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THE NUCLEAR ISSUE?

interzone

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EDITORIAL

Even when the practical consequences of theoretical nuclear physics had hardly been thought through, sf and its non-generic predecessors had an obsession with the possibility of universal destruction. In the heyday of the European empires, there was something bracing about pretending to face unmoved the possibility of some eventual Fall: "Lo all our pomp of Yesterday/ Is one with Nineveh and Tyre." And when the slow crumbling of Western hegemony had begun for real, apocalyptic fantasies could arouse a new dog-in-the-manger sort of satisfaction. By then too, it was clear that universal destruction at the will of human beings rather than at the whim of Providence was not merely a handy story hook, but a practical possibility, one which had to be thought about if it was to be lived with or, if possible, prevented. It is worth stressing the nihilist and the stoic aspects of sf's contemplation of catastrophe, because both have as much to do with what makes stories popular and fashionable as the more serious, constructive tradition. It is perhaps significant of some change in the stock American complacency about the degree of risk the US runs that in 1984 we saw become popular a novel like Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* with its betrayed America still keeping beating its heart of purest populist gold.

All this has only a certain amount to do with stories themselves; once the subject of atomic war came into the sf vocabulary, it became just another gadget on which authors could hang their real preoccupation with story or with evocative background. When Walter Miller wrote *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, it is hard to believe that he was for long concerned with warning the world or indulging in even that religious version of gloating over destruction which is called the contemplation of the transience of worldly things: the book would not be as popular or as powerful if he had been. His concern was rapidly, perhaps immediately, with the quirky human individuals who appeared in his mind's eye as he thought of the survivors of nuclear war, writing as he was at a time when it still seemed there might be some; his monk illuminating a wiring diagram has become a popular image partly because of its ironies, partly because of its simplicity and consoling humanity.

A magazine like *Interzone*, known to be less concerned than some rivals with purely commercial values, is always liable to be charged with political indoctrination. One of the editorial team is a full-time worker for CND; others are members; others yet again dissent from the unilateralist stance without giving any house-room at all to the idiocies of deterrence theorists. In producing an issue which includes three stories about the shadow of the Bomb, however, we are all of us more concerned with editing a magazine, with presenting our readers with good stories, than with promulgating a political line. In a time when people are thinking seriously about nuclear war, it is inevitable that that contemplation will produce some good stories. Here are three of them.

Roz Kaveney

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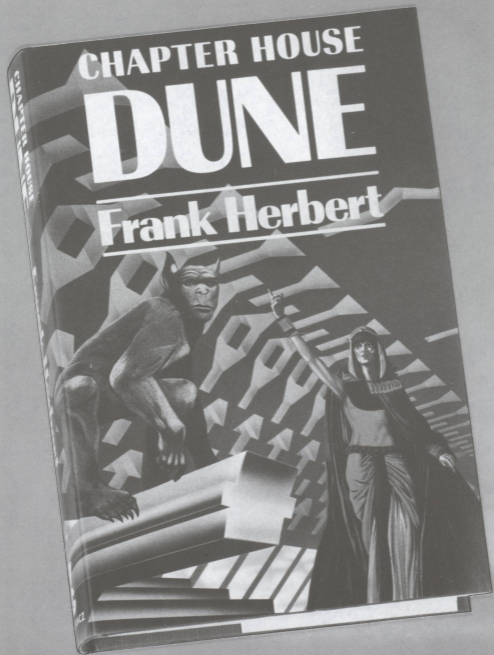
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COMPETITION WINNER

WAR AND/OR PEACE

Oh God. Just as I am slipping an apple into my pocket, my arm is grabbed and twisted viciously behind my back. *Shit*: nicked knocking *food!* Righteous loathing fills the eyes of the fanatical shoppers aggressively competing for crap. I flinch, anticipating a stiff punishment. The apple falls to the floor and splatters, full of worms.

Damn it; I didn't even want the crappy apple! I stole it to recapture the excitement of the days when things were worth stealing; when the supermarket was a magical treasure house dealing in goods more real than reality. I remember a glittering pendant sparkling amid constellations of imitation diamonds. In a jungle of artificial flora, a spray of silk leaves, dyed to evoke the poignant mellowness of Autumn. A handheld computer simulation of General Relativity. Their transcendental mysteries haunted me for weeks.

Probably it was only childhood that lent enchantment to those fakes. No sooner did I steal them than they reverted to dull glass, frayed cloth and busted silicon chips. Now the dark supermarket economy is driven by madness and deals in fakes of fakes, and the most desirable good on display is a rotten apple, a treasure only by comparison with the dented tins and leaky bags that litter the ransacked shelves. The brilliant consumer bubble has burst, and with it the consensual dream. Pigs, do your worst!

I turn my head. Kevin is grinning evilly at me.

"Shit a bomb!" I scream. "You scared me out of my brain!"

Kevin looks even redder and more agitated than I do. Beads of sweat spangle his brow and darken his waistlength golden hair. Since his mother decided to whitewash her windows, he has been walking around draped in her old curtains—today the fluorescent pop-art nightmares from her eccentric sitting room. A few curious *Fairies* stare at the beautiful, terrifying boy in the psychedelic wizard's cloak, so out of place in this town where to be well-dressed

is a civic responsibility.

