, he jabbed spurs into his horse's flanks, and they sped away. Swift travel seemed safe here, for the well-drained roadway was free of slush and ice. Though the pounding gait made his damp garb chafe him raw, he built a barrier against his body's pain, the better to duel the anguish of his mind. He matched and mimicked what he heard within, parried sob with sob, until the clash became a dialogue of raging grief.

Scarcely more than a few miles passed before he reached the remembered cleft and hill. When he saw a column of smoke beyond the screening ring of trees, he drew his sword one last time. He slashed as if to strike at unseen foes and galloped straight to the ruins.

Only the smith's absence would have surprised him. Hammer in hand, the fellow was hunched over his forge, intent upon the heating of an armlength metal bar. But this time he and his gear stood open to the sky, for at some point in the past year, the garden wall behind the work area had toppled and taken the shelter with it. A cairn of rubble was heaped to the smithy's left.

The smith, for his part, looked more bemused than startled by the interruption. He made no move to welcome his visitor, but merely touched the bellows to brighten the coals.

Where had his fawning manner gone? A firm line must be taken with this shifty rogue. He guided his sweating horse across the utterly slick clearing. Its great hooves thudded on ground that was not marred by so much as a bird track. Only when he could stare directly down upon the other did he speak.

"You sold me a sword once, fellow."

"The one you bear is of my forging."

"It is a damnable blade."

The smith guffawed. "How lightly you speak of damnation. Can aught be bound for Hell unless it has a soul?"

"Such questions are for priests." The mention of priests drew fresh laughter, but he continued. "I am here to command, not debate. You will take back your baleful handiwork and destroy it before my eyes."

"Why? Has it failed to give full satisfaction?"

"This blade's no good to me."

"How so? Does it not cut deeply? Does it not keep its edge? Does it not feel perfectly suited to your hand? Did I ascribe any further virtues to the weapon than those?" The smiling face grew sly. "Perhaps you complain because it has not made you another Loring or Manny?"

"The thing's accursed!"

"Or was the flaw already in you ere you took it up? Why else would it fit you so well unless it matched your inmost self?" The smith had somehow turned the argument inside out.

"No!" he cried. "I used to sin like other men, but now with this in my hand, I sin like Satan himself."

Truth struck. Too late he tried to trace a cross with the outstretched sword, but his arm refused to move.

A mild frown creased the smith's brow. "Surely, you do not expect me to permit that gesture? Neither should you expect me to relieve you of the punishment due your sins."

It was his turn to laugh. At least the attempt masked his trembling. "My sole expectation now is to pay a high price for my folly. Must I wait for a natural death, or will the earth shortly open beneath me?" He would not permit himself to plead for the latter fate — much as he preferred it. Escape from his monstrous sword could not be that simple.

His tormentor waved a grimy hand. "You weary me, fool. And you keep me from my appointed labors. Of war and the making of war there is no end. 'Tis time to be forging new weapons." He drew the glowing bar from the coals and laid it on the anvil. "Have you not heard?" he growled between hammer strokes. "The world is divided among those who pray, those who fight, and those who work."

He paused to inspect progress on what would be a blade.

"Since you neither pray nor work, simpleton, I counsel you to go on fighting. Take you beckoning road. It will lead you to where different comrades

in arms await you, ones more befitting your flawed nature." Another tap nudged the shape nearer to completion.

Despite this dismissal, he gave his mount no signal to depart, for he could not tear himself away. The hammering's insistent tempo held him and his hapless beast transfixed. He was one with the steel being forged. Beaten and heated by turns, he was no more able to resist the Hell-smith's will than softened metal could. A fresh shriek in his mind answered every strike. Step by step he could feel himself being fashioned into a weapon that would wreak even greater horrors than the curst sword he now held in his hand. At length the forming and tempering were done. Only the quenching remained.

The smith's grin shone its whitest as he held up the red-hot blade in mock salute. When his playful feint that nearly brushed the other sword drew fresh cries from it, he laughed aloud, as if he, too, had heard the wailing. "So you are determined to see the finish? Then watch closely, wretch."

Meekly following where the glowing weapon pointed, he stared at what was to quench it and saw a tub filled to the brim with blood. Every drop shed by those his sword had slain must be gathered here to seal his doom.

The scream of guilt that gushed from his throat matched the shriller screaming of his sword. He hurled the blade at its maker as though it were a stick of rotten kindling. But smith and smithy vanished in an eye blink while the sword arced past them, tumbled over once, and plunged point down into the dried-up fountain at the ruined garden's heart.

The scream within him soared into a note of triumph so high and pure, he feared his bones would shatter and his veins would burst asunder. He nearly lost his seat as his startled horse whinnied, reared, tossed its head, and trampled the ground where the demon smithy had stood. By the time he had brought his steed under control and driven it close to the fountain, a surge of water had filled the basin and was sweeping the rubbish of years away. Awful joy engulfed him, and gladness pushed to pain as keen as any his weeping sword had dealt. But ere he could dismount, out of the spring arose the lady of his dreams. Hers was the shimmering beauty of sun-bright water, fair beyond human measure. She let her sheer veil ripple away and scalded his sight with her pity.

TERTIUS

He blinked stupidly at the morning light. Amorous birds had sung him out of his dream. No longer did he stand on a very high mountain regarding the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them. Instead, he crouched amid the low, thick branches of a Breton oak. Its bark had imprinted itself on his back right through the rough wool of his habit, but he welcomed this small Heaven-sent penance. Cautiously, he stretched and untied the cord he had used to secure his body to the branch and bound it properly about his waist

once more.

He made himself come fully awake to his surroundings, harkening to the sounds of wind and birdsong, putting aside memories of the raucous, stonegirt city with its heavy, wine-scented air. Overhead, the clouds were breaking up. The breezy spring day might yet prove fair.

By the angle of the sun, it was already past prime. He counted off hasty Pater Nosters on his fingers to fulfill his office for that hour. He dreaded the slightest infraction of the rule, lest he give the powers of darkness entry to claim him. Some days they whispered and rustled and hovered all about him no matter how fiercely he struggled to drive them from his thoughts. At such times, the commonest sight could make him shudder: any gnarled stump might leer like a demon's maw. There was still no peace in his soul, regardless of how much he prayed. If only his superiors had not forbidden him to wear the hair shirt and iron chain his guilty conscience craved! To this day his heart remained as hard and dry as desert rock ere the living water flowed. And without the gift of tears, how could he ever be certain his repentance sufficed?

He was scarcely less fearful now than he had been three years earlier when he fled half-witless over the Montagnes Noires to Quimper. The bishop there had been far too mild with him and sworn him to secrecy after his shriving. His tale had been taken for a crazed fancy. He could not prove it true by leading others to the mysterious ruins, since he had been carried from them unseeing by his bewildered horse. Though his eyes had cleared within hours, he never learned whence he came or how.

Afterward, he had gone to the Franciscans in Bordeaux and sought admission as a friar. Unable to detect the stench of his foul past, they took him in without reproach. Yet their kindness stung worse than the cruelty of his former *compagnons* because it made him feel all the more unworthy of grace.

Although profession failed to heal his scruples, it did bring him a mission. He and a newly ordained priest of the Order were sent to the desolate villages of Cornouaille, a district where scores of priestless parishes were sorely in need of ministry. What value alien laborers could have in this particular vineyard was something best left to Divine reckoning. At the very least they could help to spread comforting rumors of peace. Yet even if the hoped-for treaty were signed, he doubted it would better these wretches' lot. He tried to think of the journey as a *chevauchée* of grace, but this private jest inspired scant mirth.

He had nothing to fear from his former victims, for now that he wore a habit, who would remember how he looked in armor? But to force himself to meet those he had wronged, to face dark eyes sharp as lance points, was the fiercest battle he had ever fought. Blows struck from every side — ashes of fires his kind had kindled, bodies his kind had broken, fair-haired children his kind had fathered. Yet what bit deepest into his soul was begging bread from folk whose bread he used to steal.

His partner's company made the struggle no easier to bear. The priest, a city-bred cooper's son, was far too craven for the countryside. He saw wolves in every tree trunk's shadow, and their howling turned him pale even when he sat safe within some peasant's hut. The long miles they must trudge to reach their scattered charges wore away his early zeal.

Thus, the call to organize a pardon of Our Lady in a hamlet near the Monts d'Arrée drew unseemly groans from the other friar. Subsequent days of rain-soaked travel, disappearance of their path, and their near-capture by a routier band had driven the weakling to desert ere they reached their goal.

This was the second morning he had awakened alone. Unless he found food and shelter soon, he would not live to see many more dawns. But today was Friday, and he ought to welcome an imposed fast that left no room for fleshly weakness. If wolves approached, he would greet them as sainted Brother Francis had their man-eating cousin in Gubbio. However, since he entirely lacked the founder's holiness, he was certain to be devoured and so would reach the end of all his troubles.

