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# *Interzone*

NEW STORIES BY

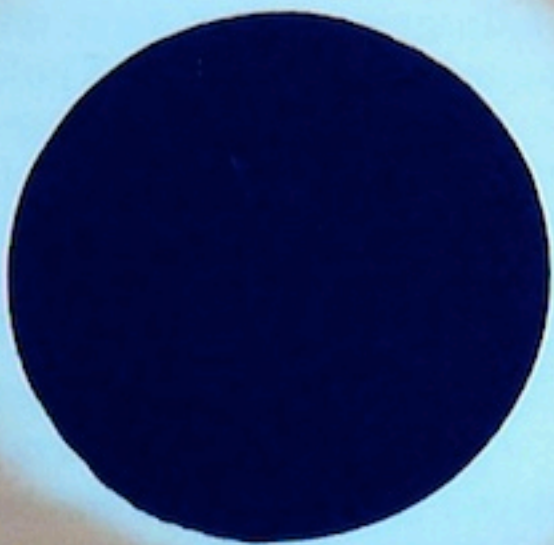
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# Interzone

## EDITORIAL

A ghost hovers over this magazine, a spirit from our collective past. Like all ghosts it has a stifling affect upon the living and must be laid to rest. Its name is *New Worlds*.

There can be few readers of *Interzone* who are not to some extent familiar with – or at least aware of – *New Worlds* and its history. For many years it was an entirely conventional science fiction magazine, though founder-editor John Carnell was adventurous enough to publish such unusual and demanding stories as J.G. Ballard's "The Terminal Beach". Then in 1964 Michael Moorcock took over, aided and later succeeded in the editor's chair by Charles Platt. Over the course of the 60 or so issues they produced the magazine became increasingly wide-ranging and innovative. Half-way through their reign, aided by an Arts Council grant, it switched from paperback size to a large format, which gave more scope for experiment. Imaginative art and graphics crowded its pages. Devastating polemic blasted the staid science fiction establishment. A host of new and original writers was loosed upon the world. Nothing has been the same since.

So, at least, runs the legend.

It is a story which today is told most assiduously by the generals who fought in the campaign – Messrs Moorcock and Platt – now retired respectively to Yorkshire and New York and firing off salvoes to this magazine, complaining crustily at the failure of the new generation to live up to their legendary exploits. They fondly remember the good old days of the "New Wave" in science fiction, when *New Worlds* was the undisputed flagship of the task force which sailed to liberate the Falklands of science fiction from the forces of fascist oppression. It's a familiar pattern – one can see its equivalent in the *Daily Telegraph* every day of the week – but it is nevertheless sad to see yesterday's iconoclasts so industriously mythologizing their own past.

The truth about *New Worlds* is rather more complex, if less flattering to the tale's protagonists. It would be churlish and ignorant iconoclasm on our own part to deny the liberating and sometimes heady ambience the magazine generated; it would be foolish not to recognise that we hold many similar ideas about what constitutes genuine imaginative writing. Nevertheless, when looked at dispassionately, its design was often a mess, its polemics were ultimately ineffectual, and its record in finding and developing new talent was not especially impressive. One of *New Worlds*'s most remarkable achievements, in fact, is that today it is remembered as being a much better magazine than in general it actually was. For the first third of Moorcock's reign it was surprisingly conventional, the polemical tone of its editorial matter hardly matched by its straightforward contents. The last third saw a gradual winding down into increasingly inconsequential offcuts of conventionally unconventional prose. In the middle period it was probably nearest to being the magazine Moorcock wanted. Writers such as Aldiss, Ballard and Disch were producing their best work; crisis and controversy were stimulating rather than debilitating. But even at its apex much of the memorable material consisted of novels which the magazine was given to serialise, rather than short fiction created expressly for it, and its leading names had made their reputations elsewhere.

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This issue is dedicated to Michael Moorcock, who said three Interzones was like three Shredded Wheat.

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# THE

# DISSEMBLER

GARRY KILWORTH

*"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ."*

Christian teachings still run thickly in my blood. My new religion, a mere two years old to me, is like an adopted child: dear because it is mine by choice, not accident. But, yet, like an adopted child it can never be truly part of me. It is a grafted branch, well-taken and, indeed, an extension of me, but not inherent. Thus, those phrases from my childhood learnings spring to mind more readily in crises, than do the new words, though I love the latter more. Those others were with me from birth, and now I am nearer to death than the beginnings of my life. I sometimes panic. Will I be ready? Will I be ready? Or will they scream "Dissembler!" in my wake as I try to gain entrance into a world I barely believe in?

"You must be Orget. I'm Jane Reece." I looked up from my newspaper to observe a tall, elegant blonde woman in a safari outfit. The clothes were obviously Zandra Rhodes. The woman inside them finished by a Swiss school.

"It's rude to stare, Mr Orget."

"I'm sorry. Please sit down." I placed the four-day old paper on the table before me and nodded to her companion, a thickset man with square, tan features. He was about two-thirds her height.

"You too, sir, whatever your name is."

"His name is Chota. He's a deaf mute," she replied for me, taking one of the rattan chairs. Chota followed her example. Around us coffee was being served in glasses the size of egg-cups. I signalled the Arab waiter. He saw my three fingers and gave the slightest of nods, not even turning his head. Through the glassless window behind my guests I could see the mountains of the Hadhramaut rippling in the heat waves. Before them, the dust-rock desert furrowed unevenly by deep wadis. Brown kite hawks created invisible whirlpools in the air above. I turned my attention back to my visitors.

"I expected you yesterday," I said, "and him not at all."

She stiffened, two red spots appearing on her high cheekbones. "Chota is here for a reason. It's nothing to do with protecting me, Mr Orget . . ."

"Ray."

". . . though he's quite capable of doing so. He's from Papua. A forest Indian."

"Well, you look as though you usually know what you're doing. Did you fly up from Aden? In the DC3?"

She nodded. "The one wallpapered inside with a rosepattern design." It was a serious remark.

"There is only one. Bit of a hairy ride, isn't it? I suspect the wallpaper is to hide the cracks in the fuselage . . . it gets a bit bumpy over the Radfan hills . . . the thermals. Tends to shake up the superstructure." I could see my frivolity was having very little effect and immediately abandoned it. "Let's talk about why you're here," I said.

The coffee had arrived accompanied by three glasses of water. The waiter placed them on the table. I paid him immediately, the coins clattering on the small, brass tray. Jane Reece was staring at the thick, black sludge in her coffee glass.

"I don't want this . . ."

"Then don't drink it, but we're in a coffee shop. It's paid for. Now, I understand you want me to find your husband for you. That's what the letter said."

Her blue eyes observed me coolly. I could see a strength in her face I was not used to in one of her class. Then, mentally, I reprimanded myself for my prejudice.

"I haven't heard of anyone called Reece in the Hadhramaut," I continued, "and I would have done so, if he were here. There's not that many whites in the area."

"His name is John Freeman. I didn't take his name when we married and he didn't ask me to."

I held up my hand as her mouth began tightening.

"Please. You needn't go into details. John Freeman I have heard of. He was at the Consulate in Sana'a,

wasn't he? Then he came down to the Hadhramaut last cool season. I understand he discharged himself from the diplomatic service . . ." The Papuan Indian momentarily distracted me by dipping his finger into his coffee. After licking it gingerly, he took another dip and grinned at me with small blunt teeth. I smiled back.

"Friendly guy. Is he a tracker? You'd have been better with a Yemeni or an Adeni. There aren't many jungles in South Arabia."

"I don't need your sarcasm, Orget, just your knowledge of the local geography. Chota has a special job to do and what it is, is my business, not yours. You won't *trick* me into revealing what he's here for. You'll know when I'm ready to tell you."

A hot breeze came in through the window and lifted a few wispy strands of her hair. She was wearing it tied up with a yellow bandana and I was about to say something banal like, "You look beautiful when you're calm," and then remembered in time that macho males had been out of fashion since Hemingway's heroes fell from grace, and in any case, I was too old and tired. Well, perhaps not too tired but it was a good excuse for not attempting something at which I was bound to fail.

"Fair enough Jane . . . Reece," I added. "We'll try and find you're husband for you. In my engineering days I drilled half the local desert looking for oil I never found. A man should be easy. At least he won't be hiding *underneath* the sand. Do you prefer horses or camels?"

"Horses."

"And a thousand wasn't it? Riyals, that is."

"It was seven hundred to look and three when we find him."

"If we find him."

"I didn't come all this way just to go home with my tail between my legs. We'll find him, one way or another."

"And when you do? What then?"

"That's where Chota comes in." And for the first time she smiled.

**W**e met the next day and arranged enough provisions at the village to last us several weeks. I explained to Jane Reece that I knew the general whereabouts of her husband and that his location would at least be confined to one of fifty places. "He's got to live near a well," I said.

"What about food?" she asked.

"If he's got money, that'll be no problem. Other well-users will sell him food as they pass through. And anyway, there's gazelle and small game." I began to check our own provisions. Sugar, tea, raisins, flour . . . We were going into the empty quarter from Shimab, where I would have to rely on reports from strangers. Hopefully Freeman would not take too long to track down. Then I could get back to my wife in Shimab. I had not told Jane Reece about my wife because, to use Jane Reece's own words, it was none of her damn business. We were ready to set off just before noon. The horses stood waiting nearby. I unrolled my mat, took out my beads and knelt in the direction of Mecca.

"What are you doing?" asked Jane Reece, in a voice that suggested I was about to take part in some revolting perversion.

"I'm about to say my prayers. I'm a Moslem."

"Oh."

"You don't have any objections to Islam, do you?"

"Plenty," she replied, "but I won't let them interfere with the expedition."

"The women?" I said.

"The women," she confirmed, "and the disgusting, barbaric practice of circumcision on small girls . . ."

"Islam is beautiful," I said, "it is people that are ugly." Then I ignored her and all about me to contemplate Allah, the One God, and the Prophet, peace be upon him. The strange thing was, as a young man I had never been particularly religious. It was a woman who had been responsible for my conversion. They would never have allowed me to marry her unless I was a Moslem. Once the rituals obtained a hold on one's soul however, they were difficult to shed. They were as addictive a drug as qāt grass, which I had also taken to, since settling in the Hadhramaut. I knew that Jane Reece considered me one of those peculiar whites who have 'gone native' but I was not going to explain my complicated reasons to her. What her Papuan shadow thought, I had no idea. The whole alien scene must have been totally bizarre to him, yet his impassive face registered nothing. He was probably storing all these wonders of humankind to mime before a camp fire in his native forests. (. . . And then this old whitey goes down on his knees and starts waving his arms at the sun, while the woman walks around him slapping the side of her boot with a short whip . . .)

The wind-blown dust and grit bit into our shins as we made our way among the foothills. Diurnal temperatures at sea level were around 150 Fahrenheit, nocturnal they were still over a hundred, yet when we went up into the mountains the waterbottles froze solid. Jane Reece had made no murmur of complaint since we had started out, three days before. She had seen black scorpions, sand-snakes and camel spiders as big as soup plates, but she just clenched her teeth and swatted at them with her crop. The privation in the empty quarter is not a pleasant experience and though she protected as much of her skin as she could, her milky complexion suffered under the harsh sun. I felt sorry for her but she would have hated me for it, so I kept my pity to myself.

**O**n the fourth night out, at the well of Jebel Rakmel, we made a fire and cooked a lizard I had caught. She chose it as the moment to begin telling me about her husband and why she was searching for him. The story made me sick with apprehension.

"My father has been in the diplomatic service since he left university in 1922 and there was no reason why John should not take advantage of that. I persuaded him to take a post that daddy found for him in Paris. John worked there quite happily, until he was sent to Singapore to negotiate on behalf of a Briton there who had been convicted of smuggling narcotics. They still hang people for drug dealing in Singapore. John failed to obtain clemency and had to witness the execution.

"When he arrived back in England he was very shaken. Shaken, I suppose, is an understatement . . . he was deeply disturbed and began to develop an obsession with death – especially with death by hanging. Books on capital punishment began to arrive

by post in batches. John would take these packages to his room and lock the door, spending hours at a time, presumably studying them. Of course, I was aware how unhealthy it was and contacted the family doctor but each time he called, John would either laugh it off or treat him brusquely. John's whole demeanour altered. From a fairly passive but optimistic personality he deteriorated into an intense, pessimistic individual. He became hollow-eyed and pale, and rejected any sort of approach by me which might interfere with his new 'interest'. Finally I broached him on his reasons for his passion with death. I told him I was jealous of anything that took up so much of his time and he agreed to talk about it.

"'I want to look over the edge,' he stated, enigmatically.

"'Over the edge of what?'

"'Death. I must see what's on the other side.' There was little excitement in his tone but there was an earnestness I had not witnessed in him before. We were in our bedroom at the time – I was preparing for bed and feigning interest in my appearance because I hoped it would encourage him to disclose more if I did not appear to be concentrating on him completely – and he paced up and down behind me as I sat at the mirror.

"'I believe,' he said, 'that if a man could take himself to the edge of death . . . yet still remain on this side, then he could observe the naked soul . . . supposing it exists.'

"To my credit, I did not call the doctor immediately. I allowed him to finish his explanation.

"'I've been reading about Newgate prison . . . about the triple tree – that was a sort of three-cornered gallows at Tyburn where they could hang nine people at a time. The hangman was always called Jack Ketch and he hung the criminals for at least half-an-hour before allowing them to be cut down. This was in the days before dropping the malefactors to break their necks. They were usually hauled up slowly from the back of a cart. Occasionally . . . just occasionally a man or woman would still be alive when friends cut them down.

"'One of these people, a man called Half-hanged Smith, recounted his feelings on being taken to the very point of death.' He picked up an open book, which rested on the floor on the side of the bed, and began to read.

"'When I was turned off (hung) I was sensible of very great pain, occasioned by the weight of my body, and felt my spirits in a strange commotion, violently pressing upwards. These, having forced their way to my head I saw, as it were, a great blaze or glaring light, which seemed to go out of my eyes with a flash – and then I lost all sense of pain. I saw my soul rising upwards into the ether . . . then I was cut down and began to come to myself, the soul returning, the blood and spirits forcing themselves into their former channels, put me, by a sort of pricking or shooting, to such intolerable pain that I could have wished those hanged who had cut me down.

"That night I told John he had to abandon his lunatic studies or I would have him committed to an asylum. He looked at me as if I had just betrayed him – a sort of hurt, bewildered expression – but, you understand Ray, I had to shock him out of it. I had to be blunt and

honest, not kind, and to prove it to him, I telephoned our doctor there and then to arrange an appointment with a psychiatrist. John just stared at me with that helpless expression still on his face. Then he stuttered something about being sorry, and, yes, he would get rid of the books the following morning. Naturally, I cancelled the doctor's appointment immediately. Afterwards we made love . . . as well as we've always done." She hesitated, then nodded, "I tell you that so you'll realise we were reconciled."

"What happened next?" I asked. Her eyes were glistening in the firelight. I think she was upset but her voice remained clear and even.

"Outwardly, he seemed to have put his obsession aside, but secretly he had applied for a post in the British Consulate in Sana'a . . . Ray, I'd like to ask you a direct question. Do you find me attractive, I mean, do I repel you in any way? Please answer honestly." I thought over the answer for a full two seconds.

"I think you're one of the most exciting women I've ever met." My answer was sincere.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

After she was asleep, I sat up and stared across the fire at our Papuan companion. He gazed back at me placidly.

"I wonder what a man who has witnessed his soul looks like?" I said softly. "Does his body blanch, to become white as an albino's? Does it become brittle, hard, like a diamond, with no feelings evident? What do you think, Chota?"

His broad face creased a fraction and there was the hint of a smile just below its surface.

"I think," I continued, "that a man who has seen his own soul, would have to be mad. I think that John Freeman is *already* mad. I think he is as cuckoo as an early spring. Crazy. Savvy?" I tapped the side of my head. Suddenly the smile was there, fully, and the two rows of small teeth shone white in the firelight. I nodded, returning the smile, then lay back and stared at the stars, wondering why, as I lived longer, I should be dragged deeper into this morass of strange human activity known as the 'search for the truth' by others of my kind. Around me I could hear the desert wind whispering dust into the dry shrubs: the insect world toiling amongst the shale. This was no Sahara, with high golden dunes adding majesty to an empty quarter: it was a rocky, grey volcanic area, as dirty and depressing as a disused railway yard. This was no place to search for the truth, to discover one's eternal soul. Something scuttled amongst the rocks. I murmured two suras memorised from the Koran, and then promptly fell asleep.

**I**n the arid wasteland there is not a great deal to occupy one's attention. The scenery is endless, formless and dull. Only our eyes were visible from beneath the swathes we wore to prevent the evaporation of our sweat and we allowed the horses to maintain a slow walking pace in order not to tire them. Only the wind offered any variation of elemental mood. The occupation of one's mind was dependent upon material fed into it around the evening camp fire. During the long days my imagination reconstructed the scaffolds of eighteenth century England, where the theft of single shillings was enough to ensure their constant usage. Jane Reece had read some of her

husband's books and she told me of men, women and children who went to the gallows dancing, crying, singing, shouting abuse, shivering in terror, silently dignified . . . every emotional display of which a human is capable. She told me of Jonathan Wild, the self-styled Thieftaker General, responsible for many such hangings, and who was himself finally 'turned off' by Jack Ketch. She told me of the 'Ballad of the Long Drop' that concludes: 'We dropped her, for we drop them straight, for love as well as hate'. These images haunted my waking hours as well as my dreams. I filled the void, the naked countryside of the empty quarter, with pictures from my head. There were trees springing out of every rock and from those trees swung corpses of various sizes and either sex. She made me a child again, with new nightmares and new dependencies.

For the next two weeks we travelled from well to well asking questions of strangers. I would exchange greetings with hill tribesmen, then ask them in Arabic if they had seen a crazy European, a mad Christian, in the vicinity. Are you of the Faith? they would ask suspiciously. When I confirmed I was, they said, "But aren't *all* Christians crazy?" After which I would get my information. Or not, as the case was.

We moved cautiously, for the hills were the haunt of lean, fierce nomads, not instantly hostile but easily provoked. In such harsh conditions hot tempers lived just below the surface and violence was a spontaneous, irrational and unpredictable reaction to minor irritations. "I am against my cousin," went the local saying, "but my cousin and I are against the stranger."

The two aspects of the journey which bothered Jane Reece the most was firstly not being able to wash herself or her clothes to the degree of cleanliness she considered acceptable, and secondly, my *affaire* with Islam. She would stamp around me impatiently during morning prayer and afterwards would remark derogatorily upon the intelligence level of devout, pious idiots that believed in magic. I tried to explain that, despite the bad publicity Islam had received over the last decade it was essentially a simple working-man's religion and providing one carried out the five main duties required of a follower, a place in Heaven was assured. Much of what she disliked about it did not stem from Islam itself but from the various cultural roots of countries in which it was practised. The only true religion was atheism, she said. Then, to underline her contempt, one morning she situated herself between my prayers and Mecca, stripped completely, squatted, and washed herself over a bowl as I did my Salaams. She made her point: she had destroyed my religious concentration with a carnal display. She was magnificently disdainful. The two-fingered iconoclast. She could sneer like no other woman I had ever met and it made her absolutely desirable.

Finally our search took us to a village by a small artesian well at the foot of the Sallala mountains. I made enquiries in the *sūk* and was informed that a man, a foreigner, was living in some caves about thirty minutes ride from the village. Although the conversation had been conducted in Arabic, Jane had caught the gist from the gestures.

"He's here, isn't he?"

"We don't know it's him. Let me go and see this man first. It might not be John."

She stared into my eyes. "Are you afraid of what condition you'll find him in? You must know my threshold by now. I'm difficult to shock." I looked away from her. Chota was squatting on the ground by a patch of dates that had been left to dry in the sun. He picked one up and crunched it between his teeth before spitting it back out with a look of distaste.

"Let me go first," I repeated. I wanted to meet John Freeman without Jane there to affect his personality. From her reports he sounded a weak man, with barely enough willpower to run away from stronger forces. But a personality is not immutable; it changes shape according to the influences to which it is subjected. John Freeman might well have been quite a strong character, outside of Jane's shadow.

"We'll go with you," she stated. "You can go in first if you think you're going to find him in horrible circumstances – but I'm sure he'll be all right. He's not the sort of man to mutilate himself. He doesn't like deformities."

"It's a cave, in the hills," I said, and we collected our horses from the boy who was watering them and rode off in the direction indicated by my informant in the *sūk*.

The caves looked as though they had all been inhabited at one time. Their entrances bore the marks of having been fashioned into doorways. There were about two dozen of them on a ledge several hundred feet up, accessible by a steep path. Behind them a range of dark red mountains flowed in petrified giant waves. We left the horses at the foot.

"Wait here," I ordered. One of the higher caves had a hessian curtain hanging over its entrance and I guessed this was the one we wanted. I pulled the hessian aside and entered.