Since Kevin is my lover and our next-door neighbour (it is the presence of the Peace Camp, my father says, that has lowered property values and morale to the extent that someone like Kevin's Mum can move into the other half of our semi and do it up like a junkie disco), I cannot ignore him as everybody but the fairies is pointedly doing. I follow him out of the shop, his face still wreathed in an insolent smirk.

As we step into the sunlight, he spreads the curtains like a pair of brilliant wings and faces the dingy emporium like a creature in a vision; eyes shining, hair alight. Reflections rake the supermarket like machine-gun fire—bullets of light piercing the shadowy displays and momentarily transfixing the compulsive shoppers, stuffing their trollies with rubbish as if there is no tomorrow.

Long before the supermarket became a crappy copy of itself, I used to dream about shoddy, shadowy shops. What is just exasperating now seemed an ominous portent then. In my dream, Kevin would be glaring at me from behind the counter, grown up at last and finally revealed as a disappointment; his shining hair turned shabby brown, his snickering eyes dully evil.

As I approached him, I would imagine that the shelves were stacked with irresistible merchandise, the consummation of consumerism. Then the transcendent apparition would vanish. Kev would hand me a newspaper.

"I told you so!" he would say.

I would shiver as I unfolded the disintegrating rag, knowing that it reported the disaster we had all been dreading. Still, it was always a shock—

"REALITY COLLAPSES!!!" screamed the banner headline; the rest of the page occupied by a photograph that refused to resolve itself, a collocation of random dots. I would awake in desolation, still haunted by Kevin's harrowing smile.

"Isn't that just how it always is?" says Kevin, when I tell him about my dreams. "Out of unlimited possibilities, only one is realised. I stand on the threshold of adulthood, my career potentialities a package of overlapping wave functions. My Dad would have wanted me to be a scientist. My mother often thinks I should be an artist. I rather fancy myself as a football supremo. I end up a shop assistant with nothing to sell. An intermediary in virtual transactions. Oh God. An infinity of possible universes and I have to inhabit this shitpit!"

In Kevin's own recurring dream, he recapitulates the moment when his puppy was run over by a juggernaut. Kev is suddenly a toddler again, kicking his football to the dog, which bounds into the road after it just as a massive truck turns the corner. A bus coming in the opposite direction blocks his view.

In Kevin's dream, anything can have happened until the bus and lorry draw apart to reveal the burst black fur sack spilling intestines onto the tarmac. Through the strangely transparent bus, Kev sees Sambo's world-line as a wave of superimposed miraculous escapes. The puppy dodges all fourteen wheels and/or falls down the shelter of a manhole and/or bounces off the bumper and is thrown clear. Kevin is ready to cheer with relief. Then the road comes into view again, the dog dead, frustration knotting Kevin's tiny fists. On the side of the juggernaut, in red letters ten feet high, is written the single word: "CHOICE".

It infuriates Kev. A subscriber to the Many Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics, and he cannot persuade even his subconscious mind to collapse the wave function so that Sambo survives.

"You look repulsive," I say, Kevin is wearing one of his Mum's old dresses, iridescent silk embroidered with thousands of tiny mirrors, his football socks stuffed into the bodice. No wonder he lights up the world like a glitterball. No wonder he looks hot.

We have walked home together and are sitting in his Mum's front room: the hot sunshine permeating the brushstrokes on the whitewashed bay windows and making watery patterns on the black wallpaper. The morning's mail is lying on the coffee table. A glossy brochure epiphanising the virtues of defence with pictures of silvery missiles soaring over heaping sunlit clouds. A government booklet detailing the construction of a fallout shelter. A religious pamphlet promising that the aftermath of Armageddon will be literally a picnic—the centrefold shows a smiling cross-section of humanity sitting down to a spread in a woodland beauty spot. A duplicated circular inviting all Wimmins to a "Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Base.

Kevin's Mum brings us synthetic tea on a rattling tray of gaudy plastic crockery, sighs wearily, and goes off to the kitchen.

There are tears in her eyes as she slams the door. The street used to ring with her sickening boasts about her Boy Wonder (his father, so they say, was a whizzkid physicist at the Base, compensation for whose mysterious death has kept Kev's Mum in booze and bubblegummy trinkets ever since. Kev says that his Dad copped a massive whole-body irradiation just before Kev was conceived, and that Kev was maybe

the mutant superperson towards whom the whole nuclear programme had been unknowingly working, but only his extraordinary luminous hair looks abnormal to me).

Kev could read in his pram, do differential calculus in his playpen, was immersed in Schrödinger's Wave Equations when his contemporaries were still immersed in wet nappies, his Mum bragged.

She cannot understand how her precious infant prodigy can have grown into this dull and sullen stranger glowering at her from the kneehole under the sideboard; his appearance alarming, his manners atrocious, his intellectual powers jammed on the problem of resurrecting a dead dog. Probably she thinks his obsession with physics is a symptom of incipient schizophrenia. I wonder how she feels about her beloved son being a transvestite.

"What are you dressed like that for, anyway?" I ask.

Kevin gloatingly flaunts the invitation to the Dream. "I've been recruited into Lady Helga's bodyguard," he says. "We are going to the Wimmins' Peace Camp tonight."