Hunger must be making him light-headed already. It was time to leave his refuge and be on his way. As he climbed down from the tree, he tried to remember what he had once known of the country hereabouts. He must look for westward-flowing water, since that would eventually drain into the Aulne and thus lead him out of peril to the sea.

While he walked through the gloomy forest, he recited the seven penitential psalms over and over again, as if sheer repetition of pleas would guarantee forgiveness. For easier progress, he tried to keep to low-lying areas where mighty trees had shaded out most of the underbrush. But he had to change direction repeatedly to avoid the deep gorges that scarred the land. Even so, he nearly slipped down the weather-crumbled edge of one ravine. His wistful gaze lingered on the golden flowers of gorse, serenely blooming upon hillsides their thorn-guarded selves denied him.

Hunger pangs grew sharper after tierce. He would have to venture out of the safe shadows if he were to have any chance of finding berries. Fortunately, the slope he descended proved to have a slow, wide stream at its base. He breathed a prayer of gratitude when he spied a bramble bush. Only a few berries were ripe this early in the season, but he eagerly ate them all and searched for more. Scattered clumps of briar led him upstream, where they merged into a solid thicket around a huge boulder.

The chill of recognition cut deeper than hunger. He saluted the place as he would a familiar enemy. After eating as much fruit as he could find, he sought the well-remembered road. If it led him to his doom, so be it. He disdained to flee his lawful sentence, however much he feared it.

Although the way seemed distinctly shorter than he recalled, walking was hotter work than riding. He was sweating and dizzy by the time he reached the hilltop ruins.

From a distance, these looked like a natural thicket, so densely were they

overgrown. Saplings had shot up tall enough to tempt nesting birds. A whole carnival of flowers spread across the surrounding grass. Stepping warily to avoid bees, he slowly approached the remains of the garden. Except for the gateposts, most of its wall had tumbled down and vanished beneath banks of climbing roses. The spring's clean water flowed through stone channels around beds where young apple trees were blooming before it disappeared into a drain. A film of moss softened the roughness of the pillar beyond the fountain.

Scarcely daring to breathe, he walked through the open gate and knelt to drink from a cup chained to the basin's side. The worn pavement was warm from the late morning sun. All about him he could see and smell new life burgeoning from the wreckage of the old. He stretched out his hand to caress the waterspout that was carved like a woman's face when he heard the ring of steel on stone.

Hurriedly blessing himself, he whirled to meet, not the Devil, but a wellarmed rider. The *routier* galloped through the gate and halted within easy striking distance.

"Stand up, shavepate," he cried. By his accent, the renegade was English. He rose. "Peace, brother," he replied with all the calm he could muster. "How dare you curse me!"

"Wherein did I ill-wish you?"

"War's my only trade, and peace would be my ruin." He brandished his naked blade, and his fractious mount stamped the flowery ground.

He studied them sadly. Once he had had such a horse, such armor, such a sword — exactly such a sword, though brighter. There was no mistaking those curving quillons. He squared his shoulders for the punishment to come and said, "Those who take the sword will perish by the sword."

"But the swordless will perish first." The armsman's smile showed broken teeth.

He shook his head. "In truth, I was speaking of myself. Since I was once like you, mayhap you will someday be like me."

"And we'll quaff cold spring water together in Hell." The other hooted. "Be sure to have some poured and waiting for me when I get there." He raised his sword to strike. "Killing peasants is no sport. They die like dumb beasts. You clerics fuss more." The sword arced lazily closer. "Let's hear you squawk. Maybe heaven'll notice you."

His hand reached for a weapon that was no longer there, and touched instead the belt of knotted cord that symbolized his vows. With a firmness that surprised him, he said, "I will not play your game."

"What? No pleas? No threats? No tears?" The sword was inches away. "I do love to see those holy tears."

He tried not to laugh. "Look elsewhere then. My eyes dried up years ago." He stayed perfectly still as the sword came to rest at his neck. The blade was wickedly sharp and seared his flesh as if red-hot. He had to squint

against the pain.

"Saying your prayers, eh?"

He opened his eyes to lock stares with his tormentor. "You think to kill me for your own pleasure, but you are merely God's instrument of justice to requite me for my sins."

"I'll slay you or spare you as I will." The routier snarled. "I'm no one's tool, no one's!"

The sword sliced his skin as deftly as a flaying knife. Agony flamed in his opened veins. He clung to the soft murmur of the water to keep from screaming.

"Beg! Damn you, beg!"

"Only of God do I beg mercy," he whispered. "Miserere mei, Deus. . . ." His spurting blood stained the fountain as he fell.

A chorus of twittering birds awoke him at prime. Chilled to the bone by soaking wet garments, he greeted the windy morn with a shudder. The shudders turned to spasms as memory returned. Many wordless prayers later, he unclawed his fingers and shyly probed for a wound. A ridgy new scar half-circled his neck.

He grasped the basin wall to pull himself up on his knees and gazed about like a man bespelled. Although a trail of fresh hoofprints trampled across the garden and away, there were no bloodstains to be seen.

A fresh gust of wind set him shivering again. When it had passed, he turned a bit and spied the sole trace of blood. The carved woman's face from which the spring flowed wept dark clots of gore.

For moments too long for measuring, he clung to her cool stone basin and made her shining water deeper with his tears.

A STARSHIP COMMANDER, McPHEETER

A starship commander, McPheeter, Went and landed his shuttle one-seater On a Centaurus-3 street But got jailed for his feat — He did not have a zlopf for the meter.

DUBIOUS PLEASURES by Bryan G. Stephenson art: George Barr



Bryan Gregory Stephenson was a finalist in last year's Bulwer-Lytton Contest for bad SF writing. He now works as a phlebotomist, librarian, and tax law specialist to support his family of three. The difference between a successful entrepreneur and a decapitated felon is often simply a matter of a quick escape.

- Lazarus Lengthy, Time Enough for Epigrams

The Reverend Cinn, of the Galactic Church of Mammon, Unreformed, stood at the crest of a snow-carpeted slope. She kicked the soft, sandlike powder and cursed the ugly pink sky above. Her ship, the *Dubious Pleasure*, waited on the frozen plain below, ready to take off the moment it was provided with a crew. Past the base of the hill, between the Rev and her refurbished shuttle, a bellowing mob brandished daggers, clubs, and ski-poles.

"I knew we should have gotten off this planet before sunrise!" yelped a young woman at the Rev's side. Tala searched the pockets of her parka for a knife (or white flag) and wondered, not for the first time, why she signed up with this bunch. There had to be a safer way to pay for her studies.

"Attend to my words, chile," the Rev drawled. "Not without reason is the Devil named as 'Child of the Morning.' Anyone who gets up before noon on a Sunday is surely among the damned."

"But this is Monday," Tala protested.

"That explains a lot of things." The Rev shook off the hood of her gold-trimmed winterwear cloak and let a mass of straight, Cherokee-black hair fall down her back. "You gotta admit, though, that was a great camp-out last night. Wolfe's World is just about the last place you can still find old-fashioned, Earth-quality marshmallows. It's one of the two things this planet is famous for."

Tala shivered within her own cloak, personalized by gobs of costume jewelry. "What's the other thing?"

"Expert torture."

Blessed is memory, which, like a recurring flashback, returns a geriatric to his boyhood, when the Excruciators' Union (Local 8) still enjoyed the endless respect and employment our expertise deserved. In all the jurisdictoriums of the satrapies of space, the ultraviolet uniforms of my Brothers and me were conspicuous by their invisibility. But time eased on down his road, like a filigreed surrey drawn by racing megafauna, and professional tormenting techniques gave way to discount McEnforcers, foreign-made Rack-O-Matics, and shoddy doit-yourself kits.

Finally, on a giant icy rock, beneath the pallid red glow of a senile sun, the last generation of Excruciators (Local 8) found a chance to demonstrate what a Fate-Worse-Than-Death really was. . . .

- Severance Pei, The Archaisms of the Economist

The Reverend Cinn was using a pair of binoculars to take a closer look at the mob from a suitably safe distance. There turned out to be several ominous (ultraviolet?) spaces among the waving weapons and homicidal facial expressions. "They look a trifle vexed," she said.

"Well, you did promise them a brand-new sun by morning," Tala pointed out, a bit maliciously. "Tropical weather. Bikinis."

"And how else was I going to unload all that Mercurian suntan lotion in our hold?"

Tala seethed privately. Yes, she thought, even a student loan would have been better than this. She wasn't a scam-crazed Mammonite like Cinn; just an ordinary, orthodox Equinist. Besides, no one should have to face a lynching, or worse, with a hangover like hers. White wine and marshmallows, for Man-O'-War's sake!

Still, last night had been a hell of a blast.

The Rev put away the binoculars and returned her attention to matters nearby. "Tala, am I wrong, or has this discussion been curiously two-sided? Where's our loyal technologist anyway?"