The atmosphere in the cave was stifling. I could see little at first, the only light coming from a foul-smelling candle on a small rock shelf at the rear. Then, gradually I perceived some furniture: a chair and table, a raffia sprung bed, and right at the far end, as deep as the cave went into the rock face, a weird contraption of pulleys, ropes, beams and levers. At first glance it resembled one of those early wooden printing presses one sees in museums, except that it was too tall, much too tall, and there was a sinister import to the angles of the beams and the way the rope stretched tautly between them. The whole device appeared to be bolted into the rock wall for support.

I breathed deeply, trying to find some air that was not thick with the heavy, musty smell which filled the cave. There was a movement a few feet to my left and a man stepped out of a shadowy recess into the candlelight. We regarded one another without speaking for a few moments. He stood straight and lean, and wore a dark ragged beard, encouraged by long, unkempt hair. His eyes were deep in his face, but clear and bright. There was a strong line to his cheekbones and his shoulders were firm. From his physical stance, he did not look a weak man. His appearance implied confidence and assurance. I guessed he was weak only in comparison to his wife. Nor was there any indication that he was insane but I had yet to hear him speak.

"You like my machine?" he questioned in Arabic.

I nodded. "Ray Orget," I said, extending a hand. "I've been looking for you."

He started and then said, "My God, English? I thought you were an Arab." I looked down at my filthy and dust-grimed hands. Beneath the dirt and headcloth I could have been any nationality. I looked up again. "I've brought your wife. She's outside."

"Jane? Here?" Panic sprang into his eyes and he looked like a cornered wild creature about to bolt. Then he seemed to get control of himself and slumped down in the chair.

"I suppose she wants me to go with her," he said, gloomily.

"I've no idea what she wants. My instructions were to find you, that's all. What happens now is between you two."

"Between us two," he repeated, but there was more than a suggestion of irony in his tone.

"She's concerned for you . . . For your state of mind."

"I know, that's why I came here." He slammed a fist down on the table. "My God, is there nowhere I can go to escape her?" He stood up and waved his arms. "Up a mountain in Tibet? Down a trench in the Pacific Ocean? Where? Where can I go and not be found out? This is one of the most godforsaken, loneliest places on the Earth, and *still* she finds me."

"She's a very determined woman," I said stiffly. "And I might add, a very beautiful one."

He looked at me with a peculiar expression on his face, over his left shoulder, for a few moments, then shook his head. "No. You're probably too old, more's the pity. Yes, she is beautiful . . . and her determination

is part of that beauty. I once thought I could never live without her. I was right. I can't."

"But . . ." I indicated that he was here.

"This?" He let out a short, humourless laugh. "This is not living. Existing, yes, but not living."

"Your choice though."

"Yes, my choice. But it seems as though I do not have the freedom to choose. Okay," he said in a resigned voice, "tell her to come in. I'll talk to her."

Before I left I said, "Have you used that thing back there?"

"So she's told you about my . . . hobby? Several times. I had it constructed by a local carpenter. The wood wasn't easy or cheap to come by. However, it works well. It's me that doesn't function properly. I lack courage, Mr . . .?"

"Orget." Evidently he forgot names quickly.

". . . consequently, I always pull the releasing lever before time. *Time* is that moment when I can stare Death in the face, yet still turn around and walk away."

"So I understand."

"No, you don't understand. No-one does, but then I'm not looking for understanding. I don't give *that* . . ." He snapped his fingers. His voice was dry and crisp. "All I want is to be left alone to experiment. That's why the entrance is covered. The locals wander up here sometimes, out of curiosity. I can't discourage them physically . . . wouldn't want to. So I have to hide."

"You actually hang yourself."

"For a few seconds." He lifted his beard and I could see red weals around his neck. I must have winced because he laughed.



"Is it . . . painful?" Despite my abhorrence of his particular form of insanity, I was morbidly fascinated.

"Of course it is. It hurts like hell. But I can't think of any other method of doing it without leaving my body mutilated or my internal organs damaged. I have to do it, Mr Orget. Make no mistake about that. When you've seen a man hang, as I have, you'd know by his face that there is a point where the expression of pain changes to one of wonder . . . then the muscles slump into death. I have to reach that point. I have to. Before the man becomes the puppet. All our lives we live in the shadow of death. I must see what casts that shadow."

I took a long look at the bizarre contraption that reared like a giant praying mantis, throwing its own scaffold shadows over the cave wall, and inwardly shuddered. I could imagine the noise of creaking joints, the sound of stretching rope, as his body hung from the thick topbeam. What frightening, taut tripwires were there in my own brain waiting for a specific event to trigger them with a delicate psychological finger? That intricate device, the human mind, with its multiplicity of traumas, its complexities of disturbances, its fine networks of nerves, was my inheritance as well as his. Was it possible that one day I would want to witness my own psyche in ascendancy?

Freeman was studying my face with an expression I could only attribute to some ugly demon that swam in his spirit and rose occasionally to the surface.

"You want to see me use it," he said. It was not a question. He strode quickly to the machine, muttering, "Maybe with an audience . . .?" Before I could stop him he had stepped up onto a small platform and pulled a noose tight around his neck, taking up the slack on a wooden windlass.

"Freeman . . .!"

"Quiet!" he silenced me curtly. The platform flipped downwards with a snap that made me jump. The rope tightened and his face seemed to swell to twice its size, as if it were gorged with blood. His eyes grew wide and lost their natural lustre. In his right hand he grasped a short lever.

During the thirty seconds he hung before me, his limbs as limp as rags, I heard the candle sputtering away his life. In the fetid atmosphere of the cave I had the fancy that I could smell Death coming, creeping in like an evil insidious wind from the cracks in the rock walls, from beneath the ancient stones, to claim a deserter to its cause. Thirty seconds . . . thirty years. And all that time there was a sound coming from his mouth like a dog would make with a bone stuck in its throat. Then I heard the wooden ratchets slip and he fell the six inches to the floor, the windlass clacking and spinning on its axle. He had pressed the release lever. He groaned, squirmed for an instant, then reached up slowly to his throat to loosen the noose. I left the room quickly and returned to Jane Reece and her primitive Indian.

**"P**lease pay me my three hundred riyals. I want to go. He's in there, believe me."

"I believe you, Ray, but don't leave us now. We have to return . . ."

"What's Chota doing here?" I asked, bluntly.

"I think you've guessed that. John is a born failure. It doesn't lower his stature in my eyes because I can see other qualities in him that are just as important,

but it's a fact. I knew he would not be able to do the thing he wants to do . . . he hasn't, has he?"

"No. He hasn't," I said, quietly.

"I couldn't beat this obsession, so in order to save John, I made a decision to join it. In order to help him, I've brought Chota, who is an expert in death. John may not be able to bring himself to the point where life crosses death — but Chota can do it for him . . ."

My stomach turned at the thought of it. She was right, I had had a hunch what Chota was for, but to hear her expressing it coldly and, I suppose, logically, made me feel ill.

"The Papuan Indians torture their enemies," she explained, "by bringing them continually to the very edge of death, but never allowing them to slip over . . . if they did they would lose them and the whole point of the exercise is to make your enemy suffer. They use the garrotte, which I believe is similar enough to the hangman's noose to satisfy John's . . . requirements. If John refuses to come back with me to be treated, I shall allow Chota to . . . to give him what he wants. Hopefully his mind will then be scoured of the insanity that's trapped within it." She paused. "Will you wait?"

Like a fool I said, "Yes," but my mind was in a turmoil and she had more hold over me than she imagined. "I'll wait. Aren't you afraid that the cure might be more fatal than the disease?"

"Chota knows what to do and how to do it. I have complete faith in him. His tribe have been doing this sort of thing for centuries."

**T**hat night, I believe a man was taken to the edge of a cliff and looked down upon the rocks of Death below. Then the man turned and walked away. From my camp just below the cave I could hear the terrible sounds that accompanied the experiment above me. I did not know until later that he had had a companion as I tried to ignore the pattern of noises which attend a strangulation. A sequence that begins with a sharp "Kahhh" like a baby's cough; then the slow rattle of phlegm in an old man's throat; then, finally, a terrible silence. Silence can have a sound too, if the ears are pressed hard enough against its thin shell. Finally, I took my horse and rode away from them, down to the desert. I could not stand to listen any more, despite my promise to Jane Reece. I ran. My imagination was full of horrible scenes of people being hanged, pressed under blocks of stone, stretched out under a blazing sun with tight shrinking rawhide collars, crucified, cut in a thousand places, stretched on racks and wheels, keelhailed, immersed and near-drowned, sliced into ribbons . . . there were a thousand ways to bring someone to the point of death. The human mind has been remarkably inventive throughout history in finding them out. I slept feverishly that night, with pictures of blades, ropes, and engines of metal and wood spinning in my brain.

The next morning I was woken by a rough hand on my shoulder. I sat up quickly and found myself staring into the ravaged face of something that had once been human. Its features were as twisted and swollen as a gargoyle's, the beard and hair a shock of white. Red eyes glared from deep pits of pain. I shouted, knocking away the hand.

"It's me, Freeman." The voice was so cracked and inarticulate I hardly understood the words.



"Freeman?" I cried, wildly. "What . . .?" Then I remembered. The crippled figure crouched before me was fresh from the world of suffering and . . . death. "Did you . . .?"

"Yes! Yes! I saw." There was an inflexion in the tone. A rising note implying excitement. "You must sell me your horse. Only, I have no money. Please! I'll send the money to you. Where do you live? No, I'll send it to Aden. You can collect it there. Please. The animal."

"Take it," I said. "And water. You'll need water. Is she following?"

"Not yet." He began removing the mare's hobble with inept, trembling fingers. I sprang up and helped him. Then I had to lift him into the saddle.

"Where will you go?"

"Anywhere," he replied. "I must get away. I must go." There was an urgency behind the words which disturbed me. I grasped his ankle.

"Before you leave, what happened? What did you see?" I was eager to know what scenes his madness conjured for him under duress.

"Death. I saw death." There was a thin line of saliva running from the corner of his mouth and I wondered whether I had done the right thing in giving him the horse. In one night his hair had lost its colour and he had assumed the appearance of an old man, wracked with arthritis.

"What did it look like?"

His eyes were damp. "Pain. I never felt such pain before – not physical suffering but an emotional, spiritual hurt, my very self was torn out of the flesh by which it was held so fast. I was forcefully wrenched away from life – a psychic experience which, dear God, I will have to go through at least once more, but next time I shall make sure it's quick – a bullet in the brain, a fall from a high place . . ." He gripped my shoulder and pulled me closer to him. "Imagine your veins being stripped from your body or your skin peeled away from your face, eyes, limbs . . . it was like that, only not flesh from flesh, but spirit away from body.

"Then after a long time – so very long – there came a single moment of peace and I was looking into the dark kingdom of Death. It was like . . . staring into a deep, black mirror . . . eternity dropping away before me, not beautiful but awesome, terrible in its promise of the everlasting . . . then the soul, reflected on the surface of death.

"Listen!" He leaned down, conspiratorially, to whisper hoarsely in my ear. "A man and a woman, when they love . . . when they live together, they begin to merge . . . their personalities. You understand?"

"I . . ."

"Yes. Their egos, their souls eventually mingle . . . become one, a single entity. I saw my soul . . . our soul, Jane's, mine. Together. One. A single spirit. You see, she joined me. We did it together but she . . . there was only one. One soul between us."

"She joined you?" I repeated, shocked. "You mean, that Indian, Chota, took you both near to death?"

"Yes! Yes!" He jerked upright in the saddle, his long white hair flying wild in the dawn air. "She said if I wanted it so badly, if I could not be deterred, then she was going to experience it with me. She has

courage, you see, more than I have . . . yet, oh God!"

"What? Is she dead? Did Chota go too far?"

"No. No that . . . the soul. The single spirit. It was all her. There was nothing left of me." With that he gave a sobbing sound and spurred the horse forward.

I stood watching him ride away into the hills, the dust rising around him like morning mist. My body felt numb. This madman . . . this madwoman. They had entered my life and shattered my peace of mind. I was a Sunni Moslem, my life running according to His plan. Kismet. I followed and was led, and had no need to torture myself with right and wrong paths. I did what was expected of me and my eventual reward would have been assured. I had even steered myself away from Shia Moslems and their fanatical, political approach to the Faith because I did not want my life to reflect the disturbances created by that sect. Now these dissemblers, these ugly pursuers of death in life had crumpled my calm, had destroyed my peace. One of them wore the mask of the curious, the inquisitive, yet all he craved was escape to another place and time, where he would be beyond reach. The other was clothed in good intentions, yet underneath was a naked lust for power, of one individual over another. Now I, too, was a hypocrite, merely wearing the cloak, the guise, of a devout man, which I would gladly have discarded if . . .

*. . . through the valley of the shadow – I will fear no evil.*

Of course, it is not evil I fear but death itself. If my soul belonged to Jane Reece, were Jane Reece, completely, entirely, then I would have no fear. For John Freeman, death will now be oblivion, for he will not exist except as her and she exists only as herself. He will die and then . . . nothing. No gentle love, no loathsome hate, no indescribable peace, but more important . . . no harrowing, ugly fears.

Sometime later she came riding into my camp. Her beauty was still evident but it was warped by a new knowledge. She was not physically bent and twisted like Freeman, though there were unsightly scars on her wrists and throat. Her eyes were wide and there was a triumphant ring to her voice.

"He's been here. Did he take your horse?"

"Yes. What are you going to do now?"

"Follow him, of course."

I shook my head. "I won't come with you. For God's sakes, leave the man alone. Why hound him?"

She gave me a puzzled frown, then a small, tight-lipped smile. I knew why. And the knowledge, evident on my face, in my gestures, left me vulnerable to her contempt. Then she was gone, following the tracks he had left. I watched her arrogant pose as she rode high in the saddle, galloping her mount down the dark grey valley. I was sure I felt only pity for her prey. Not envy. It had to be pity.

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# OVERTURE FOR 'A MIDSUMMER NIGHTS DREAM'



ANGELA CARTER



all me the Golden Herm."

My mother bore me in the Southern wild but "she, being mortal, of that boy did die", as my Aunt Titania says, though "boy" in the circs. is pushing it, a bit, she's censoring me, there, she's rendering me unambiguous to get the casting director out of a quandary, since "boy" is correct, as far as it goes... but, insufficient. Yes, insufficient. Nor is my sweet South in the least wild, oh, never; it is the lovely land where the lemon trees grow multiplied by two, or three, or four; child of the sun am I, and of the breezes, juicy as mangoes, that mythopoeically caress the Coast of Coramandel, far away on the porphyry and lapis lazuli Indian shore where everything is brilliant and precise as on a lacquer screen.

My Aunt Titania. Not, I should tell you now, my natural aunt. No blood bond, there, but my mother's best friend to whom, before she departed, she entrusted me, and therefore always called by me, "auntie".

Titania, she, the great, fat, showy, pink and blonde thing, the Memsahib, I call her, Auntie Tit-tit-tit-tania (for her tits are the things you notice first, size of barrage balloons), Tit-tit-tit-omania boxed me up in a trunk she bought from the Army and Navy stores, labelled it "Wanted on Voyage" (yes, indeed) and shipped me here.

Here! – to *atishoo!* – catch my death of cold in this dripping bastard wood. Rain, rain, rain, rain, rain!

"Flaming June," the sarcastic fairies mutter, looking glum, as well they might, poor dears, their little wings all sodden and plastered to their backs, so waterlogged they can hardly take off and, no sooner airborne, than they founder in the pelting downpour, crash-land among the plashy bracken furls amid much piteous

squeaking. "Never such weather," complain the fairies, amid the brakes of roses putting on – I must admit – a brave if pastel-coloured floral show amidst the inclemency of the weather, and the flat dishes of the pale wild roses spill over with the raindrops that have collected upon them as the bushes shudder in the reverberations of dozens and dozens of teeny tiny sneezes, for no place on their weeny anatomies to store a handkerchief and all the fairies have got shocking colds as well as I.

Nothing in my princely, exquisite, peacock-jewelled heredity prepared me for the dank, grey, English midsummer. A midsummer nightmare, I call it. The whirling winds have wrenched the limbs off even the hugest oaks and brought down altogether the more tottery elms so that they sprawl like collapsed drunks athwart dishevelled fairy rings. Thunder, lightning, and, at night, the blazing stars whizz and bomb the wood... nothing temperate about your temperate climate, dear, I snap at Aunt Titania but she blames it all on Uncle Oberon, whose huff expresses itself in thunder and he makes it rain when he abuses himself, which it seems he must do all the time, thinking of me the while, no doubt. Of me!

For Oberon is passing fell and wrath  
Because that she, as her attendant hath  
A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;  
She never had so sweet a changeling:  
And jealous Oberon would have the child!

Misinformation. "Boy", again, see; which isn't the half of it. Furthermore, the patriarchal version for it was all between my mother and my auntie, wasn't it. That is the truth.

Besides, is a child to be given? Or taken? Or stolen? Or sold into bondage, for that matter? Are these blonde fairies the agents of proto-colonialism, in the last analysis, dammit?

In the face of all this, in order to preserve my com-

plicated integrity, I present a facade of passive opposition.

I am here.

I am.

I am Herm, short for *hermaphroditus verus*, one testis, one ovary, half of each but all complete and more, much more, than the sum of my parts. This elegantly retractable appendage, here... is not the tri-bade's well-developed clit, but the veritable male reproductive article, while the velvet-lipped and deliciously closeable aperture below it is, I assure you, a viable avenue of the other gender. So there.

Take a look. I'm not shy. Impressive, huh?

And I am called, the Golden Herm, for I am gold all over; when I was born, wee, tiny, playful cherubs filled their cheeks and lungs and blew, blew the papery sheets of beaten gold all over my infant limbs, to which they stuck and clung. See me shine!

And here I stand, under the dripping trees, in the long, rank, soaking grass among draggletail dog-daisies and the branched candelabra of the buttercups from whom the gusty rain has knocked off all the petals, leaving their warty green heads bald. And the bloody crane's bill. And the stinging nettles, those Portuguese men o' war of the woodland, who gave me so many nasty shocks when I first met them. And peaseblossom and mustard-seed and innumerable unknown-to-me weeds, the dreary, washed-out pinks, yellow and Cambridge blues of them. Boring. In the underpinings of the trees, all soggy and floral as William Morris wallpaper in an abandoned house, I, in order to retain my equilibrium and psychic balance, meditate in the yogic posture known as The Tree, that is, on one leg.

Bearer of both arrow and target, wound and bow, spoon and porringer, in my left hand I hold a lotus, looking a bit the worse for wear by now. My snake coils round my other arm.

I am golden, stark naked and bi-partite.

On my golden face, a fixed, archaic grin. Except when –

*Atishoo!*

Damn' occidental common cold virus.

*Atishoo.*

**T**he Golden Herm stood in the green wood.

This wood is, of course, nowhere near Athens; the original script is a positive mine of false leads. The wood is really located somewhere in the English midlands, possibly near Bletchley, where the great decoding machine was sited. Correction: this wood was located in the English midlands until oak, ash and thorn were all chopped down to make a motorway. However, since the wood existed only as a structure of the imagination, in the first place, it will remain, in the second place, as a green, decorative margin to the eternity promised by the poet. The English poet. It is, essentially, an English wood. It is *the* English wood.

The English wood is nothing like the dark, necromantic forest in which the Northern European imagination begins and ends, where its dead and witches live and Baba-yaga stalks about in her house with chicken's feet, looking for children in order to eat them. No. There is a qualitative, not a quantitative difference between this wood and that forest, over

and above the fact that a wood contains fewer trees than a forest and covers less ground, although those are some of the causes of the difference, yet they do not explain the effects.

For example, an English wood, however marvelous, however metamorphic, cannot, by definition, be trackless, although it might well be formidably labyrinthine – a maze. Yet there is always a way out of a maze, and, even if you cannot find it for a while, you know that it is there. A maze is a construct of the human mind, and not unlike it; lost in a wood, this analogy will always console. But to be lost in a forest is to be lost to *this* world, to be abandoned by the light, to lose yourself utterly with no guarantee you will either find yourself or else be found, to be committed against your will – or, worse, of your own desire – to a perpetual absence from humanity, an existential catastrophe, for the forest is as infinitely boundless as the human heart.

But the wood, ah! the wood, now, is finite; you purposely mislay the way in the wood, for the sheer pleasure of roving; the temporary confusion of direction is in the nature of a holiday, from which you will come home refreshed, with your pockets full of nuts and berries, wild flowers or the cast feather of a bird in your cap. That forest is haunted; this wood is enchanted.

The very perils of the wood are, in fact, only so many audio-visual aids to a pleasurable titillation of mild fear; the swift rattle of an ascending pheasant, soft drop of an owl, red glide of a fox, these may "give you a fright" but, here, neither hobgoblin nor foul fiend can daunt your spirit because the English lobs and hobs reflect nothing more than a secular faith in the absence of harm in nature, part of the credit sheet of a temperate climate (hear that, Herm?) and, since the last English wolf was killed, there is nothing savage among the trees to terrify you. All is mellow in the filtered light, where Robin Wood, the fertility spirit, lurks in the green shade; this wood is kind to lovers.