I stomp across the window in a huff, thinking of the band of brawling hooligans who have formed an unholy alliance with the smarmy Lady Helga and her following of straight-laced, uptight ratepayers. Ostensibly a deterrent to dust-ups between the townspeople and the protesters, their tactics are to rampage around the Base, disguised as parodies of Peace Campers, harassing and terrorising the Wimmins and their satellites. They won't tolerate Kev.

"Shit! They will kill you!" I say.

Kevin is preening himself in front of the sideboard; mirrors reflected in mirrors, reflecting the ghastly room. The hideous dayglo furniture leaping out from the black walls and carpet is covered with garish knick-knacks, scatter cushions and sofa throws. Kev's psychotic paintings, full of blood and Glitto, menace us from the walls.

"Then you will just have to come and guard me," says Kevin. "Damn it, you look ugly enough to pass for a yobbo in drag".

I open the whitewashed window and stare out over the patio, the baroque polystyrene pots filled with sickly vegetables. I can see into our own garden. Mother is digging what looks like a grave. Father, on a step-ladder, is adding another layer of bricks to the wall. The striations of his previous labours stand out like geological zones on an exposed fault. Territory, Privacy, Security, Paranoia and Blind Panic. A pile of broken bottles, the intended crown of his handiwork, glitters in the sun.

A trio of Fairies saunters down the street. My father showers them with a torrent of abuse and a brick, which powders on the tarmac at their feet.

"The natives will be restless tonight!" he yells to my mother, not for the first time today.

The Fairies have been gathering for days, arriving on dusty feet or rusty bicycles, in dragging dresses made from old lace curtains, gauzy wings wired to their backs, tinsel fillets interwoven with wild flowers binding their long, flowing hair. Each one carries a wand tipped with a silver star.

There are said to be a million of them. They are headed for the Wall.

"Well, what are they going to do there, anyway?" I ask Kevin.

"Magic!" he replies. "They are going to wish the Base away!"

The ratepayers have procured a fleet of coaches for the expedition to the Base. Lady Helga is riding in the grandest one. She and the ratepayers sit at tables in the front; a bunch of old toads snapping at the conversational flies of discontent. The filth. The stink. The barbarity. The nudity. The downright arrogance of the Wimmin. Their flipping superstitions. They pray to a flaming totem pole with breasts, blast them.

Kevin and I are sitting with the rest of the bodyguard on a banquette at the back of the coach.

"It's the unification of science and magic," Kevin is saying. He believes that the deep structure of the human psyche is programmed with all the fundamentals of sub-atomic theory, subconsciously apprehended as religion, hence the extraordinary similarities between the physical and spiritual arcana. "The Fairies believe that the Base is just one manifestation of an infinite number of virtual realities occupying the same spot; particles from all of which are constantly being interchanged through Heisenberg loan mechanisms. They believe that if they insist upon observing something other than the Base, they can collapse the virtual particles into an alternate reality."

He is boring the bodyguard. They bat their painted eyelids at him and lick their painted lips. Their jewelry jangles as they crack their knuckles. They are even uglier than the Peace Wimmin; scraggy wigs under woolly hats, bolsters under baggy sweaters.

"We don't need wankers like you to tell us what they are up to, darling," says one of them. "We know what they are up to and we are not having it. It is them that are going to collapse and that's virtually real!"

He leans at Kevin. The ratepayers stare vituperatively at us. Then everybody's attention is claimed by our first sight of the Wall, rising above the trees in the distance, an immense monument to paranoia.

"POISED TO DETER—QUICK TO REACT" is the motto wrought into the arch above the massive iron gates.

As we get closer, we make out the art gallery that occupies the entire surface of the Wall: graffiti, cabalistic symbols, enormous portraits of the Goddess, wreathed in hearts and flowers. The whole of the low-flying aircraft that hit the Wall and nearly lit up the world has been bolted to the brickwork at the impact site—a gigantic mandala of flattened carbon fibre that hangs like a black sun over the squalid Peace Camp. The rickety huts, fashioned from flattened fuel drums, are festooned with trophies captured on raids over the Wall. The filthy compound, and the whole of the forest around, is crawling with Fairies. The sun is setting. The bodyguard bray with excitement, anticipating a horrendous carnival of violence.

The Wall was built when the Base finally gave up on fences. They said it would be visible from the moon, if anybody bothered to go there anymore, fifty feet of sheer, glazed brick, topped by razor spikes, bristling with watchtowers, constantly circled by patrols of pigs, squaddies and dogs—despite all of which

the Wimmin, naked, oiled and stoned, regularly surmount the Wall and run whooping through the Base, leaving a stench of stale woodsmoke everywhere, graffiti drawn in menstrual blood on the missile silos, and heaps of their easy vegetarian turds on the parade ground.

The fence that once protected the Base has been rebuilt around the Peace Camp Farm, to protect their seedy beans and shabby sheep from marauding townsmen. A platform for visiting speakers has been built beside the Main Gate. It is occupied by an intellectual-sounding Fairy, quietly speaking to the hushed crowd. Phrases like "collapse of the wave function," "perpendicular universes" and "virtual realities" wash over our heads as we make our way from the coach park to the platform.

"So you see," the speaker is concluding, "Physics and metaphysics is the same thing really. Nothing actually exists until it is consciously observed. It is our insistence on recognising the base that allows it to persist. If we can ignore it with sufficient conviction, it will go away."

"Did you hear that?" says an ecstatic Fairy, smiling at us as though we are all in bed together. "Isn't it so sort of, you know, amazing?" She confides that they have been training themselves for months to ignore what is right in front of their noses.