"Hiding, of course. Where else?" Tala's blue (and blurry) eyes scanned the hilltop until they spotted a man-sized vertical line, less than an inch wide. "There he is," she said.

"Eh?" The Rev followed Tala's gaze. "Oh, I see." She addressed the line. "Knock it off, Gummpi. Face front!"

The line sighed loudly and turned around, revealing the face and form of a newly mature eraserhead. Like the rest of his species, Gummpi was olivegreen, rubbery, and only marginally three-dimensional. In contrast to the parkas and heavy cloaks worn by the Rev and Tala, he was unclothed except for a black tee-shirt bearing the message (in ugly orange letters): FORMER RESIDENT OF PLANET POKI.

"I don't understand," Gummpi said. He slowly started turning sideways again, hoping no one would notice. "Why aren't they charging toward us yet? Do you think they're just trying to scare us? Maybe if we give back the rest of the marshmallows. . . ."

"Blasphemy!" snarled the Rev. Then, in gentler tones: "Gummpi dear, the poor suckers are saving their strength for the ambush to come. Why climb a snowy hill when they know we're on our way to the *Dubious Pleasure?*"

"Hah!" said the eraserhead. "We'll fool them; we'll stay right here forever! This really is a nice view, you know."

This crew has an effective division of labor, Tala decided, between the drum solos in her head. Gummpi did enough cringing for the three of them. A good science-man, though, even if he was vulcanized.

She, on the other hand, had her own response to danger. Tala shook her cloak experimentally and closed her eyes gratefully at the sound of liquid sloshing. Praise the Starpony! There was still a pocket of wine left. Clear, white, warming . . .

"Stop! Take that tube out of your mouth."

Tala paused in mid-sip as Cinn strode nearer, dragging Gummpi behind her with a pair of copper tweezers. "Sorry, dear," said the Rev, "but we need that juice for my plan."

The younger starfarer felt torn between hope and skepticism. "There's a plan?"

"Why, of course. And the first thing we have to do is jump up and down on top of Gummpi here. How heavy are your boots?"

Graedel Oolb the Third, professional scrap dealer and part-time rioter, prided himself on being able to keep a cool head even while enjoying a little mass hysteria. Thus, he kept himself carefully in the rear of the crowd surrounding the *Dubious Pleasure*. Graedel wanted to be the last to face those sneaky, bogus sun-peddlers — and the first to invade when the ship itself was ultimately violated.

He smiled, revealing greying chunks of roast destrier wedged between his teeth, and patted one of the craft's large argentine fins. Looked like an old-time NASA shuttle, the junkman thought, but with Wolfe only knew what sort of chassis or engines. Too bad that the hull couldn't be legally opened until the owners were extinct; he would have to be patient. Carnage before plunder. That was the way of things.

Suddenly, there was shouting and confusion from the front of the mob. A collective gasp worked its way back through the crowd to Graedel. Something was happening. Their unwelcome visitors had to be on the move. Graedel hopped up and down, but could not see past his neighbors' heads. He listened eagerly for the screams of the Reverend's gang.

He heard laughter. Loud, menacing, heavily accented hilarity — like Vincent Price doing Tennessee Williams, imagined the junkman, who had an extensive collection of ancient videos. Then, Graedel heard shrieks and moans from familiar throats. His own people were taking damage! Nervously, Graedel hefted his own heavy wrench.

The crowd parted before him, running west and east, and Graedel saw the enemy. Two of them, at least. Reverend Cinn and the shorter, brown-haired female. A horsie girl, wasn't she, who wanted to be a librarian? Both women were sailing across the plain on a flattened, olive-colored sled. Oddly, the sled seemed to have four limbs sticking up on the sides. The Rev and accomplice held on to these limbs with one mitten each while simultaneously pelting the locals with white spherical missiles.

Snowballs, Graedel realized. But that was impossible. The snow was much too powdery to make decent weapons. Unless you poured some sort of liquid over the snowballs and formed a hard, icy coating . . .

He tasted the wine when the next throw knocked most of the meat out of his teeth

"Goddammit, I'm a technologist, not a toboggan!" Gummpi yelled,

standing up in the corridor. "I may never get the bootprints out of my torso."

The Rev ignored his protests. "Close the airlock and meet us in the control room. Quickly, please!"

The command center of the *Dubious Pleasure* was pure, carefully crafted coziness, complete with fireplace (and crossed sabers above), crushed bluevelvet seats, artwork, and potted plants. On a functional level, each seat was equipped with a tie-in to the master computer and placed before the unbreakable window at the front of the ship.

One of the plants, a four-foot-tall mass of fronds, jumped out of its pot at the sound of approaching feet. It crouched within the entrance, ready to strike.

"Down, Gorgo," ordered Tala hastily, brushing past the leafy lurker. "It's just us." Cinn and Gummpi were already taking their seats.

Tala found herself blocked, however, by an extended green stinger. "Okay, okay! The password is *hothouse*." The stinger retracted and the plant went back to its soil.

Holy Mother Flicka, thought the novice spacewoman, why me? Other ships have sonic security systems. We have a paranoid watch-triffid.

Meanwhile, through the big window, Cinn saw the slightly battered mob returning with tractors, chainsaws, and acetylene torches. "Tala, Gummpi, I want to take off in less than two minutes!"

Tala fell to her knees and stuck her head under a console. "Fishbreath," she cooed, "where are you, Fishbreath?"

"Never mind that," said the Rev impatiently. "We don't need the cat just to get into orbit. Use the thrusters."

"No!" Tala gasped. Visions of pulverized people pancakes filled her brain. "That would be homicide."

"Self-defense," said the Rev.

"CINN!"

"Okay, find the cat. But hurry!" Outside, the irked populace of Wolfe's World was assembling a firing squad of leaky microwave ovens.

Tala followed kitty spoor through the potted plants. "Fishbreath," she called. "Fishbreath Furshedder?" Nothing answered. Where was that cat? Tala was willing to search the whole *Pleasure*. Problem was: pretty soon, there'd be no ship to search.

Try explaining that to a recalcitrant feline, though.

Inspiration struck. Tala leapfrogged over Gorgo and into place before the nearest keyboard. She tapped into the main muzak system and located the desired sound effects. The grinding sound of an imaginary can opener filled the control room.

Instants later, a golden-furred tabby popped out of a fireplace ashpile.

"Got you, sucker!" Tala tossed the cat over to Gummpi's waiting arms. Fishbreath sunk his claws into the eraserhead's tee-shirt, but Gummpi was

already halfway to the engine room.

Another row of microwaves was set up opposite the first, with the *Dubious Pleasure* in between. Men and women raced back to their homes to plug in the extension cords.

The engine room was a thrown-together collage of mismatched technologies. The rubber scientist slid between an obsolete mechanical brain and a coin-operated timetunnel (out-of-order, naturally) until he reached a catsized niche among the warping circuits. Gummpi strapped Fishbreath Furshedder into the slot, connected a row of electrodes to the cat's tail, and stuck the animal's face into an herb-filled bag. . . .

Heil, umgowa! The puddytat changes, but the purr remains the same. And how can we who are merely sentient and/or simian fully understand what the Catnip Drive is to those of the feline persuasion? Je ne sais paw. How to explain that transcendental frenzy, that ethertwisting rapture, that supercalifragilistic moment known only as . . . Kibblenbitz?

- Bugjack Norman, The Warpcat's Tail

Space, time, and Fishbreath became one. Up in the command center, Tala experienced a momentary blindness, a sense of tactile static, the smell of burnt paper, and the wrenching sound of the cosmic transmission jumping into first gear.

Just in time, she thought. Euphoria hit her hard; Tala had forgotten how thrilling defying death could be — in retrospect, of course. Then her sight returned and she saw where she was.

The reddened shadows of Wolfe's World had been replaced by an almost boring starscape. Inky blackness, tiny spots of immutable light, the faint wisps of distant nebulae; you know, that sort of thing. What made the view more unusual was the odd-looking phenomenon directly before them: a perfect circle of burnished aluminum, several shiplengths across, surrounding a disc-shaped mass of brownish fog. Within the fog, coruscating bolts of silver energy leaped back and forth in a way that made Tala wary.

"By the Black Stallion's Mane . . ." she whispered in awe.

The Rev's response was less restrained. "Oh my, ggd!"

"Ohmigod," corrected Tala.

"That's not what I meant!"

Ggd: an acronym popularly applied to an astrophysical oddity located at one end of the Milky Way spiral, discovered during the Late Campbellian Era by the famed explorer, Shawna the Beauteous, who believed it was a man-made artifact of the ancient Black Widowers

Dynasty. This claim was disputed by many positronic scholars who insisted that the ggd was robot-made.

Regardless, the fact remains that matter sucked into the ggd at one end of the galaxy is instantly deposited at the other, albeit in a mashed and almost unrecognizable form.

- Isaac Azazel, The Galactic Garbage Disposal

The *Dubious Pleasure* was circling in towards the ggd like a ripple moving backwards to its source. Up on the bridge, Tala found herself leaning forward at exactly a forty-five-degree angle.