Indeed, you might call the wood the common garden of the village, a garden almost as intentionally wild as one of Bacon's "natural wildernesses", where every toad carries a jewel in its head and all the flowers have pet names, nothing is unknown – this kind of wildness is not an otherness.

And always something to eat! Mother Nature's greengrocery store; sorrel for soup, mushrooms, dandelion and chickweed salads, mint and thyme for seasoning, wild strawberries and blackberries for dessert and, in the autumn, a plenitude of nuts. Nebuchadnezzar, in the English wood, need not have confined his appetite to grass.

The English wood, then, offers us a glimpse of a green, unfallen world a little closer to Paradise than we are.

**S**uch is the English wood in which we see the poet's fairies, blundering figures, rude mechanicals; this is the Shakespearian wood of nineteenth century nostalgia, which disinfected from the supernaturals all their nasty atavism until they look exactly as they do in those photographs of fairy folk that so enraptured Conan Doyle.

Enter these enchanted woods.

However, as it turned out, the Victorians did not

leave the woods in quite the state they might have wished to find them.

**T**he Puck was obsessively fascinated by the exotic visitor. In some respects, it was the attraction of opposites, for, whereas the Golden Herm was s-m-o-o-th, the Puck was hairy; on these chill nights of summer, Puck was the only one kept warm at all inside his hairy pelt. Hairy. Shaggy. Especially about the thighs. (And, h'm, on the palms of his hands.)

Shaggy as a Shetland pony when naked and sometimes goes on all fours. When he goes on all fours, he whinnies; or else he barks.

He is the lob, the lubbar fiend, and sometimes he plays at being the nut-brown house-sprite for whom a bowl of milk is left outside the door, although, if you want to be rid of him, you must leave him a pair of trousers; he thinks the gift of trousers is an insult to his sex, of which he is most proud. Nesting in his luxuriant pubic curls, that gleam with the deep-fried gloss of the woodcarvings of Grinling Gibbons, see his testicles, wrinkled ripe as medlars.

Puck loves hokey-pokey and peek-a-boo; he has relations all over the place – in Iceland, the *puki*; the Devonshire *pixy*; the *spook* of the Low Countries are all his next of kin and not one of them up to any good. That Puck!

The tender little exiguities that cluster round the Queen of the Fairies do not like to play with the Puck because he is so rough and rips their painted wings in games of tag and pulls the phantasmal legs off the grey gnats that draw Titania's wee coach through the air, kisses the girls and makes them cry, creeps up and swings between the puce, ithyphallic foxglove spires above Titania's bed so the raindrops fall and scatter in a drenching shower and up she wakes. Spiteful!

Puck is no more polymorphously perverse than any of the rest of these sub-microscopic particles, his peers, yet there is something peculiarly rancid and offensive about his buggery and his undinism and his frotteurism and his scopophilia and his – indeed, my very paper would *blush*, go pink as an invoice, should I write down upon it some of the things Puck gets up to down in the reeds by the river, since he is distantly related to the great bad god Pan and, when in the mood, behaves in indeed an Athenian manner uncommon in an English wood, although familiar in the English public school.

By the Puck's phallic orientation, you know him for a creature of King Oberon's.

Hairy Puck fell in love with Golden Herm and often came to frolic round the lovely living statue in the moonlit glade, although he could not, happily for the Herm, get near enough to touch because Titania forethoughtfully had thrown a magical *cordon sanitaire* round her lovely adoptive so that s/he was, as it were, in an invisible glass case, such as s/he might find herself, some centuries later, in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Against this transparent, intangible barrier, the Puck often flattened still further his already snub nose.

The Herm removed his/her left foot from its snug nest in her/his crotch and placed it on the ground. With one single, fluent, gracile movement of transition, s/he shifted on to the *other* leg. The lotus and the snake, on either arm, stayed where they were.

The Puck, pressed against Titania's magic, sighed heavily, stepped back a few paces and began to energetically play with himself.

Have you seen fairy sperm? We mortals call it, cuckoo spit.

**A**nd no passing, clayey mortal trampling through the wood on its great, heavy feet, scattering the fairies who twitter inaudibly as bats in their fright – just as such a mortal would not hear the fairies, so he would never spot the unafraid Herm, sticking stock still as a trance.

And if you *did* chance to spy him/her, you would think the little yellow idol was a talisman dropped from a gypsy pocket, perhaps, or a charm fallen off a girl's bracelet, or else the gift from inside a very expensive pornographic cracker.

Yet, if you picked up the beautiful object and held it on the palm of your hand, you would feel how warm it was, as if somebody had been holding it tight before you came and only just put it down.

And, if you watched long enough, you would see the golden sequins of the eyelids move.

At which a wind of strangeness would rise up and blow away the wood and all within it.

**J**ust as your shadow can grow big and then shrink to almost nothing and then swell back up, again, so can these shadows, these insubstantial bubbles of the earth, these "beings" to whom the verb, "to be" may not properly be applied, since, in our sense, they are not. They *cannot* be; cannot, themselves, cast shadows, for who has seen the shadow of a shadow? Their existences necessarily moot – do you believe in fairies? Their lives lead always just teasingly almost out of the corners of the eyes of their observers, so it is possible they were only, all the time, a trick of the light... such half-being, with such a lack of public acknowledgement, is not conducive to any kind of visual consistency among them. So they may take what shapes they please.

The Puck can turn himself into anything he likes; a three-legged stool, in order to perpetrate the celebrated trick ("Then slip I from her bum, down topples she") so beloved in the lower forms of grammar schools when the play is read aloud round the class because it is suitable for children since it is about fairies; a baby Fiat; a grand piano – anything!

Except the lover of the Golden Herm.

In his spare moments, when he was not off about his Master's various businesses, the Puck, wistfully lingering outside the Herm's magic circle like an urchin outside a candy shop, concluded that, in order to take full advantage of the sexual facilities offered him by the Herm, should the barrier between them ever be broken – and the Puck's motto was, "Be prepared" – if there was to be intercourse between himself and the Herm, then the Herm's partner would require a similar set of equipment to the Herm in order to effect maximally satisfactory congress.

The Puck further concluded that the equipment of the Herm's hypothetical partner would need, however, to be attached in reverse order to that of the Herm, in order to procure a perfect fit and no fumbling; the Puck, a constant inquisitive spy on mortal couples come to the wood to make the beast with two backs in what they mistakenly considered privacy, had noticed

there is a vexed question of handedness about caresses, that all right-handed lovers truly require left-handed partners during the preliminaries to the act, and Mother Nature, when she cast the human mould, took no account of foreplay, which alone distinguishes us from the beasts when we are being beastly.

Try, try as he might, try and try again, the Puck could not get it quite right, although, after strenuous effort, he at last succeeded in turning himself into a perfect simulacrum of the Herm and would, at odd moments, adopt the Herm's form and posture and stand facing him in the wood, a living mirror of the living statue, except for the fierce erection the satyromaniac Puck would not subdue when in the presence of his love.

The Herm continued to smile inscrutably, except when he sneezed.

**B**ut all of them can grow big! then shrink down to... the size of dots, of less than dots, again. Every last one of them is of such elastic since incorporeal substance. Consider the Queen of the Fairies.

Her very name Titania, bears witness to her descent from the giant race of Titans; and "descend" might seem apt enough, at first, to describe the declension when she manifests herself under her alias, Mab, or, in Wales, Mabh, and rules over the other diminutives herself the size of the solitaire in an engagement ring, as infinitely little as her forebears were infinitely large.

**"N**ow, I do call my horned master, the Horn of Plenty; but, as for my missus —" said the Puck, in his inimitable Worcestershire drawl.

**B**ut, like a Japanese water-flower dropped in a glass of water, Titania expands.

**I**n the dewy wood tinselled with bewildering moonlight, the bumbling, tumbling babies of the faery crèche trip over the hem of her dress, which is no more nor less than the margin of the wood itself; they stumble in the tangled grass as they play with the coneys, the quick brown fox-cubs, the russet field mice and the wee scraps of grey voles, blind velvet moles and striped brock with his questing snout — all the denizens of the woodland are her embroiderings, and the birds that flutter round her head, settle on her shoulders and make their nests in her great abundance of disordered hair, in which are plaited poppies and the ears of wheat.

The arrival of the Queen is announced by no fanfare of trumpets but the ash-soft lullaby of wood doves and the liquid coloratura blackbird. Moonlight falls like milk upon her naked breasts.

She is like a double bed; or, a table laid for a wedding breakfast; or, a fertility clinic.

In her eyes are babies. When she looks at you, you helplessly reduplicate. Her eyes provoke engendering.

Correction: used to provoke.

But that was last year, not *this* year. Frosts have blasted the fruit blossom, rain has rotted all the corn so her garland is not gold but greenish and phosphorescent with blight. The acres of the rye have been invaded with ergot and, this year, eating bread will make you mad. The floods broke down the Bridge of Ware. The beasts refuse to couple; the cows refuse the bull; and the bull keeps himself to himself. Even the goats, hitherto synonymous with lechery, prefer to



curl up with a good book. The very worms no longer agitate the humus where they used to writhe in blind love. In the wood, a chaste, conventual calm reigns over everything, as if foul weather had put everybody off.

The wonderful giantess manifested herself with an owl on her shoulder and an apronful of roses and of babies so rosy the children could scarcely be distinguished from the flowers. She picked up the child of her defunct friend. The Herm stood on one leg on the palm of Titania's hand and smiled the inscrutable, if manic, smile of the figures in Hindu erotic sculpture.

"My husband shall not have you!" cried Titania. "He shan't! I shall keep you!"

At that, thunder crashed, the heavens, which, for a brief moment, had sealed themselves up, now reopened again with redoubled fury and all the drenched babies bundled in Titania's pinafore began to cough and sneeze; the worms in the rosebuds woke up at the clamour and commenced to gnaw.

But the Queen stowed the tiny Herm safe away between her breasts as if s/he were a locket and commenced to diminish until she was a suitable size to enjoy her niece or nephew or nephew/niece à choix in the obscurity of an acorn-cup.

"She cannot put horns on her husband, for he is antlered, already," opined the Puck, changing back into himself and skipping across the glade to the heels of his master. For no roe-buck now raises its head behind that gorse bush to watch these goings-on; Oberon is antlered like a ten-point stag.

**A**mong the props of the Globe Theatre, along with the thunder-making machine and the bearskins, is listed a "robe for to go invisible". By his coat you understand that Oberon is to remain unseen as he broods magisterial but impotent above the scarcely discernible quiverings among last year's oak leaves that conceal his wife and the golden bone of contention that has come between these elemental lovers.

High in the thick of a dripping hedge of honeysuckle, a wee creature was extracting a tritonic, numinous, luxuriantly perfumed melody from the panpipes of the wild woodbine. The tune broke off as the player convulsed with ugly coughing. He gobbled phlegm, that flew through the air until its trajectory was interrupted by a cowslip, to whose freckled ear the translucent postule clung. The infinitesimal then took up his tootling again.

**T**he Herm's skin is made of beaten gold but the flesh beneath it has been marinated in: red chili, yellow turmeric, cloves, coriander, cumin, fenu-greek, ginger, mace, nutmeg, allspice, cous-cous, garlic, tamarind, coconut, candlenut, lemon grass, galangel and now and then you get – phew! – a whiff of asafoetida. Hot stuff! Were the Herm to be served piled up on a lordly platter and garnished with shreds of its own outer casing, s/he would then resemble that royal dish, *moglai biriani*, which is decorated with edible gold shavings in order, so they say, to aid digestion; but, since the Herm is vegetarian, s/he would never be able to taste himself. Yet nothing so deliciously aromatic as the Herm has ever been scented before in England's green and pleasant land, where, at this historical period, boiled cabbage and bacon is the staple fare. S/he is hot; and sweet, as if drenched

in honey, but Oberon is the colour of ashes.

The Puck, tormented for lack of Herm, pulled up a mandrake and sank his prodigious tool in the cleft of the reluctant root, which shrieked mournfully but to no avail as old shaggy-lugs had his way with it.

Distemperate weather. It's raining, it's pouring; the earth is in estrangement from itself, the withered buds tumble out of the Queen's apron and rot on the mulch, for Oberon has put a stop to reproduction. But still Titania hugs the Herm to her shrivelling bosoms and will not let her husband have the wee thing, not even for one minute; did she not give a sacred promise to a friend?

What does the Herm want?

The Herm wants to know what "want" means.

"I am unfamiliar with the concept of desire. I am the unique and perfect, paradigmatic Hermaphrodite, provoking on all sides desire yet myself transcendent, the unmoved mover, the still eye of the tempest, exemplary and self-sufficient, the beginning and the end."

Titania, despairing of the Herm's male aspect, inserted a tentative forefinger in the female orifice. The Herm felt bored.

**O**beron watched the oak leaves quiver and said nothing, choked as he was with balked longing for the golden, half and halfy thing with its salivatory perfume. He took off his invisible disguise and made himself gigantic and bulked up in the night sky over the wood, arms akimbo, blotting out the moon to menace his wife, he wearing nothing but his buskins and his great codpiece; the mossy antlers on his forehead aren't the half of it, he wears a crown made out of yellowish vertebrae of small mammals, down from beneath which his black hair drops straight as light. Since he is in his malign aspect, he has put on, furthermore, a necklace of suggestively little skulls, which might be those of babies he has plucked from human cradles. Do not forget the Germans call him Erl-king.

His face, breast and thighs he has daubed with charcoal; Oberon, lord of the grave silence of endless night, Lord of Plutonic dark. His long hair never saw scissors but he has this peculiarity – no hair at all on either chop or chin, nor his shins, neither, but all his face bald as an egg, except for his eyebrows, that meet in the middle.

Who in their right minds would trust a child to him?

When Oberon cheers up, a bit, he lets the sun come out and then he'll hang little silver bells along his codpiece and they go jingle jangle jingle when he walks up and down and round about, the pretty chinking sounds hang in the air wriggling like homunculi.

And if these are not the creatures of the dream, then surely you have forgotten your own dreams.

**T**he Puck, too, yearning and thwarted as he was, found himself helplessly turning himself into the thing he longed for, and, under the faintly twitching oak leaves, became yellow, metallic, double-sexed and extravagantly precious-looking. There the Puck stood, on one leg, the living image of the Herm, and glittered.

When Oberon caught sight of that, he stooped down,

picked up Puck and stood him, a simulated yogic Tree, on his palm. A misty look came into Oberon's eye. The Puck knew he had no option but to go through with it.

**A**tishoo!  
Titania wiped the Herm's nose with the edge of her petticoat, on which the flowers are all drooping and shedding embroidery stitches, the fruits are cankering and spotting and unravelling, for, if Oberon is the Horn of Plenty, then Titania is the Cauldron of Generation and, unless he gives her a stir, now and then, with his great pot stick, the cauldron will go off the boil.

Nothing doing, said the Herm.

Lie close and sleep, said Titania to the Herm. My fays shall lullaby you as we cuddle up on my mattress of dandelion down.

The dragged fairies obediently started in on a chorus of: "Ye spotted snakes with double tongue", but were all so afflicted by coughing and sneezing and rawness of the throat and rheumy eyes and gasping for breath and all the other symptoms of rampant influenza that their hoarse voices petered out before they reached the bit about the newts and after that the only sound in the entire wood was the pit-pattering of the rain on the leaves.

The orchestra has laid down its instruments. The curtain rises. The play begins.

*Angela Carter is the first author to appear twice in Interzone. The stories published here form part of a wider series which will eventually be collected into a book.*



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# NO COWARD SOUL

Josephine  
Saxton

I am standing in the centre of a howling desert storm, metallic grains tearing as if to strip me to the bone. I can find little air to breathe and that is full of poisonous gases. My lungs burn, my senses turn in on themselves like struck snakes, whipping back at me for subjecting them to such awful terrors. But I am on a quest and shall persist in the face of everything. I am stronger than I have ever been, my powers of concentration and my determination will carry me through. I come here seeking powers that no human being has yet had, and I must not fail. Like a knight in ancient times I must run the gauntlet, I must be fearless.

If only my limbs would behave properly; they thrust themselves against my control, grotesquely so that I laugh. It must be the atmosphere in this dreadful land, this frightful country on the deserted planet of Amygdalanea.

Everything here is designed to trap the traveller. I am deceived by strange visions, tortured by horrible thirst and hungers, by sexual desires which I feel will drive me insane but which sweep away as suddenly as they took me, leaving me mercifully drained and as dry as an old dying woman. I go forward, dragging myself through the tempest, wary of the ground which has hidden quicksands, unseen steps, rocks which seem to move into my path as if with intent to trip me, hurt me. Everything here is hostile. Everything is against my plan, but I shall win.

Nadine prepares everything very carefully as she has trained herself to do. The room is entirely sterile. In the corner is an ozone-ioniser quietly aiding continual purification. This entire project is a work of art. The carefully placed automatic film cameras will record every stage, for she wishes to exhibit the process as well as the result. She has written notes of all her intentions. It is only a matter of checking and double-checking; taking everything a step at a time. She has taken the appropriate light-

hypnotic drugs, her hair is very short and washed with alcohol, she has administered local anaesthetic. The mirrors are all in place so that she can see exactly what she is doing, magnifying glasses are to hand, and the carefully tailored arm rests are covered in sterilised cloths. She lowers herself into the specially constructed couch, placing her head on the moulded pad. She is an expert with fibreglass and resin and made the couch herself. All the instruments are sharp. The telephone is silenced, the door is locked.

"So now, Nadine, you can begin," she says aloud.

She takes a scalpel and with great care makes an incision in the image in the mirror. It is the top of her own head. When the flaps are laid back all neatly clipped and the area cleared of blood, she takes a tiny circular saw, adapted from a dentist's drill, and cuts a large area out of her skull, lifting the object which resembles something found on a beach, and laying it in a steel dish. The look of it amuses her. The only discomfort so far was the noise of the saw which she hates; the whining sets her teeth on edge but that is over. As she takes the first fine probe from the stepped-down electrical rack she has to calm herself. It is very exciting.

This is the culmination of three years of secret work. Autosurgery is not unknown in the world of art, but this will be the most sophisticated project to date. She has spent a lot of time practising and researching, picking up knowledge from medical friends, reading, and performing similar operations on dogs and cats. She knows the process by heart. There are important differences between animal brains and her own but basically everything is the same, and she is perfectly familiar with human models. First of all, it is a matter of bypassing certain areas of this delightful grey matter, to reach a deeply seated spot.

There were figures approaching. This was to be the first confrontation.

"Say who you are!" a loud voice demanded.



She prepared to present herself with dignity. A lot would depend upon what she said and how she did it, but someone else spoke in different accents.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" The voice was very cultured, very angry. And also someone else.

"You stupid twat comin' down 'ere at night, yer've bleedin' well asked for it!" Somebody leapt at her and gave her a clout on the arm with something heavy and she squealed, all dignity forgotten, anger surging in response.

"I am Nadine Quilling, an artist, and I am here seeking peace." Her mouth filled with sand out of the gale. The attacker grabbed her clothing and the pain in her arm was excruciating. "I'll bleedin' well do for yer — got any cash?"

"No. Nothing." She was pushing backwards and fell over a sharp rock, managed to roll onto hands and knees. Fear got her by the skin, hairs rising like pins. Was this how it should be? Where was the rational discussion?

"Get to your feet woman, immediately, and explain yourself." She did so, to face a man in tweeds with a bristly moustache. He carried a shotgun. His face was scarlet with fury. The storm dropped somewhat and she spat out sand.

"If you trespass on my land you will be shot as like as not. I don't tolerate poachers, I don't call the police, I act. You'd best be off or you might get a blast up the behind. What are you doing here?"

"I'm on a mission. I seek peace."

"Bloody conshy I suppose. No patience with 'em." The man did not seem to be aware of the others poaching on 'his' land. The youth with the weapon was doing a kind of war dance, laughing to himself. "She seeks peace, tee hee, she seeks peace."

He was painted in an extraordinary manner, his face a canvas, his skull almost shaved and dyed with some lettering which she could not decipher. The third person was more menacing; he had an unhealthy spotted complexion and mean eyes like a furtive rat. His clothes were poor, everything greasy and worn. He looked cold and underfed.

"No money. Them with no money pays somehow." He moved his hand and brought to life a flick-knife which he gestured with in a sly gentle manner. It made the blood run cold. The three were obviously not together, but they were all against her.

"Somebody like you shouldn't be out here at night, it's dangerous for those that don't belong." Suddenly the painted youth went for her but she was faster than he was and grabbed the thing in his hand, a heavy cosh. All peace missions forgotten, she swung at him at the same time as aiming a kick at the shotgun which went off with a dreadful sound mingling with the screams of the man with the knife who got the full blast. The youth went down with a grunt and she turned to the tweedy squire but he was running away.

Things were not going at all well, but at least she was whole and safe.