Lady Helga and her entourage have reached the foot of the platform.

"Order! Order!" Lady Helga is trumpeting; waving her arms at the completely silent crowd, "I demand the right to speak in the cause of balance!"

"Yes, balance!" Helga is booming from the platform. "The previous lecturer on theoretical sub-atomic particle physics has neglected to give us the whole picture, I believe. I don't think she truly brought her intellect to bear on the symmetry that is inherent in the system. If every particle were not balanced by a particle of opposite qualities, the whole structure would collapse.

"Take maleness and femaleness for example; opposite qualities that make up a harmonious whole. I know there are some women here who like to believe that they can do without men, and we all know how absurd and degenerate their lifestyles are, but what I would like to know is this: where did those children come from?"

There is a surge of spiteful laughter from the ratepayers. Kevin and I are sitting behind the platform, commanding a view of the sunset reflected off a row of neighing dentures, and Lady Helga's horsy bottom in a white pleated suit.

There is a hole in the backside of the platform, out of which a naked Peace Woomin wriggles, covered with mud. She reaches after herself to extract first her filthy wrapper, which she winds around herself, then a pair of sagging leather buckets slung on a groaning pole. She shoulders her load to the nearest field and empties the buckets into a patch of pumpkins. Another Woomin squeakily and squelchily embraces her, takes up her yoke and vanishes into the hole.

"I would like you to consider," Helga concludes, "that for jolly nearly half a century we have enjoyed perfect stability within this alliance, an oasis of peace in a crazy world, despite being faced by an utterly

ruthless and evil adversary. It is our determination to resist the enemy with all the strength at our disposal which has given you people the freedom to make your ridiculous protest. Deterrence has never been known to fail! Can you say the same for whatever you are going to put in its place?"

She comes down the steps flushed and triumphant, to the uproarious cheers of the ratepayers. The Fairies have ignored her speech in impatient silence. Now a self-styled Fairy Queen ascends the platform, waving a sparkler, and leads the crowd into a song.

We love the flowers, a million crystal voices sing in the gathering dusk,

We love the vegetables,

We love the children

And baby animals.

We want to live in a world of peace and harmony

With no more mi-i-siles, no more mi-i-siles, no more mi-i-siles, no more mi-i-siles.

The Fairy Queen appears to be on the verge of falling asleep. She gazes blearily at the scene, illuminated by the million flashlight bulbs in the Fairies' wands.

"You have to forget this Wall," she yawns. "This Wall is all in the mind. Forget it and it will melt away. All you must see before you is this beautiful, untouched forest."

She gestures vaguely at the derelict woods—shitpit, rubbish-dump, builders' yard and woodpile for a generation of Peace Campers; campaigning stamping-ground for a generation of concerned, cleaning-up townsfolk. The withered, mutilated trees grow out of a compost of knitting wool, baby clothes, paper flowers, confetti, paint pots and busted mirrors, steeped in disinfectant, detergent, deodorant and insecticide; to which the Fairies have just added a top dressing of Glitto.

"I didn't come all this way to listen to all this half-baked mystical claptrap," I complain. The Fairy Queen is yawning on about squirrels, bunnies, birdies, badgers and hedgehogs, elves and goblins and supernatural lost races, steeped in the forgotten wisdom of the forest.

Kevin and I are sitting in the cab of Lady Helga's coach. We command a wonderful view of the entire cast of stock characters. In the back of the coach, the ratepayers are curling their vindictive tongues around scandal and sandwiches. Outside, the bodyguard are bellowing and kicking each other in the bolsters, limbering up for a night of rape, murder, arson, riot and mayhem. The pigs look on impassively.

The Peace Wimmin are sitting around their stinking, smoky bonfire drinking their witches' brew from a pilouined pilot's helmet.

"No more mi-i-siles," the Fairies sing, their sweet voices ringing like silver bells.

"Damn it; nobody's real! They're all like carbon copies of cardboard cutouts!"

Their complacency revolts me. I am reminded of my favourite screen in the General Relativity game: the inscrutable singularity surrounded by a cloud of degenerate particles embedded in a region of dilated time, whose field spreads out to act upon the entire universe and returns to act upon itself.

Damn it; everybody's consciousness stops at the Wall: it is an event horizon beyond which our thoughts are trapped and sucked out of the universe. The Base is detectable only by its field, which has warped our entire continuum, paralysing our brains, reducing us to stereotyped shadows of ourselves. Emptying supermarkets, excavating shelters, whitewashing windows, walling ourselves in! Shit; we have been mindlessly preparing for the nuclear holocaust, without consciously admitting that it will ever happen!

I look at the Wall. The gates are opening. A widening rectangle of yellow light spills across the road, illuminating the sign "POISED TO DETER—QUICK TO REACT" emblazoned on the arch above the entrance.

"What a fucking stupid slogan!" I say. "What's the point of reacting if deterrence never fails?"

Oh God; it's too late—the moment has come!

A clamorous siren drowns the maddening singing.

A seething mass of broad-shouldered, tight-lipped, gun-ready peacekeepers lines the road.

Two motorbikes, a landrover and a fire engine scream out of the gate, sirens blaring, whirling stroboscopes transfixing the hypnotised faces of the Fairies. A launcher rumbles after them.