The pull was that strong.

"From microwave to disposal drain in one fell hop," she muttered. "The life cycle of a teevee dinner."

"I, for one, do not intend to be pureed in deep space," said the Rev. She grabbed her cordless phone and dialed the engine room. "Gummpi, get us out of here!"

"But, Reverend," answered the eraserhead, "what direction?"

"Full reverse!"

Amidst his equipment, Gummpi sighed and gave the cat another shot of herbs. Then he flipped Fishbreath upside-down.

The cosmic transmission shrieked from abuse. Tala's skin crawled (Damn static!) but didn't get far. When she opened her eyes again, Wolfe's World's pathetic excuse for sunlight was making all the blue velvet look like mud.

The mob was taking a deep, collective breath of anticipation. The last microwave was being plugged in.

"Reverend," Gummpi gibbered over the phone, "the cat can't take any more of this. His eyes are spinning!"

"Deficits," Cinn swore. "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this. Get ready to ignite blasters . . ."

Tala turned pale. "Cinn, you can't!"

". . . and jettison all our cargo," added the Rev.

Outside, in full view of commonfolk and Excruciators both, three things happened almost simultaneously:

Four score and twenty microwave ovens hummed ominously, sterilizing hundreds of iceworms that had come up to greet the sun.

Rockets in the underbelly of the *Dubious Pleasure* roared to life, sending the surrounded spaceship straight up into the sky.

And a ton or two of creamy white goo poured onto the surface of the planet, absorbing most of the rocket's blast. . . .

The odor that came through my bedroom window smelled of charcoaled sweetness, pink-tinted memories, and distant autumn nights. A warm, happy smell, and stronger now than ever before. I followed my boyish nose that morning to the big field outside of town. All the grown-ups were there, looking like gargoyles with good posture, with spines straight, mouths open, and eyes lifted upwards to watch a rising star. All I could see, though, was the wonderful sight in front of me: the Biggest Toasted Marshmallow in the World!

- Ray #451, Something Dubious This Way Comes

Safely in orbit at last, the non-decapitated felons finally got a chance to lower their adrenaline levels. (In Gummpi's case, rubber cement flowed more sluggishly.) Tala conducted a quick inventory, which was easy enough since the cargo cache was empty, while the eraserhead calculated new coordinates for the Catnip Drive. Flat on his back, Fishbreath grinned through his whiskers. The Reverend watered Gorgo.

"What a morning!" she said. "Thank Mammon it's over."

"Amen to that," agreed Tala. A battle and three narrow escapes, before breakfast. Great Secretariat's Ghost, what a senseless and needlessly exciting way to live!

Maybe that student loan could wait awhile.

Gummpi cowered and turned sideways. "In space," he observed, "it's always Monday somewhere."

OBSIDIAN SPHINX

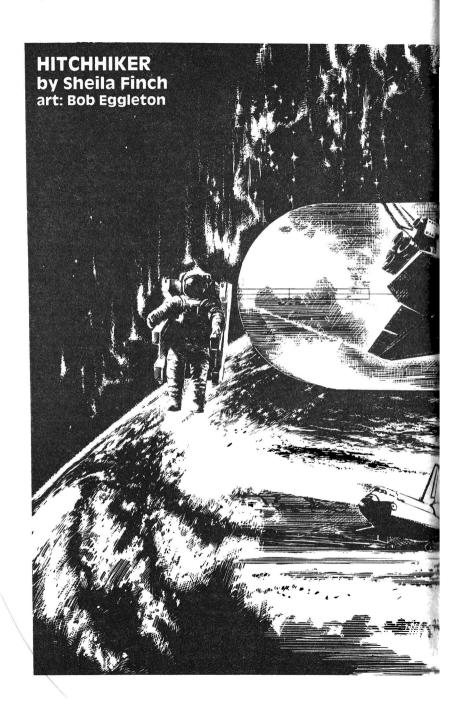
There's love and hate and heartbreak in that beast of polished stone, like a jewel in the darkness where a woman weeps alone — and the Furies all pursue us for a sin we can't atone.

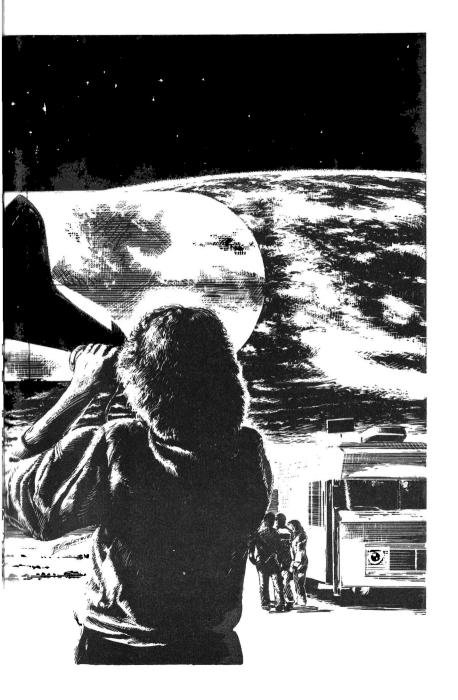
That ebon ogre haunts me.

In my dreams she hunts and taunts me

— and I never shall be free.

It's the fate that dogs all mankind from conception to the grave for the crime of being human and the punishment is — life.





"Go ahead on the dump, Polaris."

Ellen Devon maneuvered down the row of hastily set up folding chairs, her movements made clumsy by the four layers of clothing she'd donned against the December cold. Hearing the loudspeaker, she felt her stomach knot. Plagued by a series of small mishaps and changes of plan, *Polaris* had raised grim memories with this flight.

"Dump complete, Joe."

Nobody talked about Challenger these days, of course. The STS program was back up and running, and the press were as pleased as NASA that America once again had a presence in space. But this hadn't been a smooth trip for the newest shuttle, the first to fly from Vandenberg. Of most concern had been a glitch in communications while her sister Jackie was on EVA, and now there was a computer malfunction delaying landing at Edwards. Ellen couldn't rid herself of the uneasy feeling there was more to it than NASA was admitting. Or was that just the skepticism that everyone felt about the program in these post-Challenger days? The fact that details of the shuttle's mission had been shrouded in the usual military air of secrecy hadn't helped either.

"Stand by one."

To the east, the mountains stood out starkly black against the pale mauve blur of the dry lake; the sky over the California desert turned the unbelievable shade of crayon pink a child might choose to illustrate sunrise.

"No joy there, Polaris. Try the dump again."

Patrick Kelly, award-winning columnist and self-appointed NASA watchdog, slid into the seat beside her, holding two Styrofoam cups of coffee. "Here — this'll get the blood circulating. How do you feel?"

He was handsome enough to be a Hollywood playboy, yet Ellen knew he had the instincts of an ambulance chaser. "Are you going to report my answer?"

He gave a short, barking laugh. "If it's interesting enough to my readers, maybe."

"At least you're honest."

"Only way to go, babe."

"Okay. All balls on that one."

Only a small crowd of people had gathered to watch *Polaris* land, NASA personnel and their families. The novelty had gone out of shuttle flights lately. Or was it that people were afraid to see a repeat of that nightmare day in January, 1986?

What was the matter with her? She glanced at Kelly, sipping coffee as if there were nothing wrong — and perhaps there wasn't.

"What kind of satellite was Jackie supposed to repair?"

"Huh?" he said. "Oh, a scientific one. In polar orbit, studying the solar wind's interaction with Earth's magnetic fields. Why?"

She wasn't sure herself why she'd asked. He gave her an odd look, then

returned his attention to the scalding coffee.

"Polaris, we'll see you at TDRS at four plus one."

"Where's Tidris?"

"What," Kelly said, "not where. Tracking Data Relay Satellite."

She imagined the note he'd make for his column: Astronaut's twin sister ignorant of crucial terminology.

"Odd that they say see not hear, isn't it?"

"We also still say, 'The sun rises,'" he said, nodding towards the east.

The loudspeaker that had been broadcasting a continuous stream of shuttle-to-mission-control communications since they arrived was silent. She sipped her coffee, trying to blot out the uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. Though this wasn't her sister's first flight, Ellen had never come to meet her before. She studied the NASA facility. Sixteen miles off the highway, Edwards looked like another small, unimportant airport — a runway over the flat dry lake bed, hangars, an office building or two, a group of house trailers for temporary office space. Next door, fighter planes practiced takeoff and landing, the sound of their jet engines coming faintly to her on the still air.

The scene reminded her of air shows their father had taken them to every summer in the Midwest. She remembered the display of jet engines, the flight simulators Jackie was so absorbed in, the film strips the Air Force recruiter always showed that Jackie watched over and over again. It had been obvious, even while they were still in junior high school, which twin was going to make a name for herself, and where.

"Did anything - unusual - happen when Jackie worked on the satel-

lite?"

"The video link broke down. You know that."