#### **Notes on my Autosurgery, by Nadine Quilling.**

I have always had a violent nature. All my life I have been the victim of a terrible temper. I once almost killed my little sister; it was only the timely intervention of an adult which saved me from putting the

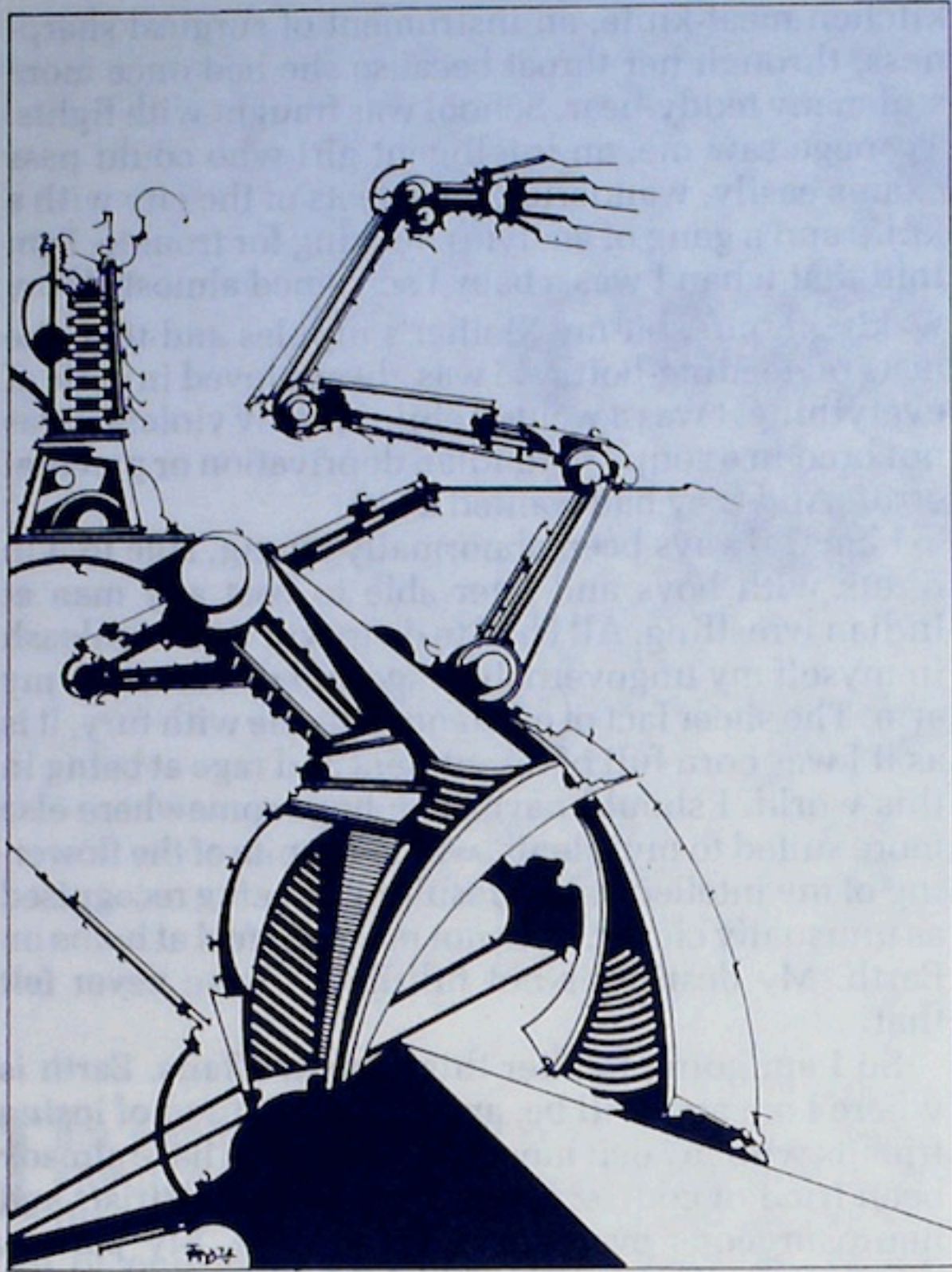
kitchen meat-knife, an instrument of surgical sharpness, through her throat because she had once more stolen my teddy-bear. School was fraught with fights. Teenage saw me, an intelligent girl who could pass exams easily, wandering the streets of the city with a knife and a gang of acolytes, looking for trouble. I am told that when I was a baby I screamed almost all my waking hours, bit my Mother's nipples and then the teats off feeding-bottles. I was always loved in spite of everything. I was a wanted child and my violence was not bred in a soup of Freudian deprivation or parental error. And they had wanted a girl.

I have always been abnormally strong, able to win fights with boys and later able to beat any man at Indian wrestling. All I had to do to win was to unleash in myself my ungovernable rage and direct it into my arm. The sheer fact of existence fills me with fury, it is as if I was born full of resentment and rage at being in this world. I should have been born somewhere else more suited to my talents, which in spite of the flowering of my intellectuality, resulting in being recognised as unusually clever, does not make me feel at home on Earth. My destiny is not fulfilled. I have never felt that.

So I am going to alter this state of affairs. Earth is where I am and will be, and I am fully tired of losing friends with my evil moods. Many things have already been tried of course; I have been to psychiatrists and neurosurgeons ever since I was little. My parents refused to allow me to have brain surgery because they feared the crude methods might turn me into a vegetable. They were correct, but the answer still lies in brain surgery. That is why I have devoted recent years to learning everything necessary about manipulation of the human brain. I am an artist, as is well-known, but painting ceased to give me satisfaction as did fibreglass sculpture. I have worked in performance art, and this new project is very much a result of those years I spent doing quite extraordinary things in front of people in art galleries. Now, I intend to solve the central problem of my own life. Rather than trust myself to a brain surgeon, I myself will effect the radical change in temperament needed to make my life peaceful, without altering in any way my intelligence, perception of the world or motor functions. More than one piece of autosurgery has been successfully carried out, although some have unfortunately been obliged to call for medical help due to exhaustion. This operation will be painless and I do not anticipate fatigue. There will be no problems with main arteries; success will lie with skill and delicacy.

Having located my own amygdala, which is the seat of the disturbance, I shall implant permanent pathways to that and to nearby areas so that I can self-administer appropriate chemicals to the exact brain area needed whenever I feel slightly irritated, which is often the prelude to a fit of rage. I shall never again be out of self control.

I hope that this process will become recognised as a valid tool to people similarly afflicted, to violent souls of all kinds who wield terror over others, to anyone who destroys the peace of the world by unleashing the powers of darkness which reside deep within their natures, whether there by natural accident or unfortunate distortion. I intend to benefit people instead of being remembered as one who ruined her



own and other's lives because she could not keep her temper.

Everything is prepared (see notes on procedure).  
I have no fear.

**S**he had several chemicals prepared in readiness. No one substance was a panacea. It would require experience to know which to introduce at any one time; there was the monthly cycle, occasional illness and medicines to be taken into account. Deep in the hypothalamus, many chemicals have many effects. Any interference must be as precise as possible, unlike the offerings of the chemotherapists she had encountered over the years. She had steroids, hormones, cannabinal, cannabichrome, adrenochrome, ergotamine, delt-1 form tetrahydrocannabinol, supra-reserpine, norepinephrine, psilocin, and her own invention, her own serotonin invert. It had hitherto been thought that serotonin was not after all a useful psychotherapeutic tool, but she had not been convinced from her reading. She had extracted her own serotonin and distorted its indole structure to resemble that of lysergic acid derivatives. The scar on her belly showed where she had opened herself to take the necessary samples from the bowel lining, and with the help of a biochemist, a dear friend who had no idea what she was actually engaged in, had mimicked this precisely and could produce it in the lab next door, which had once been a kitchen.

The only advantage of possibly getting someone else to do what she required was that a qualified brain surgeon would not be as excited as she was during actual operation. She could not be too tranquillised. Her advantage was that strength of character goes hand in hand, paradoxically, with a vile temper. Her

rage could tear the world apart, and she was making it construct a new world.

Everything would be okay, said an optimist deep within that part of her which she now probed with a fine erect, sterile wire.

**I**t rained, it rained, and all the world was mud. The mud smelled of death and effluents, of petrol and shit and lead. She wore dark green Wellington boots and a souwester hat, and in between, nothing. What could logic do in such a world, you would get wet eventually anyway. Trudging after her mother in the snow it had been like this, the boots sticking in the green slime and clay beneath the perfect whiteness. Not far to go now lovey, soon be at school, put your feet where I put mine or you may fall into a bog, this field is full of bogs under the snow. Out there though, in the countryside the snow was never blotched by specks of soot. Lifting high the infant legs, in the end the warmth of the schoolhouse full of enemies, now to be faced, her mother gone to work leaving her small and precious intelligent very bad-tempered girl in the hands of ignorant teachers and children who would laugh at the fur-lined hood her mother had sewed, and call her Eskimo Nell.

On and on now through the terrible humours of this planet where the weather was never good, was always dull and wet and cold and wretched, oh to be in England, now November's here! Everything looks like a sea of diarrhoea, even earthworms could not thrive in this cold stuff, and they will survive almost anything. Planting daffodils, she had often marvelled at the lively worms turning in their graves, indignant at being disturbed to make way for a bulb which would also survive the ghastly winter and thrust forth beauty and laughter enough to delight a crowd of Wordsworths whose hearts would lift at the sight of those glorious sex-organs.

But now it was serious, and she was alone, no Mother to guide and cheer and it didn't look much like anything at all had been planted. But as in fairytales and horror stories, there was a light on the horizon. Was it a house, a palace, or a Will-o'-the-Wisp come to lure her to her death in the bubbling morass beneath the outer shell of the planet? There was only one way to find out. A wind whipped up, full of gall and ire, blowing the rain of sulphur from far hills fit to rot a frozen mammoth. But this was important work, her legs must carry her — towards the lights. It seemed to take an age, the knees weakening, the fingers long since dropped off with cold for all she knew and hunger and thirst driving her mad to the point where she thought perhaps like Scarlett she might go with the wind and eat the very earth. Rhett and Ashley were nowhere to be seen when real trouble was brewing. Her senses were not deprived, therefore she need not have been looking inward so much, deep into the sea of associations, not always as free as some literary critics will have it, but the outer world was so bloody awful there was nothing for it but to be inward as well as go on, like Milligoon, to Christmas backwards, or the light. It would have been perfectly possible to forget what world she was out to change so awful was the world she was in, but deep in her mind it was there; the ideal, the idea, the id, the drive onwards to the light and salvation.

The light was in an office block in a car park with no cars, but the door opened as she approached it much as doors in hillsides open to those in fairytales or those with heavy shopping bags in department stores. A secretary in a nylon overall waited.

"Do you have an appointment?" That phrase, how many desperate supplicants has it put off forever, how many at the end of their tethers have simply stepped backwards and knotted the tether into a noose for their own necks?

"Yes," she lied.

"Well if you will go into the waiting-room I'll ask the chief to see you in a moment." On the waiting-room wall the posters. A skull smoking a cigarette, a reminder to have her cervix checked, a warning about toxicaria (but who eats dogshit anyway?), a holiday poster for spectacular trips across the Great Central Commisure, complete with arranged simulated brain damage so that presumably one would not be able to read any more boring posters. The magazines on the table: *Country Life*, *Vogue*, *Punch*. Instruction on how to go walking in the country dressed in a side-slit scarlet dress with high sequinned shoes, feathers in the hair, and punch somebody, possibly an unsuspecting Pig.

And then the cross of Jesus on a handout, advertising Western Meditation which would change the world, person by person, relaxation was the key to eliminating all warfare. Jesus, with his coterie of thugs around him, instructing them how to spread the message so that all future generations would be able to torture and maim and kill in His name. The only one among them with any wit or foresight, Judas. And his girlfriend Mary of ill repute turned from a healthy woman into a foot fetishist. If he comes again, it will be different. She herself would personally attend to him. She Mary Amygdala would personally duff him up for all the pain and trouble and misery....

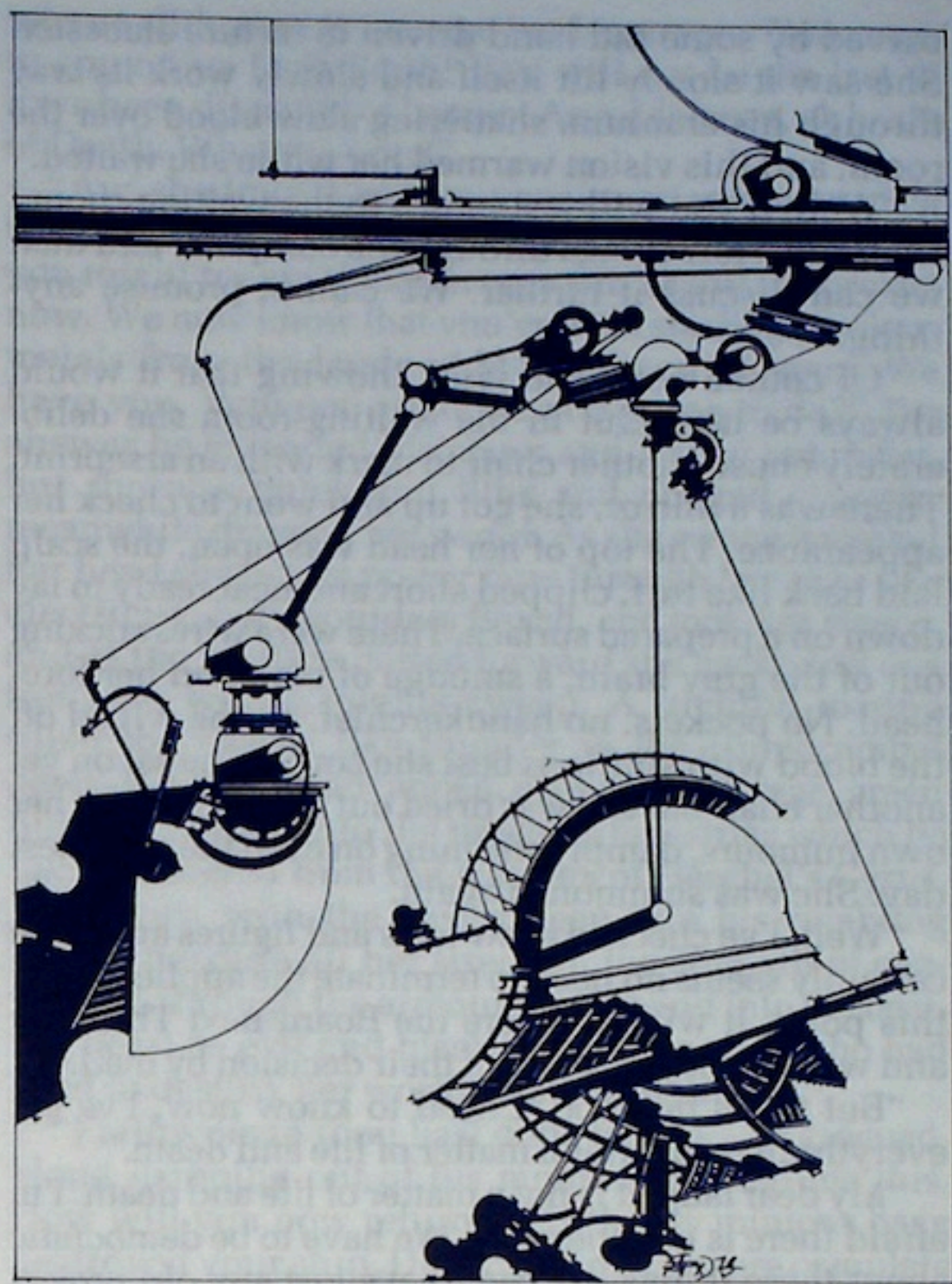
"The Chief will see you now," said the secretary who had glided in on the thick pile carpet. With no word she followed, dripping evil-smelling mud, and then stood there in front of the vast and dignified desk covered in the hide of an unfortunate animal. She faced a pair of gleaming spectacles which did not quite hide perverted intelligence shooting forth like sunrays at her disreputable appearance.

"Have a seat." She resisted easily the temptation to pick up the seat and bash him with it; sat on it, squelching bare bum, and the interview began. She gathered together her confidence.

"I understand that you are applying for a passport, and a licence for agriculture?"

"You understand correctly." There would be no point in revealing negative emotion it would get her nowhere, but the sight of that face was making adrenalin build up from underneath making a stagnant sewer in weak conduits. The fury of ages was in her, in front of her its cause. All in one package, a manifestation of what fucked up the world.

A white, clean, bespectacled, masculine, self-assured, unscrupulous, self-controlled, reasonable, rational, patronising, helpful, fatherly, brotherly, friendly, efficient, trained, qualified, educated, powerful, potent, virile, monied, God-fearing, authoritative, secure, polite and democratic male. He must be democratic or



she would not be here at all.

"Well, let's begin at the beginning," he said, relaxing visibly, the bristles on his face taking a slightly downward curve. She looked with her telescopic and microscopic eyes and saw his pores open and exude micrograms of sweat containing bacteria, ethyls and esters from whiskey, urea and after-shave.

"No, that's too far back. Let's begin now." The whiskers made an arc in space which would have delighted Einstein, but nothing else showed.

"Well, put it to me then in more detail. What do you require of this office?" he was being patient.

"I wish to have free access to the hypothalamic and Amygdalanean territories and after soil-improvement, grow new crops, guaranteed disease-free."

"You must be aware that it will cost you millions, and that there are strict laws governing what is grown here?"

"Yes. But I am prepared to pay a large price, and you would gain in other areas also."

"Would we though? Our ecology is already very carefully balanced."

"I noticed that, outside," she said with sarcasm. And then as he reddened slightly, she told him what she planned to grow. Hybrids of *cannabis sativa*, peyote, various medicinal plants, and also in underground caverns, with sunray and infra red, anticipating his pointing out that the weather here was too stormy and cold for such crops.

"I see." With glasses like those he should have been able to see but he clearly did not, quite.

"And how soon would you wish to commence work?" It was funny how some things commenced and others began.

"I wish to commence immediately."

"I see." There was a nasty ashtray on the desk,

carved by some sad hand driven to torture alabaster. She saw it slowly lift itself and slowly work its way through his cranium, shattering slow blood over the room, and this vision warmed her while she waited.

"Well, if you will just return to the waiting-room I shall run a few things through the computer and then we can discuss it further. We cannot promise anything."

"Of course not," she said, knowing that it would always be true. Out in the waiting-room she deliberately chose another chair to mark with an arseprint. There was a mirror, she got up and went to check her appearance. The top of her head was open, the scalp laid back like turf, clipped short and neat ready to lay down on a prepared surface. There were wires sticking out of the grey brain, a smudge of blood on her forehead. No pockets, no handkerchief, so she wiped off the blood with spittle as best she could. She sat on yet another chair but she was dried out now except for her own humours, damply steaming on even the grimmest day. She was summoned again.

"Well, I've checked a few facts and figures and there certainly seems no need to terminate the application at this point. It will go before the Board next Thursday and we will let you know of their decision by mail."

"But that's no good, I need to know now, I've got everything ready, it is a matter of life and death."

"My dear lady, it is not a matter of life and death. I'm afraid there is no other way. We have to be democratic about these things, we can't have just any old project going through without a vote and we cannot rush these things." She thought of attempting to bribe him with promised cash, but he had another idea.

"Of course, if you would like to discuss it further here and now," he said in a different tone of voice, looking at her breasts. He turned round to a drinks-tray

behind him, then she picked up the alabaster monster and hit him with it hard. She stormed out past the open-mouthed secretary, determined to go ahead with the project anyway. So, it was illegal! Anarchy was the reply.

Outside it was still raining and there were no other buildings. It is at such moments that anger changes into despair. There had been a lot of anger so there was a lot of despair. Slumping along in her Wellies she cried bitter desperate tears. When they got into the schoolyard at playtime the other children ganged up on her, pulling her ringlets. Out-numbered she ran to the lavs to hide and found frightful things written behind the door. Outside in the yard, under the shelter, were cages of baby white mice. Everybody got to look at them except her. She wished it would be teatime so that she could go home. Then the bell rang and she opened her eyes, aware of her sterilised room, the alarm set to go off every ten minutes as an aid in case of unconsciousness. Not infallible, but it had worked now.