"Shit a bomb!" screams Kevin, "it's a fucking deployment!"

"Oh, jolly good," says Lady Helga, "let's get a better look. Driver! Drive on!" But Kevin has started the coach even before the order is given.

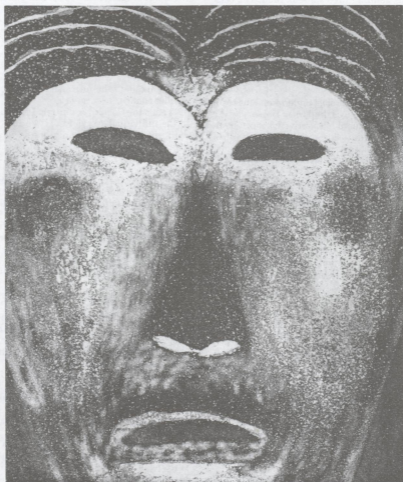
"I can't steer this thing!" yells Kevin. Between the coach park and the road is a symbolic cemetery; a burial ground of lost hopes. The coach rollics over the humped graves, upsetting the picnic suppers and the ratepayers, who hiss like stampeding reptiles, still straining for a better view of the convoy.

We reach the road. "Driver! STOP!" yells Lady Helga. Kevin ignores her. Hand on hooter, he bulldozes through the triple cordon of pigs, the ratepayers shrieking and drumming frantically in the back, drives straight between the fire engine and the launcher, and brakes.

The enormous wagon is inches from our coach and the bug-eyed sweating driver ploughs unwaveringly towards us; the effigy of a fat, ragged Woomin swinging like a pendulum in a noose slung from the rear-view mirror. Lady Helga is hammering at the emergency door, trumpeting in the panic-call of her species, but there is no time . . . we are down to counting the zilliseconds in foaming sub-units; stills from a movie filmed at infinite speed.

God damn it; I always assumed that we were going to grow up. Kevin was going to be a genius again, and I was going to be a nice woman from a lovely home, a dream from the vanished consumer consensus. Not the scruffy, foul-mouthed, clod-brained supermarket thief who has sex under the sideboard with the weirdo son of the mad widow next door. I don't even much like Kev. I always suspected he was laughing at me. I turn towards him and am taunted by my own reflection, fragmented by the thousands of mirrors on his dress. Shattered.

The nearside coach windows burst in slow motion; the rumpus from the passenger compartment is degraded to a roar like waves breaking on the shore in



search of an inlet; perhaps the probability wave in search of its own collapse . . .

There is a sudden, crunching, grinding, thundering crash!

The wrecked coach is rocking on the lip of a pit, within which the broken-backed launcher is thrashing and churning, sending up a spray of mud. The back wheels are still going, and the whole missile-launch assembly rears up, shears off and rolls over, the missiles spilling out of their sheaths. The launch control vehicle slams into the back of the launcher. The front end of the convoy comes screaming back. The Peace Wimmin slip through the ranks of shocked pigs and run, whooping and bellowing, through the spray from the fire hoses.

Of course! The Wimmin have undermined the road. The speakers' platform was the Trojan Horse.

Lady Helga's bodyguard have arrived; boots twitching under long, muddy skirts, wingers slipping off to reveal lobotomised haircuts, slaving lips still smeared with make-up. They are after Kev's guts.

“We jolly nearly got killed!” says Lady Helga; red-faced, infuriated, frothing at the lips. We are sitting in the back of the smashed coach, the blue velvet upholstery soaked with mud, blood and foam. Two of her bodyguards are holding Kev down, while a third kicks him.

“We did get killed!” says Kev. The word “killed” excites the thugs, who kick him in the head several times. I can’t look. I keep seeing the overturned missile-launcher with the bombs jerking out of their tubes like the ghastly death-orgasm of a quadrupenile alien dinosaur. I keep seeing the driver’s face erupting through the fountaining windscreen; teeth bared in a rictus of uncontrollable rage.

“God damn it,” says Kev. “we got killed and killed and killed and killed! We got gulped! Those pigs shot us! Those fucking bombs went off! We are still getting killed, every minute of every day!”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Lady Helga asks crossly. “Is he feeling all right?” She has waved off the yobs. They are sitting on a bloodstained banquette, sticking bits of broken glass in their boots and glaring at Kev. The townspeople have long since shakily descended from the coach, still hissing.

“I’m talking about the collapse of the wave function, you stupid bitch!” shouts Kev. “I feel like Schrödinger’s bloody cat! I feel like Wigner’s fucking friend! How do you feel when there is a strong probability that you are dead?”

“You see,” says Kevin, impersonating the intellectual Fairy. “Physics and metaphysics are the same thing really. Schrödinger of the wave-equations puts a cat in a box with a radioactive atom which has a 50% probability of decaying, in which case it activates a hammer which crushes a cyanide capsule which kills the cat. But radioactive decay only exists as a probability until observation collapses the wave-function, and the state of the cat is tied to the state of the atom. So how does the cat feel?”

Helga cannot be bothered to listen to this rubbish. She snorts with contempt and stares out of the intact window behind her, still covered with foam through which the floodlights are diffracted into rainbow

spheres. Night has fallen. The sky is suddenly a magical treasure-house of stars, sectioned by the courses of satellites.