"You're the press. I thought perhaps —"

Kelly was silent for a long while, as if he were replaying the sequence of events in his memory. "You know how close-mouthed they were about military flights even in the beginning! Well, they're more so now. But they released the info that the crew reported some magnetic turbulence when the shuttle approached the satellite. That was from ten kilometers out, so it probably had nothing to do with anything. What's making you so jumpy?"

"Just nerves, I guess."

She wondered if Jackie was disturbed by the delays. It had been several years since Ellen had allowed herself to be close to her sister, to know with that intuitive bond identicals sometimes have what her twin's reactions would be to anything. How much had Kelly suspected when he called her? She was familiar with his syndicated column, Kelly's People; he went for the jugular in human relationships. She wondered why she'd bothered to ac-

cept. Vicarious excitement because she was bored by her own career teaching high-school science? Or did she feel a lingering sense of regret over that long-ago split with Jackie?

'Polaris, this is Houston. Do you read?"

Unlike Jackie, she thought, she'd never make a contribution that would impress anyone. Ellen stripped off the first layer of clothing, dumping the car coat on the next seat.

"More coffee?"

She shook her head.

"I'll be back in a minute — want to talk to someone." The columnist loped across the clearing towards one of the office buildings.

'Polaris, how do you read?"

From the few public statements about the mission, it had seemed routine: repair of a satellite with a crippled energy system. It was a job that needed Jackie's training in microcircuitry. Ellen had sat up past midnight, listening to news bulletins on the night Jackie repaired the satellite, her feelings a mixture of pride and bitterness that she would never confess to Kelly. Then the *LA Times* suggested that Jackie was a heroine, for she'd apparently had a lot of trouble despite NASA's downplaying of the incident. That was why Kelly had sought Ellen out to be there at the landing. "To add the family touch for my readers," he'd explained over the phone.

"Polaris, this is Houston. We have good news for you. Do you read?"

In the silence she was aware of the whispered conversation of a couple in the next row and the faraway bark of a dog.

Why didn't *Polaris* reply? She looked uneasily at the sky. Of course, they weren't visible. They weren't even back in the atmosphere, yet. Now the sun was up, and it was getting warm; she removed the sweater, leaving a shirt over the tee. The desert gave off a faint, aromatic tang like incense. On top of one of the buildings, a large radar tracking dish caught her eye.

"Loud and clear, Houston."

"Analysis of the GPC 2 dump was clean. We're clearing de-orbit burn." She jumped as Kelly touched her arm.

"Won't be too much longer now. In the meantime, how'd you like to get a little closer to the action?"

"How can we do that?"

"I've got friends in high places!" He grinned. "Maybe we can swing something. Besides, someone wants to meet you. Come on."

The communications room was guarded by a stiff-faced airman, holster bulging conspicuously at his waist. Kelly flashed a pass, and he let them through. Inside, she had a déjà-vu of the airport control tower she'd sat in with her father when Jackie was soloing — she'd never forget the pride on his face — but this had more computer screens.

"Meet a long-time L-5 buddy," Kelly said.

She shook hands with an older man whose white hair contrasted starkly

with his mahogany skin. Missing the name Kelly had spoken, she read his ID tag: Colonel James Gardner. The leaden feeling in the pit of her stomach was growing. It was more than nervousness at the thought of finding something to say to her twin after all this time.

"- may not be possible," Gardner was saying.

"Anything wrong?" Kelly's journalistic antenna was up.

"Probably means nothing. But there were a number of anomalies on this one. That's off the record, by the way."

The voice of Houston came in, clearer than over the public loudspeaker. "Elapsed time: twelve days, four hours, twenty-three minutes, five seconds."

Cold welled up through Ellen's body. She clutched the back of a chair. A feeling of wrongness flooded her mind.

She scrubbed at her forehead, pushing the sensation away.

"Just have to wait and see." Gardner stopped as another transmission came in.

"Go to page I-6 of the manual, Polaris."

She knew Jackie was in trouble.

As children, they'd always known when something happened to the other. They were used to phantom sore throats and painful knees that the other had bumped. They'd shared each other's emotions, the frustrations and heartaches of their love affairs, though Jackie had always been more popular with boys and teachers than her sister. Sometimes, they'd even believed they could send messages to each other — though it hadn't worked at exam time, Ellen thought wryly. Then Jackie had gone on to a glittering career in space, and Ellen was left grading papers for Physics 1. There'd been little to say to each other after that — their lives were worlds apart. And there were few shared perceptions. Now, suddenly, there was this gnawing danger.

"Colonel?"

He looked at her over his shoulder. Behind him figures raced on a CRT.

"What really was wrong with the satellite Jackie repaired?"

Seconds passed, and she was aware of every head in the room turning to gaze at her.

Gardner took his time, his dark face unsmiling. "Fluctuation in the solar array's output. Worked fine for a couple of weeks, then shut down. Sudden and unexplained energy drain. Happened more than once."

"Was it working when my sister rendezvoused with it?"

He nodded. "But it was due to go AWOL again right about then. This is the first time we've been able to put a shuttle into polar orbit. We sent your sister to see what was causing the problems with the satellite."

The room suddenly lurched under her feet. She had the vertiginous sensation of spiraling downwards at tremendous speed.

"Ellen?" Kelly touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

"Bathroom -" she managed.

Someone led her down a corridor and waited while she went inside. She

leaned over the toilet, but nothing came up.

Later, she allowed herself to be persuaded to lie down. Jackie would be all right. Jackie always came out all right! Sleep came almost immediately — she'd been up since three A.M. to get here on time — but was fitfull and disturbed by dreams she forgot as soon as she woke.

The sun was high over the dry lake bed when she sat up, but she shivered with cold and reached for her sweater.

Kelly pointed out the observation window. "She's on her way."

The radar dish on the roof opposite tracked slowly east to north. Colonel Gardner led the way outside; she followed with Patrick Kelly.

Across the dry lake, there was a line of tiny shapes under a brooding dust cloud, and an occasional flash from a windshield. The shuttle's delayed landing had given people time to jam the public viewing area. At the landing site, a line of support vehicles waited, hydraulic lifts, firefighting equipment, a gigantic fan to vent the shuttle's noxious exhaust from the landing area. Nausea twisted again in her stomach.

"There it is!" Kelly exclaimed.

A tiny bright speck had appeared in the unflawed blue dome over the base. Kelly pushed field glasses into her hands. In the lens, the speck revealed its deltoid shape. As she watched, it emitted three short bursts of white exhaust, as if it were about to type its own arrival data on the sky.

"Hey, you're trembling," he said. "Don't be afraid."

"You don't understand -"

Now the chase plane behind *Polaris* was visible. The sonic boom cracked across the quiet desert morning.

She gripped his arm. "Something's terribly wrong."

"If it were, they wouldn't let *Polaris* down till they'd found it. NASA's middle name is caution these days!"

"It's Jackie — something's happened. She shouldn't be allowed — Jackie should be quarantined."

Kelly's expression hardened. "Back off, Ellen! I know what it meant to you growing up in Jackie's shadow. I did my homework. But you can't allow jealousy to ruin her triumph. She's earned it."

Was that what it was, only jealousy? It had been hard not to be jealous of a sister who outshone everyone around her and seemed to need nothing from anyone.

That wasn't entirely true, she corrected herself. There had been one time when Jackie had needed her desperately.

Polaris was lined up for landing. Without warning, the barrier Ellen had erected against further humiliation gave way, and her mind opened.

She had a sharp image of Jackie, arms outstretched to her twin. Something else —

- cold, dizzying vastness -
- the clutch of inchoate menace -

She broke away from Kelly's restraining hand and bolted through the gate. The shuttle touched down. Behind it, the chase plane gained altitude again.

"Ellen, come back!"

Running, she realized the futility of it. *Polaris* had landed more than a mile away — distances were deceiving here. She'd never make it on time. She'd waited too long.

Someone was gaining on her, and she half-turned, expecting Patrick Kelly. It was Colonel Gardner.

"Tell me what it is," he said. She slowed but didn't stop. The black man jogged beside her. "I'm listening to you."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"It's my twin -"

"My father was an identical twin," Gardner said. "He always said he knew the moment his brother's plane was shot down over France."

She pulled up short, panting, and stared at him.

He gazed steadily back. "I know about the 'link' you two shared. It was in Major Devon's file."

Ellen nodded briefly and told him what she knew.

When she was done, he pulled out his radio. "Gardner here. Code: Mayhem. Repeat, Code: Mayhem!"

Ellen peered through the double chicken-wire screening of the Faraday cage. Jackie had lapsed into a coma. Three days ago, she'd descended the shuttle's steps with help from the shuttle's commander, collapsing the moment her feet touched the ground. But by then the truck-sized emergency medical vehicle had come racing up in a cloud of dust, and men swathed in outfits that resembled moon-landing suits had gathered her up and disappeared with her into the portable isolation unit. The rest of *Polaris*'s crew seemed untouched, and after the doctors were through examining them, they went on to debriefing.