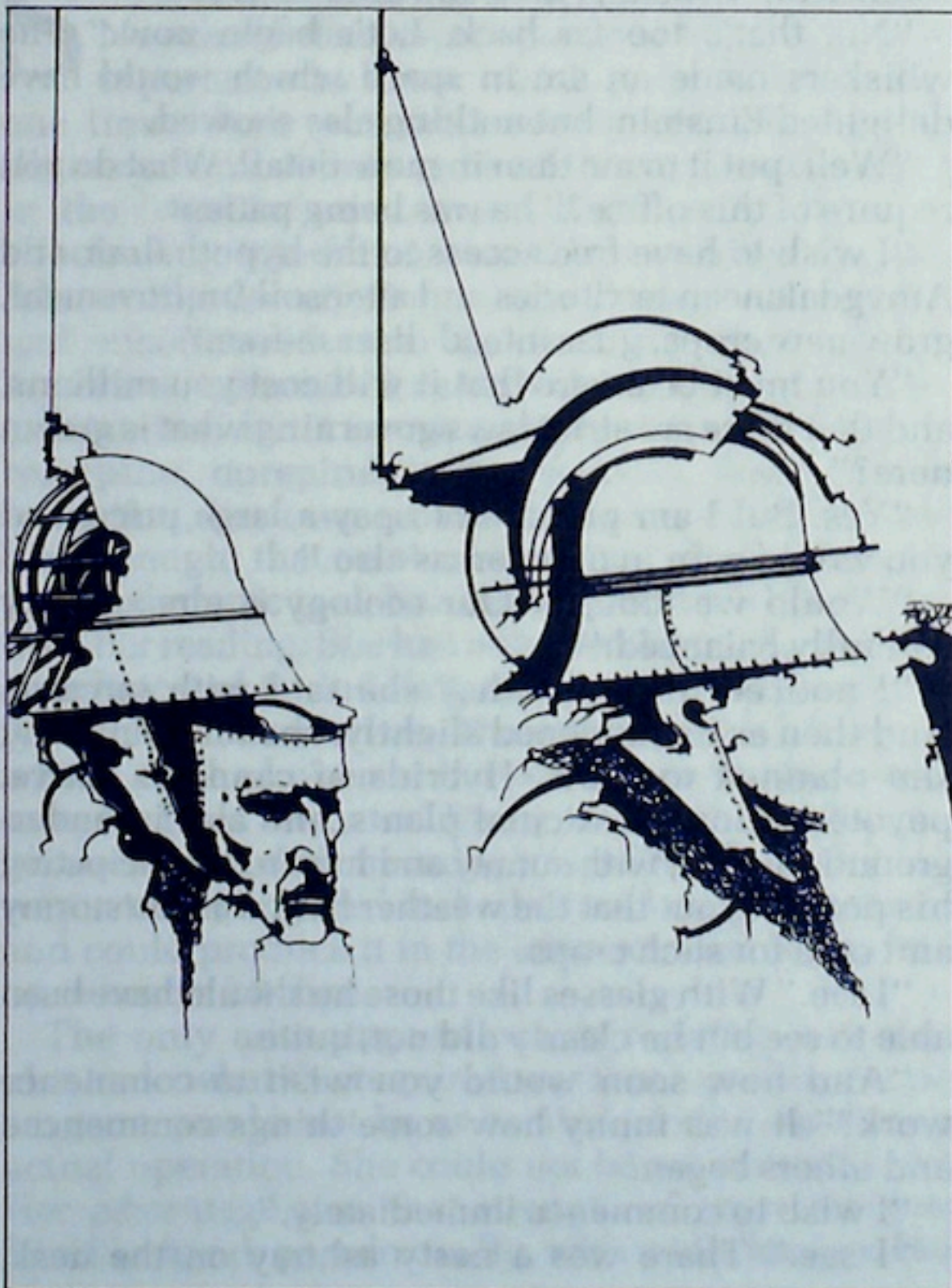
It was wonderful the way nothing hurt at all. In a superstitious corner of her mind she had not quite believed that brain tissue does not itself feel.

She steadied herself and selected a cannula, very gently worked it down into the tissue until the point made contact where an electrode had been. The matter closed around it as if welcoming the foreign object. The cannula was obtained through a biologist, a size used for goats. She had told him that she was doing a lifesize sculpture of a brain operation on a goat, a perfectly possible thing for her to be engaged in. The top was adjustable so that she could have it exactly right, hardly protruding through her skull when replaced. She had not known how thick it would be, but judged correctly that it had been quite thick from the number of knocks it had taken during fights without cracking. Two more cannulae went in without trouble. It was now a matter of testing to see if they were correctly placed, although she already felt sure. But she did not want to be the victim of perpetual appetites or to feel continually hot, or cold or have her judgement and senses distorted in any way. A few millimetres and she might not be able to read, or to smell certain things — but she reminded herself to concentrate now and not digress upon morbid possibilities.

A human brain is not like an animal brain precisely, and doubtless human brains were individuals also, just like faces and hands. She only knew this one, and it was the first meeting.

Suddenly the weather cleared and she was in a burning desert. A beach, not a desert. There were few people about at this time of day, but no mad dogs. A sailor with his trousers rolled up and his peaked hat awry. The Greeks were friendly and good tempered, the men much too friendly but pleasant. Nearby a tethered goat munched on kitchen scraps, its golden eyes blank with greed. The sailor came and sat down beside her, jogging her paintbrush, ruining the sketch she was making.

"Hey steady on, look what you've done!" He looked but obviously could not tell there was anything amiss. He put his arm round her in a strong grip, hurting her bare arm, and put his other hand on her breast which



was clad only in a tiny bikini top. This was so unexpected and unusual, all the Greeks she had met spent a lot of time chatting and being charming. He tried to kiss her.

"Get off you bastard what the hell do you think you're doing." In any language the message was plain, from both of them. He had no smile, no charm, not a typical Greek but horribly handsome and knew it. She started to struggle but he persisted, murmuring the one word "fuck".

"Oh sod off you pig," she said, and got her strength together, heaving him off as she stood up so that he rolled in the sand. Perhaps he was drunk, again unusual for a Greek. He was on his feet again and instantly at her but she got her ankle behind his to bring him down. He was very strong but now she was furious and crashed her fist into his teeth making him howl and bring his hands up. Her other fist went into his eye and her knee into his balls, bending him double as she sprang back. She grabbed her sketching box and hit him on the back of the head with it, flinging tubes of paint everywhere. He fell groaning, then silent. She spent a lot of time getting back the paints except one which the goat had eaten, packed everything and watched the sailor getting to his feet, bending over again to vomit. He gave her a venomous glare and shook his fist but she shook hers with more determination. He staggered off, and she went in search of some lunch. Thank heavens she had her strength, the world was not always safe for women.

She lay back sweating profusely on the sterile sheet. The sun, the effort. The doubt. What would have happened if she had not been able to zap him? It was not possible to think about it, saliva came into the mouth with revulsion. She remembered now, she had given the ruined sketch to the goat.

So, a little more work and the worst of this project would be finished. She took careful measurements, deciding to bore the holes now while she was still steady. A highspeed drill can rip through anything and needs great care. Little jokes about holes in the head flittered through her mind as she finished the job. Then, the electrodes again, the fine probe. Just testing.

She suddenly felt the blissful orgasmic waves passing entirely through her, a wonderful feeling of pleasure, but had the presence of mind to switch off the current. It must be like that for deepsea divers; the symptoms of euphoria were so pleasant that she might not wish to surface. Already she was tempted to switch on again. No wonder animals would starve to death rather than stop pressing the buttons. She pressed her own and was instantly flooded with a feeling of happiness, physical sensation so agreeable that it must surely be the way flesh was meant to feel? She switched off, trembling. She took a while to calm down, administered more local anaesthetic and a mild tranquilliser and set to work again. Another probe.

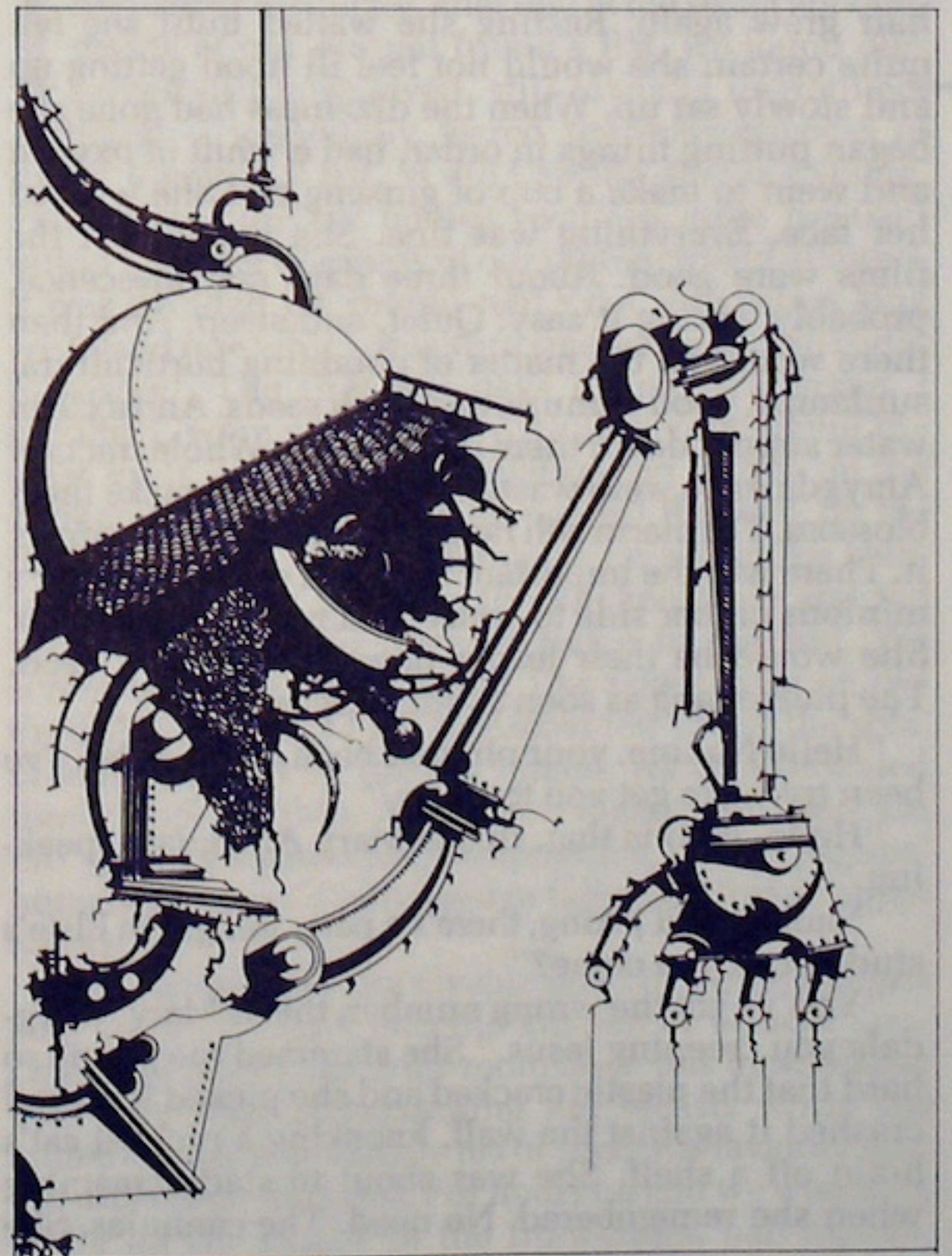
Vennors the Lizard Lord stood before her, snarling to show his terrible teeth, his immense and splendid ruffle standing up to impress and intimidate. His claws were terrible and his anger great. She had trespassed into the innermost secrets of the Keep, and she must die.

"So, you call yourself a seeker?" he hissed, his

tongue slithering to manage her language. "You come to spy on us from Earth! You will not be the last to have been disposed of here on Amygdalanea, oh bride of Death. What say you?"

"Aw shaddup Vennors you oversized newt. I've telegraphed the contents of the scrolls to my colleagues, you might try anything but you can't spoil the project now. We now know that you've been stealing precious metals from the lands of Maruzzi and Magoun. We have you, Vennors, what are you going to do?" For answer he extended his claws and lashed out at her, but she was quick and lithe and dodged expertly, meanwhile drawing her sword. As she swung it around her head she felt its power flow through her arms like electricity. her shoulders flexed, she took her stance, and as the creature darted forward she hacked off one front leg with a mighty sweep. A frightful roaring filled the cavern like thunder in the Hippocampal deeps but still he advanced, eyes red with rage, green blood spouting onto the precious tapestries which he had plundered from the weavers of Heschel's Gyrus. She thrust with the sword deep into his rumbling breast, needing all her strength, the strength of conviction, through the armour plating and into the beating heart as evil and black as his plans. He who had tried to destroy her world was now dying.

"Earthwoman thou hast done for me," he groaned, blood dripping out of his mouth. "But tell me this. How will you now return to Earth. My minions have destroyed your ship. Did you think we were complete fools?" She sprang back, pulling out the sword which smoked with his acrid humours, and ran for the door, down the thousand steps of his tower and out into the perpetual twilight of Amygdalanea. The grey plain stretched before her, the only relief her wrecked ship. She thrust her sword into its scabbard and put up her



hands in supplication.

"Oh, Board of Medical Directors, how will you help me now?"

The thing is, she thought lazily, cleaning her instruments with alcohol, I need the angst to get me out of scraps, but would I get into the scraps in the first place if it wasn't for the angst? There were always outside circumstances which would excite anyone to ire and wrath. But those who were mild and turned the other cheek, did they get raped, beat up, slaughtered? Well of course they did.

She placed a drop of cannabimol down the central cannula. Instant trip, thoughts going on several levels, delight and distortion and mystery and humour. Great fun. And not a bit of aggro anywhere. When it was over she lay dreamily smiling, thinking, well, it works just fine. Amazing. But she was lazy, she just wanted to lie there, existing, taking pleasure in being around. She took a look in the mirror at the exposed brain and found it hilarious. She laughed and giggled, feeling the lovely humour rise up from her diaphragm in waves, the funniest brain she had ever seen. A person could live like this, just laughing at their own brain. There was a loud knocking on the door of her apartment. Instant alert. Who was it. Go away. Keeping quiet, wishing them away. Eventually it stopped, they had assumed she was out, had not heard her laughing, she hoped.

Last stage of the operation, placing the skull with its holes over the ducts, perfect fit. Then the scalp, stitches. Antiseptic. Shot of penicillin, adjustment of drip feed to include high ascorbic acid, take that out soon. Her brain cleared of the last molecules of cannabimol and she felt fine. If it wasn't for the oxygen cylinder she would have liked a smoke. The cannula ducts were obvious but she would wear a hat until her hair grew again. Resting she waited until she felt quite certain she would not feel ill upon getting up and slowly sat up. When the dizziness had gone she began putting things in order, had a whiff of oxygen and went to make a cup of ginseng tea. She washed her face. Everything was fine. She hoped that the films were good. About three days convalescence, probably, taking it easy. Quiet, and sleep. And then there would be the matter of obtaining horticultural sunlamps, good manure, and fresh seeds. And a clean water supply down there in the caves. Whole tracts of Amygdalanea were wasteland; she would make them blossom. The alarm bell rang so she went to disconnect it. There was the important matter of getting Vennor's minions on her side to assist with repairing her ship. She would be their leader now Vennors was dead. The phone rang as soon as she plugged it in.

"Hello Nadine, your phone's been out of order, I've been trying to get you for days."

"Hello, who is that, this is Mary Amygdala speaking."

"Nadine, quit joking, there's a party tonight in Elsie's studio, can you come?"

"You've got the wrong number, this is Mary Amygdala you creeping Jesus." She slammed the phone so hard that the plastic cracked and she picked it up and crashed it against the wall, knocking a pickled cat's brain off a shelf. She was about to start screaming when she remembered. No need. The cannulas. She

dripped a small dose of her own special serotonin and was instantly in a different frame of mind. She must have been suffering from post-operative shock. She cleaned up the mess but felt slightly weak so went to sit by the window, pulling the cord on the blinds. The view outside was of a dismal November afternoon, with rain and gusts of wind blowing garbage around. It was enough to depress the spirits, but she wasn't going to get upset; perhaps the weather would improve by the time she had finished her convalescence. The afternoon mail arrived and she noticed that there had been other mail. She opened the most ominous one, which was disguised as an electricity bill, but she could decipher the strange script. It was a declaration from the minions of Vennors of their sworn enmity and a refusal under any circumstances to help her.

She went to sit by the window once more. Tears ran down her face. Not tears of anger, but the tears of the timid and ineffectual. Only rarely as a child had she ever felt like this. Perhaps she would never be able to return to earth. Perhaps they would stop her crop-growing scheme. If she went out perhaps she would be attacked by louts? There must be ways of dealing with situations without force but they were alien to her. Surely though, she had taken the right course? One thing was certain, nothing in her world would ever be the same again.

**Josephine Saxton's** first story, "The Wall", appeared in 1965, since when she has published regularly, if not prolifically, on both sides of the Atlantic. She is the author of four novels, the most recent being *The Travels of Jane Saint* (1980), all of which defy easy categorization.

*Continued from page 2.*

A magazine is not unlike a city — which is one reason why *Interzone* is named after one. It hopes to attract prominent residents from elsewhere: people who will wander in, find the environment stimulating, stay for a while, leave their mark, move on. So it was with most of the major writers identified with the Moorcock *New Worlds*: Aldiss, Ballard, Disch, Moorcock himself, Spinrad, and so forth. In time there will also be locals who make good and become famous within the city, but the ultimate measure of their success comes when it is time for them to move on. Will they sustain their reputations, or will they lapse into obscurity? Here lies *New Worlds*'s most significant failure. The writers who grew up and prospered in its environs were people like Michael Butterworth, Graham Charnock, George Collyn, Langdon Jones, David Masson, Charles Platt, Peter Tate. Where are they now? Only John Sladek and Ian Watson (who resided there briefly in infancy) went on to greater things. The lesser-known companion magazine *Science Fantasy*, though lacking the reputation, has at least an equally impressive record, having suckled M. John Harrison, Christopher Priest, Keith Roberts and Josephine Saxton, among others, before its premature demise.

*Interzone* is a new community, with new aims. We could aim bitter epithets at the ever-more-bloated carcass of commercial fantasy and sf, but it would be about as effectual as trying to stop a dinosaur with a peashooter. We would sooner use our precious space to explore and celebrate the possibilities of what is original and worthwhile in imaginative fiction, to provide an open and varied forum for writers rather than a straitjacketed market. Already we have attracted some famous and talented residents, some of them previously prominent in *New Worlds*. New names are now beginning to appear, writers who we hope will go on to leave their mark on the world. It's a gradual, organic process. After three issues this magazine is far from fulfilling all our hopes for it, but we are happy with the way it is developing. We hope our readers — even those as impatient and forgetful of the realities of their own history as Michael Moorcock and Charles Platt — will stick with us and enjoy and contribute to that development. Even *New Worlds* was not built in a day.

Malcolm Edwards

# CHEEK TO CHEEK

**Nicholas Allan**

I remember, before finally living together, we arranged trysts at a mutual friend's flat, and it was there we first undressed together, and it was there I first inspected, stroked, and eventually melted into the full extent of Camilla's white body; and it was there I first witnessed the curious excrescences or fleshy wings of equally white skin which descended an inch or so from the shy lips of her vagina. They were not offensive: they were even charming, cute...sensual (as well as sensitive), and in the course of our love-making I would kiss or tease them in much the same way as I might kiss or tease her ears or nipples. It was during one of these afternoons (after particularly strenuous and altogether satisfying passion) that she lay her damp ash-blonde head in the crook of my arm and explained that these extensions of her genitalia, which, as if to exemplify her remark, were at that point illuminated by a slant of gold sunlight from the window, had made their appearance only after we had met.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know," she whispered.

I suspected, at the time, that it was as if her body itself had a message for me: this was her gentle and oblique way of saying that she accepted me, perhaps was even very fond of me. And it must have been about a week later that I discovered, in the bath one morning, that a reciprocation had occurred – not only in my feelings towards her, but in a definite thickening and even extension of my own foreskin. It was as though a layer of subcutaneous fat, similar to that found at the base of the thumb, had developed about my penis. This, of course, I immediately revealed to Camilla. Yet neither of us felt cause for alarm; in fact we were quite comforted, since these physical anomalies considerably increased the sweetness of

our love-making. I would go so far as to say it served to bring us together, though how much closer together it was eventually to bring us I could not then have guessed – or, for that matter, wanted to have guessed.

I remember distinctly, after one of the secret appointments at our mutual friend's flat, we found ourselves still unrelieved, still sexually ungratified. Although I personally feared the consequences of living together, I felt, as did Camilla, that our young, expansive, buoyant bodies required more frequent union than the kindness of our mutual friend allowed. It was decided we should rent a flat, and before long we found one which was very small, cheap, and badly furnished. The first few days in our new home, I recollect, were spent hedonistically, yet without the least guilt, in reckless copulation, on chairs, on the cooker, the bathroom scales, against the wall, on the front-door mat, under the television-set, in the bath, on the lavatory, between the kitchen table and the ironing board, and once or twice in the bed. We screeched manically, lowed like cows: with an old Fred Astaire record we'd discovered under the sofa, presumably left by the last tenant, we experimented freely with rhythm. And so we managed to perform the kind of manoeuvres impossible in our parents' houses, ones we'd only read or talked or dreamt about before.