“Some say that the cat is neither alive nor dead until Schrödinger opens the box. Others say that two different universes come into being at that moment, containing two Schrödingers, one live cat and one dead cat. Conscious observation either collapses the wave function or splits the universe. So, if, instead of a cat, a human being—Wigner’s friend, he is called—gets into the box, his own consciousness should collapse the wave function or split the universe or whatever, except that he obviously can’t be conscious if he is dead, so it must be the universe which splits, and his consciousness must migrate to the universe in which, by whatever slender chance, he survives.”

“That’s the Cosmic Anthropic Principle as applied to the individual,” says Kev. “We live in this crazy world because it is the only one in which we have managed to survive at all. It is as if Wigner’s Friend—let’s call him Kev—has spent *all his life* in the bloody box. His consciousness gets channelled into increasingly improbable universes as his chances of survival decrease. God damn it, that’s why deterrence has never been known to fail! We only experience the realities in which it succeeds!”

While he has been talking, the remaining missile-launcher convoys have been streaming out of the other gates. Now a wail of sirens goes up. The pigs go rigid and make a dash for the Base.

“Shit!” says Kevin. “The four-minute warning!”

“It’s OK for Schrödinger,” says Kev, who has to finish his lecture if it’s the last thing he does. “Schrödinger lives on in all the universes in which Wigner’s friend dies. All these other universes exist at right angles to ours. They are like extra dimensions. I don’t know how many dimensions something has to penetrate for it to be real. I mean, we wouldn’t exist unless we extended into all four dimensions of spacetime, even if we don’t perceive the full stretch of our extension in time, so maybe our extension into perpendicular universes also contributes to our reality. Shit; no wonder we are all like carbon copies of cardboard cut-outs!”

“Maybe it’s worse than that,” he says. “Maybe consciousness is actually a property of our worldlines warping through superspace, an advancing wavefront testing the probabilities. Maybe we have no other realities to choose. Maybe we really are like Schrödinger’s cat, hardily alive at all . . .”

He is white; huge blobs of sweat conglomerating on his skin. Sitting on the bloody banquette in his mirror robe, he puts his arm around Lady Helga.

“If consciousness is a function of the splitting of reality,” he says through her hair, “then the Cosmos must be the most conscious thing there is. Maybe there really is a God out there, after all. Oh God . . .”

The base gates have shut. The lights are out. Only the bonfires and the Fairies’ wands illuminate the silver birch forest. How the flesh crawls between my shoulder blades as I wait . . .

“Oh God!” cries Kevin, embracing Lady Helga.

“God!” cries Lady Helga, rigid with fear, incomprehension and disgust.

The Peace Wimmin are huddled together around

their totem pole, keening so loudly that we can hear them over the sirens.

The Fairies are staring vacantly at the empty Base.

The yobboes are glaring belligerently at Kevin, white knuckles clenching the stems of broken lemonade bottles.

A sudden horrible flash of white light fills the sky—bolts through the coach—shows me x-rays of Kevin and Helga, hearts juddering as one, ribcages expanding with a simultaneous panic-stricken gasp of pure terror.

Time stops. Nothing moves except the incandescence boiling behind me. Kevin is leaning on Helga's shoulder, his face as white as her suit, a fountain of blood leaping from his head to her body. He is grinning insanely. She is soundlessly screaming at the mushrooming image reflected in her glasses and scattered by all the thousands of mirrors on Kevin's Mum's dress—

—The incandescent apparition billows and bellies and bulges in the stillness, and suddenly fills the whole of my perceptions . . .

The Goddess!—hair streaming like comet tails, great milky breasts and a belly that spawns galaxies—stands astride the Base, smiling like all the Fairies rolled into one. At Her right hand, an ICBM hovers motionlessly in space, an unmoving vapour trail marking its down-curving trajectory. Her coalsack eyes consume us. Her cavernous nostrils breathe us in.

I ascend into the mind of God, my consciousness compounded with that of the million Fairies, still carrying their nauseating song.

We love the flowers,

We love the vegetables, celestial voices sing in the echoing cathedral of the Cosmos, as we look out at the World through the eyes of God. Although the World is round, we can see every inch of it. Although it is big, we can see every atom.

We love the children

And baby animals.

Through two million sleepy, sentimental eyes, I see the World in all its misty, rainbow-tinted, throat-catching sweetness: a sugary cake with a miraculously delicate icing: a tender extension of our own flesh over which the horrible missiles hang in their thousands; painted, pointed, poisoned and poised to devastate.

We want to live in a world of peace and harmony

With no more mi-i-siles, no more mi-i-siles, no more mi-i-siles, no more mi-i-siles, sing choirs of Angels, sing in exultation; as the Fairies, filled with the knowledge of power and the memory of Bible readings, direct the hand of God to abolish these abominations from the face of the Earth.

1. And God stretcheth out Her hand and gathereth unto Herself all the nuclear warheads of the World; strategic, theatre, tactical and battlefield; and all the delivery systems thereof. From the skies and from the seas and from caverns deep within the Earth plucketh She them. And God seeth that it is good.

2. And God taketh all the chemical and biological weapons, the lasers and the particle beams and all the devices upon which they are borne.

3. And unto Herself God gathereth all the conventional weapons. And God seeth that it is very good.

4. And God calleth out unto us and saith; Behold, the World is disarmed. And we cry unto her; God, behold the military-industrial substructure, the communications networks and the nuclear facilities.