Inside the unit, chaos struck.

Every instrument brought into Jackie's vicinity reacted wildly. Whatever it was that had happened to Jackie as she repaired the crippled satellite, it disrupted the functioning of anything using electricity. The first computer monitoring her vital signs burned out crucial circuits ten minutes after being activated. The second and third — state-of-the-art machines on loan from the Jet Propulsion Lab — malfunctioned repeatedly. She herself jerked and lunged about the room like a maniac, then collapsed into near lifelessness only to revive suddenly and writhe and twist again.

They'd constructed a Faraday cage around her bed in the isolation unit to shield themselves and the instruments from the surging electromagnetic disturbance that was Jackie Devon.

Three days of confusion, fear, shrouded in secrecy. Ellen had stayed, feeling useless and in the way, but unable to make herself leave.

The air in here had a prickly, rubber and disinfectant smell that said hospi-

tal. She buttoned her jacket against the chill.

"Can't you do something?" she asked, gazing at the temporarily lifeless form of her twin. Whatever was wrong with Jackie had left her comatose for the past six hours. "There must be some drug — an antibiotic —"

"Even if we ever do find bacteria floating free in space — and we haven't yet!" Dr. Alvarado, head of the space medicine team, told her, obviously annoyed Gardner had given her the clearance to stay. "It's highly improbable they'd find conditions on Earth to their liking!"

"NASA used to worry about that, back when Glenn and the others were riding the rockets," Kelly said. He'd come out to Edwards at least once every day, trading on old friendship to get him where the rest of the press were banned. "But we know more now."

"You can't be certain, though, can you?" she said.

Ellen -

Jackie's voice?

The isolation unit dissolved in a dazzle of urgent light.

- geometries of fire like burning glaciers -
- something primeval whirling in terror -

As swiftly as the experience came over her, it vanished.

"It's got Jackie!" She clutched Colonel Gardner's arm. "There's something in Jackie's mind! I can feel it."

"That's not possible!" Alvarado said stiffly. "And how could you know, in any —"

Gardner gripped her shoulders, steadying her, his dark eyes assessing her thoughtfully. "But you just might, I think. What do you feel?"

"Nothing I can put into words. Something jagged — spiraling — burning.

Like lightning."

"If you're right . . ." Gardner left the thought unfinished. "My guess is it's some phenomenon dependent on energy. That would explain the periodic shutdown of the satellite. Your sister was there when it was — well — feeding. We designed the mission so she would be."

She stared at him. "You mean -"

"She knew the risk she was taking," he said. "She accepted it."

Jackie lay sprawled across the bed like a rag doll. Heavily shielded waldos snaked cautiously toward her to take their readings. Gardner huddled with the scientists over their instruments, conferring.

Kelly steered Ellen outside the mobile unit to a chair at the foot of the steps. The desert air cooled rapidly as evening approached.

"They're not telling me everything," she said shakily.

He glanced at a guard just out of earshot. "I found out what happened after they brought Jackie back to Polaris. After she gained consciousness. For

a while, she was okay. Then everything she touched began to malf."

"The shuttle's computer problems."

"Yeah."

"But it wasn't a military satellite, so why the secrecy?"

"They couldn't be sure the Russians didn't have a hand in it. Antisatellite weapons and such."

"There must be something -"

"They've tried almost everything in the book."

After a while, she said, "They're not going to let you tell this story to your readers, you know. It'll be classified."

"We all take risks. This is mine."

She propped her head with her hands and closed her eyes.

"What're you getting from her now?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. It comes and goes. It's not like a telephone hookup, you know!"

Kelly grinned. "Touchy subject, huh? Sorry!"

"Ms. Devon?" Colonel Gardner emerged at the top of the steps. "Get some rest. There's nothing you can do here for a while."

"That thing — it's not a 'phenomenon' — it's a parasite."

"I rather tend to believe you," Gardner said. "But whatever it is that hitched a ride to Earth in Major Devon's body, it's not going to give up easily. We don't have much choice but to wait."

"And what happens to Jackie in the meantime?"

Ellen!

This time she was certain. "Look — it may sound silly, but Jackie needs me."

"We can't allow you inside the protective shielding."

He was afraid she'd be contaminated and bring it out. They were all more concerned with that than with Jackie, just as Jackie herself had been more concerned with spectacular gestures than with her own safety. She always was a showoff!

She shook the unworthy thought away. "I understand that. But I have to be near her."

Gardner led her back to the Faraday cage. The unit was jammed with doctors, scientists, technicians of many specialties; a hubbub of agitated voices filled the cramped space. Men wearing protective suits were just emerging from the open cage; the scientists used the dormant periods to move equipment in or out, hoping to find the magical combination. So far, nothing had worked. Behind them, Ellen saw a trail of cables and voltage meters.

Without warning, disturbance broke out in the cage. Jackie's body bolted upright on the bed and flung itself across the room at the departing men. They barely managed to get the door shut in time as she fell to the floor.

- prismatic light coalescing into ice -
- Danger! the stench of burning flesh -

Giddily, Ellen staggered against the wire shielding of the cage. The link between them was strong, pulling her towards Jackie, compelling her to touch. At the distant edge of awareness, she felt Gardner's hands gripping her arms, holding her back.

She clenched her teeth as icicles lanced through her skull.

"What is it, Ellen? Tell us," Kelly urged.

Through the mesh she saw the jerking zombie that was Jackie struggling to its knees. The eyelids flew open, and for a second she was caught by their cold blue gaze.

Home - go home -

She fought down the horror that climbed into her throat. "You're not my sister. You're a parasite!"

Thought rushed over her: humans shared their bodies with so many entities already — mitochondria, chloroplasts, bacteria. What was one more?

She dared not allow herself to think like that.

Jackie now lay crumpled awkwardly in a corner like a marionette with broken strings.

"What have you done to Jackie?" she cried.

But the link was fading, as if whatever it was that struggled so hard to control the human body it had entered was depleted by the effort.

Help -

Sorrow overwhelmed her, a sense of something captive and despairing. "It doesn't understand!" she screamed, writhing in Gardner's grip. "It wants to get out, but it doesn't know how!"

Then — void where the link had been a moment earlier. But just before the silence closed in, she had a vivid image of a curtain of energy rippling with blue light, a shimmering panoply spread across the night sky above vast plains of snow and ice, like an illustration in *National Geographic* she'd shown to her science classes. It vanished, leaving her drained and cold.

She allowed Gardner to lower her onto a couch in a corner of the isolation unit, and didn't protest when a medic approached to administer a trank.

"Northern lights," she said as the shot took her down into darkness. "But why would it live in the aurora borealis?"

Around five A.M., Kelly brought her soup and a glass of milk. The pungent smell of onions and beef rose on the steam, encouraging her appetite. Grey winter light was beginning to push its way through the unit's small windows. She felt sticky, in need of a shower. He sat with her, coaxing her to eat. However this turned out, she thought, he'd get some kind of story. But she sensed it wasn't journalism alone that kept him here.

"You're not half as sadistic in the flesh as you are in print."

"Illusion only, fair lady."

"Which one?"

A dimple came and went in his cheek. "Try me and find out?"

"Forget it!" She smiled at him. Perhaps when this was all over?

"You got a message last night, from someone who identified herself as your 'second violin.'" He looked at her quizzically. "She wondered if you'd be able to make practice tonight."

"A string quartet — made up of high-school teachers," she explained. "We play for our own pleasure. But we're lacking a cellist anyway."

"You have hidden depths, madame!"

She smiled again. "Jackie used to play cello, once."

Now why had she said that? Annoyed, she busied herself with the soup. But he tactfully didn't pursue the subject.

After a while she said, "Tell me what they're saying about that thing."

"Well — let's see if I can get this right! I'm not a science columnist. There's a constant drizzle of electrons into the ionosphere at the geomagnetic poles —"

"From the solar wind," she explained. "When the wind is strong, the electrons plough deeply into the Earth's atmosphere, interacting with the plasma. We see the excited oxygen atoms in high latitudes as the aurora borealis."

"Thanks, Teach! Anyway -"

"We've always known there were strong, unexplained electrical currents in the aurora."

"— that's the energy source. This — whatever it is that normally lives way out of our reach in the solar wind — suddenly found an unexpected delicacy in its own backyard. It learned to harvest the satellite's batteries."

"But why this one, Patrick? Why not some other satellite?"

"A particularly large solar array?" he suggested. "And besides, this one was designed to interact with the solar wind."

She stared up at the white ceiling, thinking. Somewhere, a fan droned lazily, sucking out stale air. "So it kept coming back to — eat — the stored electrical energy?"

"Seems that way. They think it didn't know enough to stay out of Jackie when she made contact while it was getting its fix. But it did recognize the power pack she wore to maneuver."

Depression welled in her. "All it wants to do is go home."