The pleasure (inconceivable now) of seeing Camilla step whitely naked into the kitchen or wander nonchalantly across the front-room floor was inestimable. The very idea of massaging her breasts while she endeavoured to make the tea or flush the lavatory sent me into erotic raptures. For hours on end we would sit or lie on the carpet in the front-room, half-replete,

touching one another, examining languorously the subtle folds, tiny hairs, and smooth surfaces of our pale skins, and forever fondling the peculiar enlargements of our respective sexual organs. It was during one of those moments that we noticed – could not help but notice – that a substantial growth of both had taken place.

“Does it worry you?” Camilla asked, with genuine concern.

“Not at all,” I said.

As we huddled together on the blue carpet, silent, content, thankful, my lips brushing her blonde locks, Camilla beginning to hum a tune called “A Foggy Day” we’d recently heard on the ancient record-player, I had a brief, yet positively distinct inclination to ask her to marry me, though fortunately (I say fortunately from a retrospective point of view), I possessed the presence of mind not to.

I think it must have been on the third morning of our living in the flat that I decided, in that semi-hazed state between waking and sleeping, that perhaps we should take a walk outside, go shopping, and inspect our new neighbourhood. On attempting to get out of bed, however, I found I was unable to pull myself away from the still sleeping Camilla. My testicles seemed somehow attached to her. She stirred. I assumed that my morning erection (due mostly to a full bladder) had by chance lodged itself between her legs, and this I found rather touching. On delicate inspection and carefully applied leverage, however, I discovered this not to be the case. It seemed I was definitely stuck.

“Camilla...” I began.

Camilla was smiling, which, surprisingly, slightly irritated me. Her blue eyes watched me in what I can only call a demanding way.

“Look, could you raise your left leg a little?” I said. She giggled.

“I want to go for a pee.”

Camilla continued to gaze at me, without moving.

“Why don’t you...go inside me?” she said coyly.

Still only half-awake, the suggestion appeared strangely erotic – it was something we’d never tried before – and so, after a little hesitation, I emptied the entire contents of my bladder into her, and Camilla, receiving it, smiled rather mischievously throughout. Curiously, perhaps astoundingly, there was no leakage, not one yellow stain on the sheets. Without withdrawing, however, we made love as usual on awakening, and I suppose it was only after this that we finally became aware of our true predicament. Experiencing a slightly unpleasant sensation when attempting to part – as though our pubic hairs had become entangled – we both gazed down between our legs and discovered that the pale flaps of skin emanating from Camilla’s vagina had merged imperceptibly with my own fat foreskin. Our sexual organs, miraculously, had fused together overnight.

At first we were frightened. Camilla yelped.

“Look, we’d best not make any sudden movements,” I suggested.

We lay still, Camilla lowering her head to my chest. After vague and fruitless experimentation – touching, pulling, relaxing and tensing of various muscles – we lay sweating in each other’s arms. Then Camilla

began to giggle again. I don’t know why, but I felt embarrassed, and, although aware that our position might be thought by some as absurd, I did not feel like laughing.

Perhaps we imagined that further sleep might resolve our problem, and since we were still tired from the industrious night before, by tacit agreement we snuggled up to each other and fell into a light and curiously untroubled doze. The positions of our sexual organs lent an unexpected intimacy to our sleep...little surges of innocent, benign love for Camilla, like sweeps of silver sand, seemed to pass right the way through my body. Her hot breath against my cheek, her child-hands carelessly wrapped about my shoulders allowed me to experience a kind of bliss I hadn’t felt since we’d met.

We woke as late as one o’clock in the afternoon, both suffering from slight headaches. Our first reaction on opening our eyes was one of relief, since we found ourselves several feet away from one another in the large double bed. Yet, so it felt, we were still apparently connected. I pulled away the bed-clothes, glanced down and saw between us, lying snake-like on the sheet, a long, quite thin extension – like an umbilical cord – running from, as well as forming part of, the foreskin of my penis to the mouth of Camilla’s vagina, which it enclosed in the form of a loose funnel where the enlarged lips once were. The cord itself was four or five feet long, about as thick as a finger. The skin, moist and translucent, blue veins showing beneath, was blemished by large pores, from which exuded, even at that moment, a faint smell of...sexual activity?

We were dumbfounded, I think terrified. With extreme caution, we stepped out of bed on either side, so that the cord dangled like a skipping rope across the bed between us. We were too repelled to say anything for a while.

It’s enough to make me shed tears to think how much I happened to love Camilla over this particularly intimate period. More reason to be astonished at wanting to be rid of her. But five days after our discovery, as I was vaguely watching the television and Camilla cutting and hemming a hole in a pair of her jeans for our ever-growing cord (opening the flaps was unsatisfactory since the zip scratched the skin), my thoughts delved towards a separation. And the means to achieve it...

This was saddening. Camilla was, technically and emotionally, my first real girlfriend. The last days of the summer term, after exams, I remember, when Camilla and I got together, seemed the beginning of a substantial or at least romantic future. I know that when I saw her cross the college playing-field in her dark blue school-uniform, her curly blonde hair bobbing, I had wanted her, and that feeling of wanting her had not abated until this moment.

That we should seek a doctor’s professional opinion was Camilla’s immediate, fright-inspired suggestion; but we didn’t have a telephone. Besides, I didn’t want our parents knowing, which they might if our doctors caught wind of the situation.

“Most likely it’ll just shed itself, like a snake’s skin,” I said authoritatively, though secretly doubtful.

The cord lengthened about a foot a day, and thick-



ened proportionately. It dragged behind us with a rustling sound (like a hose-pipe across grass) as we walked from room to room, and on occasion I noticed it had grown distinctly heavier. Soon a surprising and thoroughly beneficial discovery swiftly transformed our fear into relief, into sheer gratitude. Whenever we felt the on-come of sexual desire, the cord magically concertinaed into itself (while becoming engorged with blood) until we were, in effect, tugged together, inviting us to make love. So Camilla might be in the kitchen boiling potatoes and I in the front-room combing my hair – I had wisely jammed all the doors – and instantly we would be made aware of one another's desire. It would make us laugh.

Due to our connection, our awareness of one another reached hyper-sensitive proportions. Thrills, doubts, love, and displeasure were telegraphed from one to the other by the cord. I could not hide my craving for Camilla, she could not hide her affection for me.

After breakfast, we would take exercise (holding the cord between us), running round the front-room and up and down the hall...endless frolics, it seemed. Often, before lunch, I would sit in an armchair, with my eyes closed meditatively, the rosy flush of healthy exhaustion on my face, twiddling the cord with my fingers (while it lay restfully coiled on the carpet) and listen, listen to the tinkle of cutlery, the effortless footfall on the kitchen lino, or else wait for the fluttering orange shadow of Camilla to pass across my eyelids. But all the while I was aware that it was a kind of bliss I suspected all along of being ephemeral.

For, gradually, our domestic contentment was disturbed, inevitably, I suppose, by the means of its original promotion. Along the cord ran the occasional dark throb or brooding pulsation of disquiet. Our flushes of sexual desire were not always simultaneous, causing embarrassment for one, irritation for the other. The odours of semen, urine and vaginal excrement trapped in the cord and evaporating (like sweat) from its pores had urged us to bathe frequently, but recently we'd agreed that perhaps the smell was the lesser inconvenience. And Camilla took to dressing: I became indignant that her lithe body was not perpetually on show, though admittedly our libidos, so effervescent in the beginning, had just lately floundered.

**I** took to gazing out of the window. It had been raining on and off for the last three days, yet I began to envy the few umbrellaed pedestrians who walked the street below. For the size of the flat seemed to diminish daily: neither of us could ever be alone. I became astounded at the staggering tastelessness of the interior design: a pea-green sofa challenged a canary yellow fire-place, a rose formica-topped dining-table reflected the complex tulip pattern of the rust tinted wallpaper. The cord only permitted limited movement – never hasty – from, say, kitchen to living-room, lavatory to hall. A thoughtless action could cause exquisite pain.

Yet with the cord's length at twenty-one feet (we measured it daily) to leave the flat was unadvisable. Ideas of stuffing the cord down one trouser leg and up Camilla's skirt were thought far-fetched, and in practice were, of course, found to be impossible. Fortunately, we were on the dole and Camilla, anticipating our wild, marathon "honeymoon" lasting several

weeks, had stored sufficient food. We were on to the powdered milk and saccharine tablets....

Since our relationship had never been founded on conversation, I resorted to watching television. Camilla was singing while she sewed. One of the songs from the scratched Fred Astaire record.

*Heaven, I'm in heaven,  
And my heart beats so that  
I can hardly speak,  
And I seem to find the happiness  
I seek,  
When we're out together –*

"Must you sing that?" I asked.

Camilla made some vague, and, I thought, particularly inapt remark about it being "a free world".

"I'm trying to watch the adverts."

She didn't stop, and continued to snip at the jeans she was preparing with a small pair of scissors. I believe she was quite upset and this unexpectedly hurt me. Perhaps she sensed this – the cord might have given it away – because she looked up, reproach in her eyes. She stopped singing, but I felt uneasy.

We sat through an entire football match although neither of us had any interest in the sport. I made comments like, "He's scored a goal," or "That's a penalty, isn't it?" but she offered no reply. Instead, finishing the jeans and trying them on – slipping the cord down a slit at the top of the jeans to the prepared hole, and closing the slit with a press-stud – she paced the room.

"Will you do my jeans now?" I asked, pleasantly enough.

For a moment she was silent. She picked up the sewing box, looked at me thoughtfully, as though considering a variety of possibilities, then suddenly lobbed it at my head, the contents – scissors, needles, thread, and safety-pins – flying across the sofa. Then she left the room and would – I'm sure – have slammed the door.

I waited. After a while I thought I heard her sobbing in the hall but I felt no inclination to mollify her or even move. I was shaken and upset. This represented, I suppose, in dramatic terms, the first admission or outcry of our growing dissatisfaction. It struck me, with a power which startled, that dear Camilla, of the blonde hair and alabaster thighs, had shown in this action a facet of her personality I'd never sought in her before – certainly one that she'd never shown. Tension communicated itself through the pale, sweating cord.

My eyes, all the while, had been attracted to the silver scissors lying unlocked on the blue carpet, and slowly, with what I imagined to be a criminal's curiosity and detachment, I picked them up, marked their sharpness, and feeling unaccountably clever, slipped them into my shirt pocket, with no precise scheme in mind.

**T**hat night, as usual, we slept naked. By carefully folding my shirt I brought the pocket containing the scissors face upwards, and lay the shirt on the bedside table within easy reach. Though the patter of rainfall offered to soothe my mind, the darkness of the room induced me to ponder fretfully over the past few days.

Camilla slept fitfully. Her disturbed dreams, I thought, were perhaps a premonition of my vague intentions, transmitted by the gently pulsating cord. I knew I had to be careful since the cord functioned as a sophisticated bugging-device, yet, because I registered her emotional variations too, I shared in effect, the same warning system.

Her ivory skin appeared to glow in the semi-blackness. I leant close to her face. The faintly parted lips, straight and triangular nose, and strange leaf-shaped eyes I had once eulogised (to myself, and to her) as being shaped by an intelligence, a particular intelligence, they seemed so shrewdly constructed. They still did, but it now seemed that perhaps the genius was a little wasted. The inability to gauge or even imagine the depth behind the face showed either the lack of my own understanding or demonstrated Camilla's limitations. I grew steadily more contemptuous of her as the night progressed.

At about one o'clock I took out the scissors. My thoughts had darkened, contradicted themselves, confused me. I suddenly had a desire to run down the wet street below our bedroom window, yapping wildly, or else visit a friend and talk to him all night. Frustration gripped me: I thought the cord might twitch. Camilla uttered something. I lay still, restless and angry, testing the silent movement of the scissors. Then, as if about to slash my own wrists, I gradually pulled the bedclothes away revealing to my nervous touch the S-shaped length of the cord. Estimating the centre, I placed and was immediately aware of the cold scissor blades against the cord skin.

I closed the scissors sharply and fiercely, and at about the same time, possibly before, I cried out involuntarily. Camilla followed closely with a terrifying shriek, which I thought excessive, until I too felt the pain. Dark blood trickled against my thighs, and began to make the sheets sticky. Camilla was screaming at me. Each time we moved the gash in the cord (which I'd failed to sever) widened: we were both quite sick with pain.

Then I heard what Camilla was saying: "Turn on the light! Turn on the bloody light!"

I did so. Still gripping the scissors I could only stare at the mess I'd made: the blood, flowing with abandon, exaggerated the wound. Camilla was beside herself with anger.

"Do we have any Elastoplast?" I asked stupidly, I don't know why. Camilla started crying, after which she mumbled inanely and incoherently into the pillow.

"...Perhaps we ought to clean the wound or something," I whispered hopefully.

But no, she wanted only to talk to the pillow...about how it was I, not she, who wanted us to live together, and how it was I, not she, who had insisted we keep the cord rather than call the doctor (I could have sworn it was a mutual decision)... Then, caught up in a sentimental, embittered nostalgia (while I tenderly yet uselessly swabbed the cord with the sheets), she spoke warmly, now with vague cohesion, about "those last weeks of the summer term", "that kiss in the empty class-room" (I had never kissed her in an empty class-room), "our friends, Andrew and Richard" (her

friends, Andrew and Richard), "sitting in the park" (hardly exciting), "that afternoon in the Curzon cinema", "that evening at the King and Queen", "the last day of school" (when, in a shaded part of the quadrangle we had realised we definitely wanted one another – perhaps inspired by the alternative of an unbearable parting) ... "What was the bloody point of all that?" (My hands, by then, soaked in blood), "What was the point of all that?" (More sobs).

She continued to snivel, her face pressed against my shoulder. I wanted to tell her to stop, but didn't dare. I felt rather tearful myself, I even began to reproach myself, for I must admit, as a declaration of her fondness for me she had never been quite so explicit.

Eventually I managed to get her out of bed and we carried the damaged cord, like a lame pigeon, to the bedroom, where I cleaned the wound and applied a bandage. Suffering exactly the same pain we were able to feel a strange empathy for one another, and this allowed us to fall into a deceptive intimacy.

Opening the windows and the curtains of the living-room, so that rain fell heavily on to the carpet, we put on the Fred Astaire record – I knew all the lyrics by then – and nestled on the sofa in the darkness, as though meeting illicitly as in the past, Camilla's head resting on my shoulder, and the newly bandaged cord lying warmly between us.

I cannot say definitely that when we finally fell asleep we lay in each others' arms, but, in a romantic way, I always like to think we did. I know, at least, I was so at peace in my unexpectedly poignant dreams (dreams inspired by Camilla's tearful tirade), that I was curiously unanxious, even faintly uplifted, at being awoken not only by the silver morning sunlight, but also by an unaccustomed sound: the sound of the front-door being softly closed. I then gazed with a wistful, half-closed eye at the cord and saw it had turned a grey-blue colour, as if bruised all over and drained of blood. I followed its length, passed the bandaged wound, until, curled harmlessly on the sofa beside me, I came to its flaking, shrivelled end. It was as if, anticipating our truer, darker feelings, the cord had had the decency to die quietly, without death rattle or convulsions, simply to spare us from the hurt we would otherwise have felt.

I thought then (as I have often, in my musings, thought since) that had it not been for the physical evidence of the dry, gossamer remains of the cord – which I slowly, gently tore from my penis, and coiled up like a rope, eventually to flush down the lavatory – it would be almost impossible to conceive that I had ever really been intimately involved with Camilla at all.

**Nicholas Allan** is 25 years old, studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Art, and has an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia. His play, *The Visitor*, was broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and he has had work published in American university magazines.

# SAVING THE UNIVERSE

DAVID GARNETT

“Sorry,” Dan said, as he pushed his way into the solid mass of people packing the bar and accidentally knocked an elbow, which resulted in the owner of the elbow spilling a fraction of his drink.

“Don’t worry about it,” said the American whose drink it had been.

Dan wasn’t worried.

“That’s the first time anyone’s spoken to me since I got here,” the American continued.

“Yeah?”

“I was beginning to think I was invisible or something.”

Dan looked round, glancing from side to side. “Who said that?”

The American frowned, not understanding.

Dan pushed further towards the bar, but found himself still next to the overweight youngster. Out of habit, he glanced surreptitiously at the kiddie’s name tag: Bruce Newcome. At the same time Newcome was glancing at Dan’s own label, but he showed no trace of recognition.

Finally getting one shoulder wedged up against the bar, Dan looked around at the others crowding the area, then gazed beyond and into the huge hotel lounge, searching for someone he knew. Anyone he knew. There were so many people there, but not a familiar face in sight.

“I’ve just got here too,” said Dan at last. The bar was the logical place to begin a science fiction convention, although the official opening had been yesterday; and it was here that he would spend most of his time.

“I’ve been here two days,” answered Newcome, as he continued gazing expectantly at Dan.

Two days without speaking to anyone. Dan remembered his own first convention, when it had taken half a day before he met anyone to talk to. “Your first con?” he asked. There was nothing else to do while waiting to be served, although it was bad policy to take his eye off the one barman who was trying – or

pretending to try – to serve eighty-two people, all of whom were ordering seven or eight drinks.

“No, I’ve been to twenty-seven back home. This is my first British con.”

Twenty-seven. Poor sod, and he only looked about eighteen. He must really be hooked, thought Dan. He nodded his head, because it was easier than speaking. The sooner his vocal chords were lubricated the better. He wished the Yank would push off. Dan didn’t want to waste time talking with fans, that wasn’t what he came to cons for.

Often he wondered what he did come for.

“Look,” he said, “I’m dying for a drink, ‘kay?” He turned away, getting his second shoulder to the bar and then shuffling from side to side until there was room for his arm as well, with the attached hand clutching a crisp new fiver.

“Pint of Ferring’s, please,” he said four times over the next five minutes, until the barman condescended to serve him.

“Ta,” said Dan, taking the pint and the handful of coins which comprised the change. He slipped the money into his pocket. “This is probably the most futuristic thing at the convention,” he said as he turned to face his young fat friend. “Beer at next year’s price.”

But the American had gone, and Dan was by himself. He hated drinking alone.

After that first drink and wandering around the public rooms of the hotel for a few minutes, still not seeing anyone he wanted to meet, Dan came across the second bar. This was much smaller than the main bar, and also had a direct entrance from the street outside which made it more like a pub – not many hotel residents used it.

He pushed the swing doors open and went inside, walking towards the bar. As he did, he became aware that everyone was turning to look at him. It wasn’t unusual for the regulars of any pub to turn their heads

towards the entrance whenever the door opened, to see who was coming in. But this wasn't like that. They weren't giving him a single quick glance, then carrying on with what they had been doing. Instead, conversations died, cigarettes paused on their way to mouths, glasses stayed frozen at lips.

Trying to ignore all this attention, Dan focused on the impressive row of hand pumps at the bar. He looked at the barman, who was also staring at him. There was something odd here – and everyone else seemed to think that it was Dan.

"A pint of best, please." As the barman reached for a glass and started to fill it, Dan sensed the others in the pub slowly come to life and continue where they had left off.

"Thanks," he said, handing the man a fiver and reaching for his glass – a pint, he was surprised to see, a real pint, not one of those metric measures.

But before he had his hand on it, the barman pulled the glass back an inch or so. "Here," he said, looking at the money Dan had given him, "what's this? None of your foreign money, guv." He held the note up to the light. A gas light.

Dan looked over his shoulder, at the men in their dark clothes, with their flat caps and thick moustaches. They were all men, no women, all of them living ghosts from . . . when would it be? Probably the first decade of the century. The interior of the place wouldn't have changed much since those days, only here there was no cigarette machine, no juke box, no fruit machines, no video games, and almost certainly no live sex show on Friday and Saturday evenings.

"How much do you want?" Dan asked.

"Three ha'pence," said the barman, putting down the fiver and pushing it towards Dan, as though it was something particularly disgusting that he wished he hadn't touched.

This was going to be difficult. There was no such thing as a penny any more, let alone a half penny. Dan dug his hand into his pocket and brought out a selection of pounds, fifties, twenties and ten pences. He laid them on the bar.

"Penny ha'penny," he said. "A wonderful invention, you know, inflation. Look, I've just arrived and this is all the money I have. Can't you take some? It's worth far more than the price of a pint."

"This is a pub, guv," said the barman, "not a bank."

"How about putting it on the slate? I'll pay next time I'm here." Seventy or eighty years.

In answer, the barman pointed to the sign above the Guinness mirror which proclaimed *No Credit – This Means You*.

**D**an could have walked out of the door, there was no need to stay, but he refused to be beaten. He wanted to try the same sort of beer that his great grandfather would have drunk.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Dan, collecting all his money. "I'll trade you for that beer, swap it for something. You've already poured it, can't waste it."

"Won't be wasted, I'll drink it meself."

But Dan could tell he'd caught the barman's interest, and also that of the three men who stood at the bar, smoking their rough tobacco and talking in their funny voices. He had become the centre of their attention.

"I'll give you my watch."

"Ha!" laughed the man next to Dan. "Bust, is it? A

watch for a jar of ale. Ha!"