5. And God sweepeth away everything scientific, technical, electrical, mechanical, industrial and commercial. The automobile and the television set destroyeth she them.

6. And a great fear dawns in our minds and we cry out; Oh God, what have we done? For now the Male will establish dominion over us, for he is strong in body, and great will be his anger when he seeth what we have wrought. And God heedeth us, and taketh from every Male one part in seven of his greatness and of his strength, and giveth it to every Female. And God seeth that it is exceeding good.

7. And a quarrel ariseth in our minds, and some say; Let us keep what we have left, and others say; Nay, for it is possessions which determine the power structure. And we look down upon ourselves and, knowing ourselves strong, we call upon God to sweep away every artefact from the face of the Earth, and to cause the trees and the beasts of the field to take up their dominions on the ruins thereof. And it is done.

And we are back in our bodies again, naked under the apple tree which has grown in place of our coach. God hovers above us, all humanity's handiwork piled upon Her roseate palm.

Smiling dreamily down upon us, She kneads it like dough, like putty, like chewing gum, like snot. A star lights up between Her nacreous fingernails, infringing the splendour of God, Who shrinks to get a better grip. She compresses the star until the core collapses. The radiance of a supernova momentarily flushes God's being; a butterfly God now, surrounded by a glowing halo of ejected material, wrestling with a pinhead sphere of neutronium.

God is grimacing like a woman in childbirth, struggling to overcome the neutron degeneracy pressure. Her face becomes ever more red and contorted, then purple and distorted, as She squeezes the sphere into its own Schwartzchild radius. The sphere becomes a black hole. The black hole draws in God. For a moment Her dark and straining cowl, the inverted negative of Her blissful smile, hangs in the draining accretion disc, then it fades out.

The Heisenberg loan is repaid. God is dead. As She leaves the universe, the thunderclap that heralded Her arrival reaches us, bowing the forest, shaking a basketful of transcendental apples from our tree.

There is nothing in the sky now except the first glimmerings of a new dawn. All around me, Godlike women are rising to their feet, flexing their new muscles, embracing, dancing in glowing rings of bouncing flesh, rejoicing. Their laughter rings through the woodland glade, shaking dewdrops from trembling blossoms, alerting shy little animals, alarming the terrified menfolk cowering in the darkness of the forest which replaces the Base.

Light floods the new world. From now on we live in harmony with each other and with nature in the motherly bosom of the world. It is going to take some

getting used to. I imagine the desolation and confusion of the rest of humanity, stripped of walls, boltholes, hoarded food, status and threat.

The women reach out to the frightened, elfin men, offering them the ripe fruit that hangs from the trees. Smiling uneasily, they sit down to the post-Arma-geddon picnic.

I see it all cloudily, through a rainbow. Helga is sitting apart from the glorious rejoicing, still clasping Kevin in her brawny arms. A single embarrassing tear trickles down her rugged cheek. Kevin is dead. No room for his neurotic invocations of Schrödinger and Heisenberg in the first of the last of all possible worlds. When God, arising from the foam of quantum indeterminacy to refashion the world as a Disneyland Eden, took one seventh part of his strength, She took more than he had to give. His worldline terminates here.

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Lee Montgomerie's "War and/or Peace" is the winner of the Radical Hard SF Competition which we announced in *Interzone* 8 (we hope to publish some runners-up in our next issue). Lee says that she composed the story while lying in a bin-bag on Greenham Common. Her first story for us was "Green Hearts" (*IZ* 10).

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

A fine new story by M. John Harrison. Also, an upbeat tale from new writer Paul J. McAuley; a story from Richard Kadrey, whose collages we have featured in the past; and much more, from writers and artists familiar and not so familiar . . .

BACK ISSUES

Back issues of *Interzone* from No. 1 (Spring 1982) are still available from 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR — although supplies of some numbers are now running low. They are £1.50 each, but readers who buy three or more issues may have them at £1.25 each. (£1.75 each overseas, or £1.50 each for three.) Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to *Interzone*. Contents of back issues:

- IZ* 1 — M. John Harrison, John Sladek, Angela Carter, Keith Roberts, Michael Moorcock
- IZ* 2 — J.G. Ballard, Alex Stewart, Andrew Weiner, Rachel Pollack, Thomas M. Disch
- IZ* 3 — Garry Kilworth, Angela Carter, Josephine Saxton, Nicholas Allan, David S. Garnett
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- IZ* 5 — Scott Bradfield, Richard Cowper, John Crowley, John Shirley, M. John Harrison
- IZ* 6 — Cherry Wilder, Neil Ferguson, John Hendry, Lorraine Sintetos, Keith Roberts, plus illustrated feature by Roger Dean.
- IZ* 7 — Geoff Ryman, Bruce Sterling, Michael Blumlein, plus "comic strip" by Margaret Welbank.
- IZ* 8 — Scott Bradfield, Kim Newman, Philip K. Dick, Maria Fitzgerald, Andy Soutter, J.G. Ballard.
- IZ* 9 — J.G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Thomas M. Disch, M. John Harrison, William Gibson, Garry Kilworth.
- IZ* 10 — Christopher Burns, Lee Montgomerie, Alex Stewart, Gene Wolfe, Rachel Pollack, Scott Bradfield.