"The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is how? Best we can hope for is that it'll die of energy starvation eventually."

"And if it dies, what happens to Jackie?"

He looked at her with sudden insight. "It's always been a love/hate relationship for you, hasn't it?"

The bright, beautiful twin, best friend and worst rival. They were identical, but Jackie was always somehow a little *more*. There'd been one day when hate had almost won. Jackie had been showing off as usual, pirouetting on new skates on a thinly frozen pond. Her admiring friends were useless with fear. Ellen, indoors, had nevertheless *heard* her sister's cry for

help.

And she'd realized she had a choice -

She pushed the soup away unfinished. "Yes. It has."

How different things might have been, she thought, if she'd chosen not to alert her father to Jackie's emergency.

Gardner, who had also spent the night on a nearby couch, judging from his rumpled uniform and the bags under his eyes, looked up from the computer as she approached.

"There are too many answers we don't have," he said before she could ask

her question.

"You knew there was something terribly wrong with that satellite," she said. "Why did you send my sister into danger? I'd have thought — after Challenger —"

"If we hadn't," he said gently, "then for sure we'd never have known. That's what science is about — taking risks."

"Easy for you to say!"

"I know it's a frightening situation."

"This thing - it's frightened, too."

She was struck by the irony. The first alien humans had ever encountered, and they had no choice but to wait for it to die. Would there be anything left of Major Jacqueline Devon afterward?

"There's got to be something you could try," Kelly said.

"We've tried about everything," one of the scientists replied. "It's packing a terrific punch in voltage. Tough to deal with."

His tag identified him as Gordon Chen. She remembered, when Gardner introduced them, Chen had said: "I feel responsible for Major Devon. It was my experiment she was trying to salvage."

"It's learning fast," Gardner told them. "Already it knows enough not to enter the equipment we've used against it — just to guzzle the energy from them."

"That implies it's sentient?" Kelly put in.

"Maybe. At least, intelligent. There's a subtle difference. Sentience means self-awareness. Dogs are intelligent, but we doubt they have a sense of self. Dolphins and chimps, who knows? As far as extraterrestrials are concerned and how we deal with them, it's an important distinction."

"But what kind of thing can live without a body, for Chrissakes?"

"We have to reevaluate our scenario for the evolution of possible life forms," Chen said. "What this represents is an electrical ecology. Something we never really thought seriously of. And think of the size of the auroral zone! How far out from the Earth it extends. The tremendous amount of energy pouring in from the sun. My God! And it's ancient. There's been ample time for a whole chain of life forms to evolve."

"Interesting to speculate how far up the chain this one is!" Kelly said

dryly.

"Or how big," Gardner added. "Remember, *Polaris* measured turbulence ten klicks out. That was the entity's signature. So the question is, did all of it enter Major Devon? And if not, what does that fact mean?"

"How the hell are we supposed to deal with something like that?" Kelly asked.

"We'd better learn to deal with these things — safely — if we want to continue sending shuttles into polar orbits," Chen said.

Inside the Faraday cage, Jackie twitched on her knees. They watched her in silence. Slowly now, one foot extended, and she rose, swaying, grasping the hospital bed for support. Its springs creaked loudly.

"Notice how its control of the host body is improving," one of the doctors murmured.

"That 'host body' is a woman, in case you've forgotten!" Kelly snapped. "A very bright, attractive one at that."

Ellen bit her lip. Nothing changes, she thought.

The doctor ignored him. "It's learning rapidly."

"If it doesn't kill her first," Dr. Alvarado said. In the face of massive evidence, he seemed to have reluctantly accepted the parasite theory. "That last EKG was bad news."

"You're looking at this the wrong way," Ellen said. "Trying to zap it, kill it, you'll only succeed in killing my sister as well. What we need is to get it out."

"We've tried that," Chen said. "It's electrical itself, so we ought to be able to catch it with some kind of a conductor. But, trouble is, there were some pretty good conductors in the satellite, and it's used to them — knows how to avoid getting into them."

"And it seems to prefer being inside a living entity," Gardner added. "Maybe because it's using her to communicate?"

"Then obviously you have to fool it! Try something new."

"Okay," Chen nodded. "I follow you. But what?"

"I don't know! You people are the experts. I just teach high-school science. But I would imagine it should be a kind of conductor that wasn't on the satellite."

"It had the best there is," Gardner said doubtfully, "considering the problem of keeping them cold enough."

"I don't know," Chen said. "It'd have to be something that we have here already —"

He gazed around the isolation unit, cluttered with wrecked computers.

"Isn't there anything it wouldn't recognize," Ellen said, "that it'd get sucked into too fast to avoid?"

Gardner and the scientist stared at her.

"Something with the capability of holding it indefinitely, you mean?" Gardner said.

Then Chen's face flushed. "My God!" he said.

"Ready Ellen?"

She nodded, clenching her fists to keep herself from trembling. In the cage, through cold fog rising from the liquid helium, she could see the body of her sister stumbling around again, eyes closed, one foot clumsily stepping on the other. She couldn't bear to watch.

"Remember — get her to put her hand on it. She *must* make contact." Chen indicated the makeshift rig, hastily assembled from one of JPL's cannibalized computers.

"Maybe we should wait. When it drops her again — get a glove on her?" one of the medical specialists muttered. "That hand's going to get burned."

"No time! She's weakening fast," Alvarado said. "If she goes into ventricular fibrillation —"

Ellen could feel the thing's panic now.

Out! - Out! -

There were no guarantees it would work. No guarantees, even if it did, that Jackie would survive.

"All right," she said slowly. "Do as I say."

Emotion engulfed her: homesickness. It was like a child or a small animal, she thought. Thrashing about in terror, it only succeeded in getting further entangled in the trap. She was the only one who knew, and she'd been cast in the role of its betrayer.

Home - dying -

"Tackie -"

But of course, she couldn't hear. It would have to be the link.

She couldn't do it.

If she didn't do it, Jackie would surely die.

Jackie'd known the dangers! NASA didn't do anything these days without half a dozen studies of probabilities. But nobody could've predicted this.

And if Jackie lived?

Ellen had a sudden flash of memory — their last year in high school, Jackie with the lead in the school play, Jackie on the softball team, Jackie winning the scholarship to MIT, Jackie with five offers of dates for the senior prom.

Love/hate. Once she'd had a chance to solve the problem and hadn't taken it.

Patrick Kelly was staring through the chicken wire at Jackie.

They were all staring at Jackie.

How could anyone blame her if there were no link to Jackie after all?

Near the door of the Faraday cage, the coiled wires of the cryoton waited, wreathed in fog. Ellen shivered in the extreme cold, despite the sweaters and boots they'd made her wear.

"Look at the way it's moving her now!" a voice murmured behind Ellen. Her sister's hand moved smoothly to brush a lock of hair away from unblinking eyes.

We all take risks, Kelly had told her. Love was one such risk she was familiar with.

She made her decision.

Come towards me, Jackie. Trust me.

Step by step, she directed the halting progress of her sister's body. Painfully she urged, cajoled, bullied, pushed the limp hand up.

Remember how we used to practice together, how dreadful we sounded at first? Do it for me, Jackie. I love you.

Fingers uncurled slowly - reached out -

Now!

A microsecond before the comatose astronaut's hand touched the surface of the superconductor, a spasm wracked her. The blue lips parted and a cry emerged, halfway between a growl and a scream. Something flashed across the gap. Jackie toppled to the floor.

"Down the drain!" a technician exclaimed jubilantly, looking up from the gauges she'd been monitoring. "We got it! Look at those needles spin! No

way it could resist the pull of that negative field."

"It won't get out of there in a hurry!" Chen smiled with relief. "As long as we keep the superconductor at extremely low temperature — something we can't do on a satellite yet — the current will flow round it forever."

Alvarado's medical team hurried inside the cage.



Kelly pulled up a chair for Ellen. "You did it, babe!"

Ellen found tears streaming down her face. "It asked for help."

Colonel Gardner glanced at her, understanding. "You had to do it, to save your sister."

"It wanted to be free, to go home." Much like me, she thought. Had her emotional energy been as misplaced as the alien's?

"This is only the beginning, Ms. Devon," Chen said.

"Not a very glorious one!"

"We've got a lot to learn about space," Gardner agreed. "But your sister believes we belong there. She was willing to take the risk."

"What's important is whether Jackie's going to be all right -" Kelly

began earnestly.

"You realize, I can't allow you to tell this story," Gardner warned.

"If she's okay," the columnist said, "it'll be worth it."

"Ellen — thank you," Gardner said simply. "I can guess what it meant to you."

She was the one who'd shut off contact. Jackie had only been herself — a personality more vivid than most. Why should that have mattered to Ellen? She'd never yearned to do the things her twin had done.

She wondered suddenly if Jackie ever found time to play the cello any

more.

Towards sunrise — the same improbable pink flush over the dry lake she'd first seen the day *Polaris* landed — Jackie's eyelids fluttered.