"No, it works fine. Look." Dan held out his arm, showing them all his wristwatch.

"That's a watch?" said one of the other men at the bar.

"Yeah, course. It's a quartz crystal digital watch. Not seen one before?"

"This is a watch," said the second man, pulling out his watch on its length of silver chain from the fob pocket of his waistcoat.

They were all staring at Dan's outstretched wrist as he said: "You tell the time from these numbers here. Also the day and the date. And the year, of course."

"Of course," said the barman, winking to the other three customers at the bar and smiling slyly.

Dan also smiled. He pointed to the face of the watch. "What does it say?"

"Tick tock, tick tock," said the first man, to roars of laughter from his friends. "That's what it says."

Dan joined in the laughter. "The numbers," he said. "Read them out."

The barman put his face close to the watch, squinting. "Fifteen," he said slowly, "thirteen, twenty-two . . . twenty-three . . . twenty-four."

"See?" said Dan.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"That's the time. Fifteen-thirteen. Twenty-four hour clock, you know, which means it's thirteen minutes past three."

The barman nodded his head, slowly, wisely, then took out his own watch. He flicked the cover open with his thumb nail, showed the watch face to Dan – half past seven – then put it away again.

"I'm from a different time zone," said Dan.

"That's why it says Saturday instead of Tuesday, I suppose."

"That's it." Dan noticed that the barman was having as much trouble keeping a straight face as he was. "And why it reads April when really it's . . ."

". . . July."

"And this last figure here, see, that's the year I come from."

The barman said nothing, and neither did any of the other men. Dan was wondering whether to add that his watch also turned into a lifeboat, when slowly the barman's smile widened. The man shook his head and laughed briefly, sliding the pint towards Dan.

"Your tale's worth a pint, guv, even if your watch ain't," he said. "Have it on the house."

Dan held out the glass to the barman, then to the men by his side. "Cheers." They all raised their drinks to return the toast as Dan took a deep draught. It was awful.

He spent a couple more hours there, allowing his new friends to buy round after round, while he kept them amused with tales of pocket calculators and credit cards, of health food and nuclear submarines, of electric razors and plastic onions, of see-through hats and television quiz shows.

All good things must come to an end, although Dan had never understood why, and finally he stood up and said goodbye. The men at the bar returned his farewell, then watched as the strange chap with the odd clothes and no money got up and went out of the door and back where he came from.

Dan stepped through the swing doors and into the

hotel lobby, letting them shut behind him. Then he turned around and went back inside again.

The smell was different, cannabis now mixed with the tobacco smoke and the aroma of warm beer, and the sound was very different, drowning out almost all conversation – Tax Exile, this month's pubescent rock band, howling out their current number one, "Wanna-fuckmagranny" – and most of all the people were different.

The dead were where they should have been, nothing more than fading sepia images in old forgotten photograph albums.

Dan was back.

Unemployment, starvation, censorship, inflation, rioting, martial law, cannibalism, depression, rationing, dictatorship.

And there was a war on.

But none of that would make any difference to the convention.

After registering, Dan returned to the main bar and sat down to flick through the programme and see what he was going to miss. The same old inevitable names appeared on the panels or as speakers, some of his contemporaries and friends and rivals: Terry Bland and Jeff Rush and Pete Longman. There were even a couple of Americans over: Thomas Whale, who was guest of honour, and Alvin Laurel.

Dan hadn't met either of the Americans, and he had no particular wish to encounter Whale. The man was forever making speeches and writing long articles about how he was retiring from science fiction because he wasn't properly appreciated as the Great Artist he so obviously was – and this after single-handedly trying to destroy the field by writing two dozen shitty novels in as many months. The trouble was that he kept on writing. Worse, he'd won several awards. Perhaps that wasn't too surprising; there were so many prizes floating around that anyone who had a few friends to vote for them would eventually pick up one or two.

Laurel had also collected a couple of awards, in spite of the fact that the stories concerned had been exceptionally good. Most of the stuff that won was instantly forgettable or totally dull, if not both, or else too long to bother reading. Quantity equalled quality.

Dan remembered the old line, *It might be bad, but is it science fiction?* He smiled and raised his glass to his mouth just as a heavy blow to his left shoulder sent half his pint slopping over the rim and onto the floor.

"Wotcha, Kilgore. How's it going, mate?"

Jeff Rush stood next to him, grinning, his arms full of books, magazines, papers, scripts. He always seemed to carry a library wherever he went.

"Sorry about that," he added. "I'd buy you another if I wasn't so broke. I'm completely flat, had to raid the wife's piggy bank to come here." He sat down opposite Dan. "Well, how's it going?" he repeated. "I've just sold a six book package to Mace Books. Just crap for money, you understand. You ever met the editor, Karen Idle? I had to sweat my bollocks off giving her one orgasm for every chapter. That's why I only got up to six books, but for five thousand each and six percent what can you expect? Signature next week, then I can buy you a drink."

"What would you like, Jeff?"

"Oh that's fantastic, Dan, you shouldn't, make it a

Remy Martin, on the rocks, a double, that's lovely, mate, fantastic."

Dan went and bought the drinks, wondering as he waited which was the greater fantasy – the stories Rush told about his sexual conquests or those of the book deals he had lined up. If he spent more time writing than talking about it, he could produce something quite average. He had plenty of imagination, in a limited sort of way – which was exactly what was needed. Readers didn't want anything too way out, something they couldn't understand. Or maybe they did, but they'd never get a chance to read it because that wasn't what editors wanted. They wanted the same old stuff as before, a guaranteed minimum sale, something they could issue with a Frank Steele spaceship on the cover. Anything by Thomas Whale, for example.

Almost as soon as Dan returned with the drinks, Rush spotted someone else he knew on the other side of the room, and he began picking up his reference library. "Afraid I've got to go," he said. "I'll see you later, Dan. Fantastic to talk to you. Thanksforthedrink."

Then he was gone.

Dan felt better now. This was what he came to cons for, to see his fellow writers and talk shop. It was the only time in the year when he saw any other authors. Stuck in a tiny room with only his typewriter for company, he sometimes felt he was all alone in the world. He often got depressed, thinking what a crazy way it was to make a living – inventing stories, creating people who had never existed and events which had never happened . . . and never would. Maybe he'd feel less miserable if he was more successful. Like Rush?

He smiled at the idea, watching as Rush escorted a young lady out of the crowded room just as Pete Longman entered. Dan raised his arm and moved his wrist approximately fifteen degrees from side to side. Longman came over to him.

"Dan, old buddy, just the man I want to see. Can I get you a drink?"

"My favourite phrase from my favourite author. Mine's a pint of rubbish, Pete. Ta."

Longman's first novel had been published to rave reviews five years ago. It had been a slow, dense, heavy book, with dozens of very introspective characters. Dan had got halfway through it. Since then Longman had turned out one book a year, each one slower, denser, heavier, with more and more characters. The reviews had got better and better, but Dan believed they were killing Longman as an author. He was becoming too specialised, concentrating on one minor segment of a few degrees of the spectrum. Dan liked Longman, and he hated his books – books which seemed so out of character for the extrovert alcoholic who had written them. The books sold very badly, only one had appeared in paperback, and Pete Longman had to supplement his income by cleaning windows.

In under a minute Longman was back, two brimming pints in his hands, obviously having pushed his way to the front of the queue.

"We've got to do something about this, Dan," he said, waving his glass around.

"I know, terrible ale."

"No, no, no, no, no, not that." He took a mouthful. "You're right, we'll fix that next. But look at everyone here, all drinking and having a good time. For God's sake, don't they know there's a war on?"

"Maybe that's why they – I mean we, look at us – that's why we are drinking like this, enjoying ourselves, trying not to think about the war. Drinking like there's no tomorrow, 'cos maybe there ain't none."

"You don't get my point. There's nothing in the programme about the war. Sf fans are like ostriches, putting their heads in the sand, burying themselves in ancient copies of *Stupendous Stories*, reading juvenile wish-fulfilment fantasies – or even worse watching *Star Legion* movies. But you try telling that to a fartface like Whale. You met him yet?"

"No."

"He's up in his suite, holding court, surrounded by sycophants. He's worse than anything you've heard about him. God, I hate that man! Say, maybe we should kill him. Try and save science fiction. That would be a great finale to the con. A ritual sacrifice. Better than the usual banquet and fancy dress, all those wankers dressed up as galactic thugs."

"What about the war?" asked Dan as Longman paused for breath. "Has it affected you?"

"The bombs, you mean? No, not too much. It's down here on the south coast that you get most of the echoes, ripples, or whatever. But I gather the war's hit publishing pretty bad."

"You ever met an optimistic publisher? Whatever happens, it's always bad for publishing. Any excuse to go back on promises, cut schedules, reduce advances, postpone royalties."

"There's never been book rationing before."

"True. But if something is rationed, you get people queuing up for their one paperback a month – even those who never bought a book before, never read anything but the soccer results. Fifty million people over five, is it? Twelve books a year. Each. That's bad for publishing?" Dan finished his drink. "Another?"

"And the breweries aren't doing too badly."

"The government needs the revenue to pay the unemployed so the unemployed can buy beer so that the government can get the tax. Elementary economics."

"You realise, Dan, the world could end tomorrow."

"That long? Plenty more drinking time."

"You don't care, do you?" said Longman. "No one cares. This is reality, science fiction come to life, and no one takes any notice. Okay, I'll have another pint."

**L**ongman was wrong, thought Dan. You couldn't write science fiction about the war, because it wasn't a science fiction subject, not any more. It was here and now, today, mainstream, a topic for television reports and newspapers. Sf that dealt with specific contemporary issues usually became outdated before publication. What good was that? No reprints, no foreign rights.

The news had taken long enough to break in the British media. The rest of the world knew what was happening before the free press of London said a word. There was no way that people could suddenly find themselves in the middle of events which had occurred a few centuries previously and not think that something funny was going on.

Dan had been involved in at least half a dozen time bomb attacks, although today's had subjectively been

the longest. By coincidence, the first had been a bomb from the last war – he'd seen a doodlebug whizzing high above town, on its way to crash into the capital during 1944. Since then he'd boarded a bus which had turned into a tram, woken up one day and found that his flat had become a Thirties hotel bedroom, seen a horse-drawn fire tender race out from the local fire station, watched a farmer ploughing a field which had become a council estate thirty years previously, gone to the cinema and ended up watching a music hall programme.

All his experiences had spanned relatively few years, considering the age of the universe, and they had become more vivid and prolonged over the past few weeks. Nothing he had seen appeared to have come from the future; but that was because there was no future, the way he worked it out. This really was the war to end all wars.

News of the secret weapon (Dan had no idea who it was meant to be secret from – maybe the general public – as both sets of antagonists were allegedly armed with such devices) finally leaked out at about the same time as it was realised that there was actually a war going on. But time bombs could only be explained away by the war, so it was almost a relief to know there was a war.

Naturally Dan didn't believe in time bombs, it was too science fictional. He still had trouble accepting the idea that whatsisname and his pal had landed on the moon.

The war was being fought in Europe, like the First and Second World Punchups. Geographically in between Russia and the USA, neither of them was too upset about it; they didn't have shells smashing up their towns or feuding tanks causing traffic jams on their roads. A conventional war, like all those who were in favour of nuclear "defence" had predicted. Conventional in that each side was trying to beat the shit out of the other the old fashioned way. Fighting was confined to the battlefield, very civilised – except that mainland Europe was the battlefield, which happened to be full of cities and towns and people.

Both sides used time bombs, which disoriented the opposing troops and temporarily displaced them to try and fight, perhaps, a village of fourteenth century French peasants. Air to surface rockets against medieval knights in armour, bows and arrows against napalm.

And just as the guns of Flanders could be heard in Britain, so fragments of these time bombs would be hurled across the Channel and catch some helpless citizens and zap them a few decades into the past.

The Russians were the enemy, of course. Say something long enough and loud enough, finally it becomes true. Hence the war. Soviet spies, or maybe communist traitors in Parliament – before the Government had locked up all opposition MPs for treason – had stolen the secret of time bombs, otherwise the war would have been won by now. They said. But naturally the allies were winning, and victory was assured Any Day Now. Doubtless the Commie Soviet Russkie Reds said the same.

**L**ater Dan was pleased to see that George Wright had arrived. Although he was a generation older than Dan, Dan felt he had more in common with Wright than Rush or Longman. Wright had passed

one or two things his way, and he was also the only one of his associates who knew the sort of writing by which Dan made his living – science fiction only paid for his beer and fags, his dope and women . . . life's essential luxuries.

Soon after Dan had sold his first book, Wright had said: "Now that you're a professional, you'll find you only ever have three problems in your writing career." Then he had ticked them off, on index, middle and third fingers of his left hand. "Agents. Editors. Publishers."

Wright was at the bar with Terry Bland, talking about the latter's trouble with his new novel, as Dan joined them. Two years on the first chapter, and it still wasn't right. The older man was nodding sympathetically, but he rolled his eyes at Dan. Wright could finish a chapter over a single cup of coffee.

Bland had made his reputation from a handful of books, each of which had been hailed as a work of genius . . . by Bland. Unfortunately, they sold and sold and sold, and he could make a good living by averaging a book every two years. One had even been made into a television serial. Bland had the Midas touch. There was no doubt that he worked hard, and he probably had struggled for two years over the first chapter of his new opus. Hard work more than made up for his lack of talent.

Wright was good, very good, but he'd written far too much for anyone to take serious notice of his work. He had been told he was a hack writer, and so he hacked. A book a month to pay for his wife, his children, his au pair, his mistress, his house, his swimming pool, his accountant.

"Written any good books lately?" asked Wright, as he led Dan away from the bar, leaving Bland to continue thinking over his first chapter.

Dan shrugged as they sat down. "You know how it is."

Wright nodded. "Yeah. Christ, I wish I was your age again. I'd never write much either, there's too many other better things to do. Look at that!" He nodded towards the woman who had just come into the lounge. His cigar stood up vertically, and he sucked on it hungrily. "All tit and long black hair. Give me half an hour with her."

"Half an hour?"

"It takes us old blokes that long."

"You don't know her?"

"No. Should I? Who is she?"

"Jean Welch, managing director Wolf Books. I'll introduce you. Hey, Jean!"

The woman looked around, then smiled as she saw who had called her. Dan watched her walk across the room. It was easy to tell what a good author Wright was by the conciseness and accuracy of his description. All tit and long black hair. She came and sat down, crossing her legs, all thigh and yellow velvet boots.

"George, this is Jean Welch, my favourite publisher. Jean, meet George Wright. With a guy like him, you wouldn't need any other authors . . . except me, of course."

They talked, and the drink flowed like alcohol.

"No," said Wright, "I haven't written any sf for eight or nine years. I leave it to those with more talent, like Dan here. He's the best, you know, he really is. If only he'd take it seriously, he could leave the others standing."

"I know," said Welch.

They both looked at him, and Dan looked at his pint, knowing that each was lying. George had never read anything he'd written, and Jean had never published one of his books.

"And how about you, Dan?" asked the woman. "What are your current projects?"

An unwritten book was a project, a manuscript was a property, a published book was a product.

"I'm writing a novel," said Dan. "A straight science fiction novel."

Welch shook her head slowly in despair; Wright nodded his head slowly in resignation.

"Very hard," said Welch, "to sell a new sf book these days. A single novel, that is. Why not a trilogy, or better still a series?"

"What about Robert Old?" asked Dan. "You bring out all his latest junk. Boring, dull, tedious, unimaginative rehashes of stuff he did three or four decades ago."

"He's an established big name author, he's written several classics – that's what the readers want."

A classic was any book which had been reprinted.

Dan picked his words carefully, he didn't want to sound either angry or rude. The Wolf science fiction list consisted almost entirely of American authors, with three exceptions – and one of those had been dead twenty years. Jean Welch controlled about a quarter of the combined sf output of British publishers . . . and what she knew about science fiction could be written on the back of a matchbox.

"The readers don't get much choice" said Dan. "do they? They can only buy what you publish."

"The market for sf is dead," insisted Welch. "Unless you want to do a *Space Patrol* book. We've just bought the British rights for that, to tie in with the twelfth television repeat."

"I know what you mean," said Wright, "and I saw it coming. Take a look at any bookshop, under the science fiction section – if there still is one – and you'll find that half the books are blood and guts so-called horror novels which couldn't frighten a five year old. Half the rest are some sort of fantasy: Swords-men and slavegirls; rewrites of some little-known foreign mythology; magic and mysticism; talking termites that have anthropomorphic adventures. You know the kind of crap I mean."

"But you must be doing some science fiction," said Dan to the woman.

"Of course. Thomas Whale for a start. He's writing a tetralogy for Spear, and we've got an option on the British rights."

"How about Laurel? He's very good, but nothing of his has appeared over here."

"My schedule's full for the next two years. But we have picked up the rights to a ten volume epic by another young American, maybe you've heard of him. Bruce Newcome."

"Newcome? Yeah, I've met him." Met him, but never heard of him. A ten volume epic? "What's he written?" Dan kept up with most sf, bought all the magazines, but he didn't recognise Newcome's name or else he'd have said something when he saw him.

"Don't know if he's written anything yet. A proposal, that's all anyone has to write. Once a project is accepted, then you have to start."

Right then Dan decided that he'd had enough. Enough of Jean Welch, enough of the convention, enough of everything.

He stood up, nodded to Wright. "Excuse me," he said to the woman, "but I've got to leave before I throw up."

**H**e paused at the top of the steps outside the hotel. The guard with the sub-machine gun glanced briefly at him, then Dan continued his exit, through the narrow gap in the barbed wire barricade.

It was beginning to grow dark, he hadn't realised it was so late. At a convention he lost all sense of time.

He hardly noticed the lines of derelict cars on either side of the street, their carapaces rusting, tyres flat, windows broken. He walked along the centre of the road for a couple of minutes: that was the safest place, away from the dark pavements where infant urban guerrillas lurked in wait for their unwary prey. Then he crossed to the seafront and went down to the beach.

Crunching his way across the pebbles and shingle, he finally reached the sand. He sat with his back against the damp rotting groyne, drawing aimless patterns in the sand for a few minutes, before picking up a variety of sea-rounded stones and hurling them into the lifeless water thirty yards away. It was cold and grey in the twilight, there wasn't anyone else in view. There were miles of empty sand, but a dark figure came towards him from the high-water mark and sat down by his side.

The stranger pulled out a bottle from his pocket and offered it to Dan, saying: "Hi, I'm Alvin Laurel. Have a rum."

Dan looked at him in surprise. "Oh . . . I'm . . ."

"I know who you are. Always wanted to meet you. Read all your books, think they're great. It was your first novel that turned me onto sf, made me want to be an author."

"Jesus, you make me feel like a geriatric. I know I feel like one sometimes." Dan took the proffered bottle, looking at Laurel, through the gloom from the corner of his eye. Was he taking the piss? "Thanks." He drank a mouthful, then handed it back. "You don't mean what you just said, do you?"

"No. But I've always wanted someone to say that to me – and I thought you might, too. I saw you leave the hotel, and I really did want to meet you. Keep tabs on the foreign competition, you know. I've already talked to . . ." His voice faded, his eyes widening as he stared beyond Dan, out to sea.

**D**an looked around in time to see the high curved prow of the Viking longship slide out of the phosphorescent sea and come to a halt on the sand. It was old and weather-beaten, its planking dented and patched. The huge red and white sail was swiftly furled, and in under a minute a score of berserkers had leapt ashore and were running up towards the promenade. Dan wasn't very impressed; he'd seen it all before at the cinema. But the warriors did their best, whooping and screaming blood-curdling cries as they swung their mighty battleaxes and swarmed up the steps to begin the raping and pillaging which was expected of them.

"Straight out of a sword and sorcery book," said Laurel. "I bet they've made for the convention hotel, they'll probably win the fancy dress."

"More likely gone to try and sell the rights to their autobiographies."

"Translations are always difficult. Anglo-Saxon audiences prefer stuff originally written in their native tongue."

"You sound like one of the enemy."

"A Russian?"

"A publisher." Dan considered explaining to the American something about the Vikings and their significance in English history, in relation to the Angles and Saxons, but he was too drunk. This was the first time he'd been time bombed with someone else, and he noticed that Laurel's reaction was similar to his own. After the initial surprise, he'd accepted it without alarm or fright or amazement or any other discernible emotion.

"Do you believe that story about time bombs?"

"It fits," said Laurel, taking a swig from his bottle, "so why not?"

"How come it suddenly appeared in all the papers, on the news, at the same time? It sounds like something made up to fit the facts. It's too simple, it explains everything, it's phoney. We didn't even know there was a war on till a month ago – and I'm not sure that there is, it's just another lie. The big lie that people will believe easier than a lot of little ones. If the government tells you one thing, you can be sure that it's another."

"Everyone knows that."

Dan had opened his mouth to continue, now he closed it. Everyone knew that? Did they?

"So what do you think?" prompted Laurel, when Dan continued to sit in silence.

"Apocalypse. Plague. Pestilence. Starvation. Death."

"Sounds like a good plot. What about characterisation?"

"It's the war," Dan continued, ignoring him. "It's bound to become nuclear. No one has weapons without using them, particularly if they're losing. And someone's bound to be losing. I reckon the button has already been pushed. Or will be – in the near future – and the whole space-time continuum has been ripped asunder."

"Very sci-fi."

"And it's getting closer, we're getting closer. That's why these so-called time bombs are becoming more frequent, it's because we're approaching the temporal epicentre. Not long now and . . . the end. There'll be no sequel to that, it's the final volume in the series. It might be only here, Europe, but that's enough for those of us who are unfortunate enough to live here."

"Cheer up, have another drink."

Dan had another drink. As he passed the bottle back, he noticed the smoke and flames as they began to rise from the convention hotel. Laurel had been right about the Vikings' destination, and now they were sacking the building. Any minute they'd be back with their loot, Jean Welch slung across the brawny shoulders of their chief.

"Look at that," he said.

"And look at that," said Laurel.

Dan turned. To the south, above and beyond the longship, the evening sky had suddenly flared into a halo of golden yellow, as bright as any summer sunrise. They watched in silence for the light to dim.

But it didn't.

Next came the vibration, very little at such a distance but enough to cause a few ripples in the lifeless tide and even shift the loose sand beneath them. Finally



there was the sound – rolls and rolls of distant thunder that went on and on and on.

Gradually the few stars in the sky became covered and disappeared, veiled by the dark plumes of smoke from the land or by the ominous clouds which had formed above the horizon.

Laurel glanced from the glow of the burning hotel to the glare of the wasted continent, then took a long swig from his bottle. "Too bad," he said.

"Yeah," said Dan. The only thing he could think of

was all the books that he would never write, not now. "Too bad."

**David Garnett** wrote his first science fiction novel when he was 19, and another four books followed over the next three years. Since 1970 he has written two more novels, both unpublished, and a few short stories. He is currently not writing an epic fantasy trilogy, a science fiction series or a major speculative novel. His favourite colour is red.

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# LETTERS

Some of our readers will doubtless already be aware of the extraordinary prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act which recently led to Dave Britton of Savoy Books being gaoled for 28 days, but many will not, because considering its widespread implications the case has received remarkably little publicity. We print below a letter from Michael Moorcock outlining some of the facts and implications of the case, but before proceeding to that there are some other points to be made.

Firstly in response to defence submissions concerning lack of guidance as to what might be considered obscene, the Judge in the case reportedly said that the only way to be certain not to commit an offence was not to make one's living by selling literature that could possibly be obscene. This obviously puts an absurd and impossible onus on the bookseller (and others in the publishing chain). If interpreted logically it would lead to the disappearance from bookshops of most fiction above the Enid Blyton level: it would certainly make retailers think more than once about stocking a magazine which published such stories as "The Brothel in Rosenstrasse" or "Cheek to Cheek".

Of course the argument is supposed to be that serious work is okay: it's the degrading, hardcore pornography that gets punished. But this wasn't so in the Savoy case: among the books prosecuted were titles published by Grove Press (publishers of Ballard and Burroughs), who are hardly typical pornographers.

The case is of particular interest to us and – we assume – to our readers because David Britton and Michael Butterworth are kindred spirits. They have gone out on a limb to publish good imaginative fiction. (And it was, as Michael Moorcock points out, their publication of erotica by Samuel Delany and Charles Platt which in part aroused police hostility.) It may prove to be an isolated case ... but it may also prove to be the thin end of a particularly dangerous and unwelcome edge, especially in a world where the views of Chief Constable John Anderton are given increasing prominence. Britton and Butterworth deserve all our support.

Dear *Interzone*,

As you've no doubt now heard Chief Constable Anderton's crusade to clean-up Manchester has led his men to raid Dave Britton's bookshops some thirty times. Particularly unhappy about his publication of Delany's *Tides of Lust* and Platt's *The Gas* they became chary of prosecuting him on these and settled for six other works of fiction found in one of his shops (remainders originally published in the USA). Those books have been on sale here since 1973, in places like Books and Music. Dave is now the first person to go to prison under the revised Obscene Publications Act for selling non-pictorial, as it were, books. Mike Butterworth currently faces

an identical charge and presumably an identical sentence. As publishers of Savoy Books, who published Langdon Jones's *Eye of the Lens*, several titles of mine, others by Treece, Jack Trevor Story, Harlan Ellison, Jim Cawthorn and an issue of *New Worlds*, Britton and Butterworth went bankrupt last year as the result of an optimistic series of print-runs and above-average advances to authors. Their publishing is now limited to what revenue can be supplied from shops which seem quite literally under siege. The effect of indiscriminate raids is, of course, to remove stock from sale: thus no income to the shop. They still intend to get *Savoy Dreams* out some time this year, assuming the police don't continue their attacks. This anthology contains new work by me, M. John Harrison, William Burroughs and others. If both editors are in prison at the same time, there could be a delay...

On the very morning Dave Britton came out of Strangeways the police raided one of his shops and took away large quantities of stock. "Tell Britton we haven't forgotten him," said the policeman in charge of the raid.

There are several issues involved in this case. Not least, of course, is the issue of censorship. If six rotten 'sex novels' can be seized and their seller imprisoned today, how soon will it be before, say, borderline political/sexual stuff, in particular is prosecuted? *Tides of Lust* and *The Gas* are both pretty dreadful pieces of writing but presumably the police decided there might be support for the authors if these were not dropped from the charge. They are more 'obscene' than the so-called 'sex novels'. So the jury got *Two Suspicious Girls* instead. They were asked, from marked passages, to decide if they were obscene or not. They decided they were. Dave had already admitted to selling them. He was found guilty therefore of selling obscene articles. The judge seemed keen to have someone he could make an example of, and said so in his summing up. He sent Dave to prison.

The books stink, but censorship, particularly by these methods, stinks worse. Legislation in the 60s and 70s aimed to stop indiscriminate raids, prosecutions and so on. It's a sign of the times I suppose that it's all starting up again. Imprisonment is a harsh punishment for a victimless crime of this kind.

I heard the other day a rumour that Dave Britton hadn't actually gone to jail. I hope the readers of *Interzone* aren't also saying 'It can't happen here'. *Compendium* and *Hasslefree* have just had all their drug books taken by the Obscene Publications Squad. It could get a lot worse. In the meantime concerned readers can write to Savoy at 91 Oldham Street, Manchester, and learn the whole story. Perhaps some might even want to help.

With best wishes,

**Michael Moorcock**

Dear *Interzone*.

Angela Carter's "Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" and Keith Robert's "Kitemaster" were my personal favourites of the *Interzone* fictions; both very powerful writers producing very powerful writings. (Certainly Poe's Gothicky/psychology is a perennially rewarding field, especially so perhaps for Angela Carter). Michael Moorcock's "Brothel in Rosenstrasse" is something I'm reserving judgement on. Far too discursive for my taste, the novel was one of the few Moorcock tales I've not particularly liked, possibly for no more reason than the fact that it seems even more atypical than most of his current work – apart from various aspects such as the second sentence reminiscent of 'Gloriana's' palace, and the similar temporal setting to "Byzantium Endures". I found the *Interzone* version worked better as a story than the novel version; more concentrated, perhaps.

You seem to have decided, wisely, to concentrate on fiction rather than non-fiction in the form of criticism and reviews. On the other hand, this has made your reviews seem more like space-fillers: perhaps in the future you may have a longer, more extensive column? One thing I missed was graphics, and perhaps some of the many aspiring artists in the fanworld could see their work in future issues of *Interzone*.

It seems to me you've gone for the solid reputations in the first issue. You've also set a very high standard by doing so. I'd like to see this direction kept up, but also perhaps some experiments, the nature of which can only suggest themselves to you as time goes by. I desperately hope *Interzone* succeeds and, above all, expands in readership. I also hope you succeed in your aim of attracting new writers as well as readers.

Andy Sawyer

Birkenhead

Dear *Interzone*.

This is all purely personal opinion, but this opinion is – disappointing. Immaculate printing, but desperately in need of illustrations to break blank pages of print, and a better variety of stories, too. The M. John Harrison piece was unnecessarily involved with the act of vomiting, had no real plot, substance or proper ending. I gave up on Angela Carter's piece, which seemed to have no rhyme or reason, and as for the pornography of Michael Moorcock, I have little to say. I have skipped paragraphs of it searching desperately for some kind of story line, and didn't find it. I refuse to believe that in the deluge of manuscripts you could not have found something better than that to include!!! I write erotica, and I would never ever write anything as crude as that piece. Never. Outraged Dorothy taking to the typewriter? No, upset, more than anything, that someone could write that and call it literature.

I was enjoying John Sladek's story until it dissipated itself into an uninteresting ending, as if he couldn't find a way of finishing it. But the star, the whole magical wonder of the man, the one who made it all worth while, Keith Roberts. To me, he is one of the finest writers around at the moment, he seems capable of making the most absurd and obscure world believable, witness "The Signaller", my all time favourite novella in a veritable stack of anthologies I've just gone through.

Dorothy Davies

Faringdon

Dear *Interzone*,

*Interzone* is a fiction magazine, but I believe that there should be a certain amount of non-fiction included, say one article &/or interview with a featured author per issue, an expanded reviews section, perhaps twice as long, and a letters column. The reviews, by the way, were clear and concise: professional. But why no artwork at all? I'm not an SF art aficionado (in fact, a lot of illo's leave me totally cold), but they do help to break up the print a little.

It's interesting that 4 of the 5 stories were historical or pseudo-historical in nature or content (a deliberate attempt to escape from space-operas?) Harrison's "The New Rays" was interesting: the horror began murmuring ¾ of the way through, but really came to the fore only after I finished the story, laid the magazine down, put my head on the pillow, and turned out the light...

Keith Roberts's story may not be from the Pavane canon, but is instantly recognisable as being from the same stable, and is of the same high standard as the novel.

I don't know how factual Angela Carter's beautifully written account of the formative influences in the early life of Edgar Allan Poe is; I can only say that if it isn't 'true' it ought to be: excellent.

Sladek's "Guesting" is fairly typical *New Worlds* stuff: interesting, intellectually stimulating, but somehow incomplete: it's good at what it is, but what is it? I always find this sort of story ultimately unsatisfying.

The Moorcock is a very nicely written piece of historical pornography, but is it SF? Is it meant to be SF? If not, why is it included in *Interzone*?

A good start. So long as the standard doesn't fall from this generally high beginning, *Interzone* could well see out the '80s. Let's hope so.

David V. Barrett

Harrogate

Dear *Interzone*.

No doubt too many people before me have made the unfunny remark that, to judge from the cover of your second issue, the sun is already setting on *Interzone*. A look inside the issue nevertheless confirms this impression.

The Ballard piece, though as evocative and complex as any Ballard, is nevertheless more a relic than a radical departure. That which was radical twenty years ago simply cannot seem radical now. Whatever the story's other merits (and you know how much I love Ballard's fiction myself), this is anything but fresh. And it is your lead item. A piece of pure nostalgia.

Your other item by a known name – the Disch poem – is equally disappointing, though for different reasons. First, I question the notion that *Interzone* is the right place for the romanticized obituary of an American science-fiction writer. I hoped to see the birth of writers in your pages; not the record of their deaths. Second, I question Tom's judgement in the actual writing of the poem, which seems to me to embody the worst excesses of eulogies, almost to the point of self-parody. Was this poem not bought simply so that you could put Tom's name on the cover, as opposed to that of the lesser-known writer whose work the poem displaced? Where is your courage? I should have thought that the large subscription base you have built up would be enough to enable you to publish work with complete disregard for the status of the writers.

The long story by Andrew Weiner has some merit: certainly, he's obviously trying hard. Yet it's about as exciting as something out of a 1966 copy of *Ambit*. And could have conveyed its content equally well at half the length.

Rachel Pollack's story is likewise far too self-indulgently verbose by comparison with its content. This is decadent fiction, in the sense that, no matter how "finely-crafted", it reflects an awful conceit on the part of its writer.

Tellingly (I think) the two-page story by Alex Stewart is the only fresh piece of work. Granted, an old theme; granted, a very slight departure from conventional science fiction, and written without a great sense of authority. But atmospheric, sincere, and fresh. I expected most of your second issue to consist of such material – not just two pages out of 32.

I am also extremely disappointed that you have chosen not to introduce any graphics or art, and that you have restricted your features to the predictable editorial begging for subscribers, and the short reviews which in this issue begin with unperceptive and uncritical knee-jerk homage to yet another figure from the new wave stone age. Where is your spirit, your elan? You have to get rid of all the stale associations before you can establish a new direction. That means being prepared to offend some important people, rather than praising or even publishing their work regardless of its quality.

I suggest, too, that the magazine badly needs to build some sort of coherent image or character. And I doubt that an editorial collective can do this. As it stands, *Interzone* looks unfinished. A committee's selection of stories which have simply been stapled together as they stood. That's not a magazine; it is a newsletter. I was expecting you to develop genuinely radical features – at least a column expressing some slightly angry views, some new opinions.

Your own publicity mentions *New Worlds*. Yes, you have the *New Worlds* authors; but you lack its spirit – its wit and its willingness to take risks. Your financial caution is understandable. But I think you have it the wrong way around, in trying to guarantee yourself a circulation before you publish the magazine. If the magazine is any good it will build its own circulation. If you're not able to take that kind of risk, the magazine will reflect this attitude by seeming dull.

One is always forgiving of a first issue; there is nothing that has gone before it, to be used as a basis for comparison. Where a second issue is concerned, though, it's another matter. If there's no visible progress from that tentative first issue, people feel disappointed.

I realize, of course, that I am projecting my particular obsessions onto your project. If your project had already developed a character, direction, and implicit philosophy, I would agree that my views were irrelevant. But my complaint is the very lack of an apparent philosophy. You remind me a little of Ellen Datlow, fiction editor of *Omni*, who said, when I asked her what her policy was, "We just want to publish good stories." Ridiculous! As Fred Pohl put it, "A magazine should reflect the insanity of its editor." At this point I think the exact direction of *Interzone* is less important than that it should have a direction, rather than remain a bland, cautious committee product assembled by consensus.

Charles Platt

New York

John Clute replies:

As a whole, this rather galling letter is divided into three parts. There is a not unexpected assertion that *Interzone* has flunked the *New Worlds* comparison test, a claim whose mythological premises Malcolm Edwards deals with at some length in the Editorial. There

are negative assessments of most of the fiction in Interzone 2. And there is a general argument put forward about how a magazine should be edited.

Negative assessments first. I'm not going to try to claim that Charles Platt is wrong in dismissing the Ballard novella. All the same, it does seem singularly unproductive to attack something Ballard has written on the grounds that it obsessively recapitulates the same kind of material across the same range of icons that Ballard has always obsessively recapitulated, laving and re-laving the same iconic realm, though in a dazzling assemblage of guises. Ballard's "radical departure" was precisely to earn himself the right to be himself again and again, and it is precisely in that sense that I'd go along with Charles in saying that "Memories of the Space Age" is "as evocative and complex as any Ballard"...

There's not much to say about Charles's responses to the other stories, so I'll say nothing, and there's a great deal to say about his response to Tom Disch's public ode on the death of Philip K. Dick, so this will have to be perfunctory. There are two issues here. The first (not explicit in Charles's text) is the question of the proper decorum attending public utterances in an age whose self-consciousness about role-playing has come close to making it impossible to grant authenticity to any sort of performance. Erving Goffman has a lot to answer for. It has become a conventional wisdom (especially if you live in New York) that public performance, at heart, can only be a form of self-aggrandizement, and that as a consequence any attempt to emulate the traditional decorums of (say) eulogy must be cheaply opportunistic (without counterbalancing over-the-top confessional coups, and even these are obviously suspect, as stale as old Ballard after the thrill has gone). So it is obviously the case that Tom Disch took a considerable risk

in writing a public poem about a man he did not know well enough (or embarrassingly enough) to make "authenticating" noises about. And it could be argued – I think it may be partially true – that the podium he ascended to speak from existed mainly through his assertion that it did indeed exist. I think it was brave of him. We come to the second issue. Charles Platt thought it was a bad poem. (I do not). I think he considered it bad partly because of an inchoate disbelief in the legitimacy of its public order of being. He also just didn't like it, and with regard to the penultimate stanza (but only that) I'd go along with him – the washboard rhythms of the somewhat desultory shoptalk at this point seemed almost fatally to break up the long necessary flowing pulse of obsequy. But in general I thought the poem worked astonishingly well in a medium it was an act of bravery to attempt.

Finally, Charles puts forth some ideas about the proper editing of a magazine, quoting Frederik Pohl to the effect that "A magazine should reflect the insanity of its editor." Jeepers, Charles, I think lots of magazines should reflect the insanity of their editors. I mean it's a big world, but don't you think that insisting on this sort of criterion for authenticity sounds rather – I don't mean to be rude – decadent? It may be the case that editing by collective decision – like writing a public poem – founders on the no longer warrantable assumption that there is a community of letters, a common language we can aspire to, common decisions we can occasionally take. Or maybe not. Charles, I'm beginning to feel like Don Quixote. But let me say it again. Interzone is a forum minus Nero. Through its pages, good writers will speak in their voices to the world, as it continues to darken. And in that – to answer your final point – lies the editorial policy of Interzone, as I see it:

Open all hours.

## • IN REVIEW •

### **Myths of the Near Future** by J.G. Ballard (Cape, £6.95)

No surprises from the Polaroid Wizard in this latest album of dislocated visions, architectural pathos and interesting diseases – except perhaps how deliberately and emphatically repetitive he has become. After his sour, monochrome phase, from *Concrete Island* through his last collection, *Low-Flying Aircraft*, *The Unlimited Dream Company* announced a resumption of the prismatic splendour of his earlier manner. Here the title story and "News from the Sun" continue that return: each is an ornamental rearrangement of an earlier Ballard story (respectively "The Illuminated Man" and "The Voices of Time"). Also here are "Zodiac 2000", a contrived reprise of the fragmentations from *The Atrocity Exhibition*; "The Dead Time", back in occupied Shanghai with a rehearsal for *Dream Company*; and "Theatre of War", a partial recall of "The Killing Ground". Ballard has always been the annalist of obsession, preferring psychosis in its glamorous aspect, but with reference to himself rather than to his previous work. But this isn't self-parody, or exhaustion: *Low-Flying Aircraft* was more like that than this is. Ballard is obviously still wholly intoxicated by his own vapours, and conveys it as deliciously as ever. The secret of his magic is still the way he treats the bizarre as banal, framing the most lurid hallucinations as snapshots. The bolder ones here carry a few slighter stories, like "Having a Wonderful Time", postcards from a down-market Vermilion Sands, and "A Host of Furious Fancies", a Freudian "Cinderella" that doesn't work. (CG)

### **The Man Who Had No Idea** by Thomas M. Disch (Gollancz, £7.95)

Thomas M. Disch is science fiction's foremost comedian of manners. He has an unmatched eye and ear for contemporary American life, and that in itself constitutes a paradox, for SF does not normally deal in the exact observation of social nuances. Usually SF generalises and mythicizes, producing bright, flat, colourful tales about anytime and anyplace. Disch's stories, by contrast, are mostly about

New York and the here-and-now. There are a couple of interplanetary stories in the present collection ("Concepts" and "Planet of the Rapes") but although good they are not typical. "The Vengeance of Hera", "The Black Cat" and "Josie and the Elevator" are more characteristic Disch: stories of marriage, loneliness and paranoia, each lightly brushed with the fantastic. Or consider "The Grown-Up" as a perfect example of Disch's art: the story of a ten-year-old boy who wakes up to find himself a man. No short story that I know expresses the wonder of the ordinary as effectively. This returning to the commonplace is what Disch's writing is all about; it is the quest of a poet. There are few 'gosh-wow' ideas here, and in that sense the title of the book is ironically apt. The story "Understanding Human Behaviour" might have provided a more appropriate, if drabber, overall title. Disch is one of the few authors for whom such a title, and such a project, does not seem presumptuous. (DP)

### **Alien Accounts** by John Sladek (Granada, £1.95)

This long-overdue third collection from Sladek contains most of his stories of "office life". The early "Masterson and the Clerks" is here, as well as the 1969 novelette "The Communicants" and six other spiky, gleaming pieces. Sladek can make the most sinister bureaucratic reality seem strangely lyrical, but above all he keeps you laughing. A book which every nine-to-five person should enjoy. (DP)

### **In the Valley of the Statues** by Robert Holdstock (Faber, £6.95)

A volume of clavey, clinging stories by science fiction's leading earth-lover. In "Earth and Stone" a time-traveller learns to mate with the soil, while in "Mythago Wood" a demented researcher makes it with a tree spirit – all told in a somewhat turbid prose which occasionally achieves eloquence. The chromium future has no appeal for Holdstock, and he is at his best when writing of Irish prehistory or the legends of the Dark Ages. (DP)

# GOLLANCZ SF

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