Ellen opened the door to the cage and went inside.

THE LITERARY CAREER OF SHEILA FINCH: Current Directions . . .

"A Woman's Place"

I get asked — by people who ought to know better — why science fiction? The implication, of course, is that as a woman I should prefer to write about what the questioner thinks of as typically female concerns: families, daily life, the emotions, all the little details of existence. But the survival and future behavior of humans is a female concern. And only in science fiction do I get to play with all those lovely capitalized concepts, such as What Makes Us Human and The Meaning of Life, about which a great deal of mainstream literature has forgotten. So I write SF and I read it and I teach it — because a woman's place is in the future.

I don't always know afterward where a particular story came from, but in this case the story's genesis is quite clear. I've been a fan of the shuttle program since the start, and knowing this, a friend invited me to Edward's Air Force Base to watch a landing; there was a long delay, which I spent gawking and writing notes. The shuttle eventually landed and I cried. But there's no story in that. Then I remembered as a child in England, just after World War II, being taken to military air shows, or just to watch the planes land at a nearby by "aerodrome." (I grew up in London during the Blitz, when being alive the very next day was a major achievement, let alone living to see the future represented by those wonderful old planes.)

Then Challenger went down -

But we have to believe in the future, even though sometimes the prospects look wretched indeed. Thus, this story.

... and Past Achievements

"Darkness Comes Rattling," short story. Amazing Stories: July 1983.

Infinity's Web. Bantam Books, 1985. Winner of the Compton Crook Award for the best first novel, 1986.

Triad. Bantam Books, 1986.

The Garden of the Shaped. Bantam Book, 1987.



EXILED OF WORLDS

A window opens for Surveillance on the great despots

A phantom whirlwind enters
This trembling ray of neutrinos
Its track invisible in the halflight
Along the Aisle of the Infamous
Barely stirs the dust in a mile-long room
— & follows a line of classic busts
Their lunatic features . . .
Each one imprisoning a different phase
Of madness & lust
All the emotions in the eclipse of reason

The beam moves on
As a crowd of molecules
In mimicry of human shape
Walking past the wretched statues
— & joins a whispered dialogue
Sharing their pattern of new/unheard languages
Jewelled & delicious as ejecta
Amid the memory circuits

Swiftly this interloper ray
Reads & records their precious syntax
Falling inward like nebulae
Heavy with unborn stars
Toward the center of all desire

The wire probes deep
Into these ghost-worlds of past lives
& disturbs the eternal convulse
Of the statues' molecular tortures
It checks each in turn for a certain animus
Sheathing I.D. daggers in
The empty eyes: hunting the terrible
Litany chiselled at their feet

Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note! Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should be sent to our editorial office: Amazing® Stories, P.O. Box 110, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

- Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price:

I LOVED Darrell Schweitzer's article about H. P. Lovecraft in your March 1987 issue! I was beginning to worry that I might be the only person who saw philosophy in horror stories. (I have been told that I'm a little eldritch. Of course, it's not true).

My favorite Lovecraft story is "The Music of Erich Zann." I can see how the view from Zann's window would inspire horror stories. However, speaking as a resident of the Rue d'Auseil, I believe Lovecraft didn't look out the window long enough.

Thank you for your time. Sincerely, Lois H. Radford 1974 McDade Farm Rd. Hephzibah GA 30815

Dear Sir:

In your March 1987 issue, Darrell Schweitzer is not quite correct, or is at least a trifle misleading, in saying that Lovecraft "never drank." Lovecraft never did under his own power, true. But at a party in New York on New Year's Eve, 1933-34, he was given a glass of ginger ale spiked with hard liquor, presumably whiskey. It greatly

livened him up so that he talked a streak, gesticulated, joked, and sang like a complete extravert. He apparently never learned what had befallen him.

Sincerely, L. Sprague de Camp 278 Hothorpe Lane Villanova PA 19085

Dear Mr. Price:

In his otherwise very kind comments on my novel Lovecraft's Book, Darrell Schweitzer questions my depiction of Lovecraft on two points. These are the matter of Lovecraft's drinking alcoholic beverages and the matter of his racial attitudes (or, as Mr. Schweitzer puts it, Lovecraft's "alleged racism").

It is widely believed that Lovecraft was a lifelong teetotaler. In researching the book, I received several reports to the effect that this impression is not altogether accurate. One of the sources was Alexander Laing himself. Unfortunately, Laing died before I could obtain verification from him of this report, so I'm willing to concede half a point here — I had my sources, but they were far from ironclad.

Lovecraft's racial attitudes constitute a far more serious matter, and here I'm afraid that Mr. Schweitzer has let his admiration for Lovecraft blind him to the unpleasant truth. For a clear picture of Lovecraft's racial and political attitudes, just read his stories, essays, and lectures on the subject. His five volumes of published letters, along with S. T. Joshi's invaluable index,

provide dozens of statements on the subjects of antisemitism ("... the city of New York is virtually lost to the national fabric through its tragic and all-pervasive Semitisation ..."), racism in general ("... the negro represents a vastly inferior biological variant ..."), the Nazis ("... one can't help respecting their intention ..."), and Adolf Hitler ("I'm damned if the poor chap isn't profoundly sincere and patriotic ... there is a great and pressing need behind every one of the planks of Hitlerism ...").

Please pardon my use of brief excerpts and "ellipsis journalism." Perhaps a full-length essay on the subject would be appropriate, but obviously the "Inflections" column of Amazing Stories is not the place for it. And I will gladly admit that Lovecraft's conduct was at variance with his expressed attitudes. In fact, he married a Jew (Sonia Greene), his literary agent was a Jew (Julius Schwartz), his close lifelong friend Samuel Loveman was a Jew, and any number of his other personal or literary chums were Jewish.

And toward the end of his life in 1937, Lovecraft had swung so far politically as to become an FDR/New Deal Democrat and at least to flirt with socialism!

But Lovecraft's Book takes place in the period 1926-28, when Lovecraft's racism and general right-wing sympathies were at their height.

With all the best, Richard A. Lupoff 3208 Claremont Avenue Berkeley CA 94705

Dear Pat,

I haven't read all of the May 1987 issue yet, but thus far I thought Shaver's "Fear the Light" was excellent, Cox's "The Homework Horror" was

fun, and I'm much taken with the art of Hank Jankus (particularly the "Raymond Chandler" painting). Alan Dean Foster's comments on the shuttle were well worth publishing, and I'd like to see you do more articles on contemporary issues in science and technology.

Best, Bruce Boston P.O. Box 6398 Albany CA 94706

Thanks for your input, Bruce, on the story selection of our May 1987 issue.

Concerning science-fact articles, we are interested in and hope to publish more articles on contemporary issues, especially those that are important to and can be understood by the Common Man. Often, much of what we get to review for our nonfiction section is more appropriate for a specific science journal than for a fiction magazine. We'll see what we can do.

- Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price:

You've won me over. I've never been a confirmed science-fiction fan, but I recently learned that you used poems as fillers, and in a sample copy I saw some poems I liked, so I subscribed.

When my first issue came (March 1987), I was thrilled by your statement that "literature should both entertain and instruct." That's long been my conviction, witness the two realistic novels and seventy poems from my pen which have been published.

Then I read Dr. F. Paul Wilson's story "Dat-Tay-Vao," that vivid picture of the Vietnam War, where Fatman grew from a selfish dope peddler to a miraculous healer and passed the power on before his death. If all other stories in this issue are as good as this one, it's a gem that I'll treasure through the rest of my days.

Admiringly, Frank Goodwyn 9709 Lorain Avenue Silver Spring MD 20901

Gee, we never aspired to a career as a TV evangelist, but after reading your letter about becoming a confirmed SF fan, we're having second thoughts. Seriously, though, we're glad you enjoyed the issue, but Amazing Stories is the tip of the proverbial iceberg — there's an immense mass to SF literature.

Good reading!

- Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

Thank you for continuing the good tradition of Mr. Scithers et al. I have been very appreciative of the caliber of material which you present. Please keep up the good work.

I do hope that you will expand the number of art pieces in each issue, and I would also hope that you would consider showcasing science-fiction artists in as many issues as possible. It would allow for an education of the public to the beauty of art. Also, I see it as an untapped resource of new material for the "readers."

Respectfully, Orpheus H. Allison P.O. Box 387 Mapleton ME 04757

We, too, enjoy the "On Exhibit" column, primarily because we've always marveled at an artist's talent. Though we have currently featured artists whose works appear regularly in Amazing Stories, we hope to showcase new SF artists as they make their appearance in the professional realm.

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. Also, feel free to respond to other issues — be they about writing, the SF and fantasy community, or the state of affairs in the world at large. We do value your opinions, though we may not agree with them. So, write us!

Till next issue.

- Patrick Lucien Price

SHE JUST WANTED TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE

My grandma was burned as a witch, for it seems she often would switch her mop for a broom, and off she would zoom — to cavort without wearing a stitch!



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