DAVID LANGFORD
CUBE ROOT



They had been three days on the moor when the message came.

"Operation Cube Root . . . cancelled?" Finlay read from the flat screen. He looked up, incredulous. "Why would they do that? Sir."

Captain Mackin shrugged slowly. Already his thin face was haunted with possibilities, each more likely than the last to hinder his next promotion. He was a man who thought too much for the Army.

"Some kind of emergency," he said at last.

Faulkner chose that moment to clear his throat and ask, "What sort of emergency means you have to cancel a national exercise?"

For a second there was no sound but a hiss of wind through the sparse undergrowth of Bodmin Moor. Finlay read a second message from the display. "This link is closing down. Repeat. This link is closing down. You are instructed to follow Cube Root procedures real-time. Repeat. Real-time. This link is closing down. Message ends."

"God," said Faulkner before anyone else could, "it's going to happen." With a practised eye he noted the reactions of the little knot of men: Mackin white-faced and understanding all too much, of course; Finlay nibbling his lip as he folded display and keyboard into one compact unit; Spratt fumbling for a joke and Lewdown for a sneer; young Gray copying alarm from his hero Mackin; most of the squad with regulation blank faces and Tregennis too stupid to wear any blank look but his own.

"Our orders stand," said Mackin, raising his voice imperceptibly. "All units in Cube Root will remain dispersed away from military and civilian targets until 48 hours after second strike or until recall. On occupying target or near-target zones we are to re-establish—"

"We know all that," said Lewdown to the wind.

"And they could not but own that their Captain looked grand. As he stood and delivered his speech," quoted Spratt to Lewdown.

First signs of insubordination evident almost immediately, said Faulkner to his mental notebook. Not quite unconsciously, he rubbed at the slim band of transparent, smoky plastic circling his right wrist. All

the men wore them. Faulkner found himself taking a morbid interest in his.

The Land-Rovers and the camp were tucked under the flank of a high, granite-tipped tor. Cube Root orders specified "no line-of-sight visibility from military or civilian targets including roads." In a hollow further down the slope, the greygreen waters of a tarn moved sluggishly under the wind. Unit 338 (Capt. Mackin commanding) was having a practice wrestle with heavy, rubberized protective suits, pretending to occupy a contaminated zone. When in doubt, give the dummies something to keep them busy, Faulkner reflected. As an attached civilian, he could loaf a little.

Afterwards, still prickling with sweat, they drank tea.

"Wonder how effective that camouflage really is," said Faulkner conversationally, pointing to the daubed and dappled vehicles.

"Pretty good, I'd say." That was the loyal Gray.

"Should've painted them bright yellow," said Spratt.

"Blend in with all these bloody gorse flowers."

"You mean satellites?" Finlay said to Faulkner.

"Yes . . . I dunno," said Faulkner, who knew quite well. "All this dispersal; and the eyes they have up there can track us all over the moor, I'll bet."

"Your business is with the medical supplies." Mackin sounded distant. Since the communications closedown he'd been barricading himself behind thicker and thicker layers of protocol, of routine. Faulkner dropped submissively out of the conversation. Another dangerous thought was loose in Unit 338, helping the buildup to critical mass.

Finlay's business was with communications. As the light began to fade over the bare moorland, he unfolded his apparatus and began laboriously to compose a situation report.

"Suppose you didn't hear we're off the air," said Lewdown indifferently, peering over the technician's shoulder.

"Piss off," said Finlay, this being his way of pointing out that Cube Root orders were for scrambled reports

to go into the Net whether or not anything was coming out.

Stress symptoms, noted Faulkner as with pursed lips Finlay backtracked up the screen for some minute correction, and Lewdown made pitying tch-tch noises.

The automatic mental annotation continued. The existence of a state of emergency helps crystallize behaviour. Lewdown's strategy for countering stress is to manoeuvre himself into positions of justifiable contempt for others' activities, an exaggeration of his normal cynical stance. Finlay, meanwhile, prefers to immerse himself in minor duties. . . . Later he would transfer the impressions to his case notebook.

The adjustment of Captain Mackin is particularly it happened then.

An appalling light flared high over the tor, like a giant flashbulb which instead of flashing and dying went on and on in an optical crescendo. At peak its dazzle washed out the colours of people and things with too much light, as moonlight bleaches them with too little. It died away in yellows and reds and a pulse of heat like dragon's breath; last of all came the slap of an invisible shockwave that lashed the grass and pummeled the breath from the lungs.

CLOSE EYES AND KEEP THEM CLOSED. FALL FLAT, FACE DOWN with HANDS TUCKED UNDER BODY. STAY DOWN UNTIL THE SOUND OF THE EXPLOSION PASSES. They all had it written in a little booklet.

Faulkner picked himself shakily from where reflex had flung him, in the mud. Through lurid afterimages he saw other men doing the same. His ears rang with a thunderous silence, his eyes with a solid purple lightning-sheet. The interestingly adjusted Lewdown was first to speak, leaning over Finlay as the latter wiped his comm unit.

"Report that," he said.

"I'll have to start again," the Private/Tech said mechanically. He peered at the LCD screen, and Faulkner heard a sharp intake of breath.

"Corrupted," came a voice that sounded hypnotized. "Radiation . . ."

The screen was filled with garbage, random letters and symbols, alphabets of madness.

Finlay, Lewdown, Faulkner, and one by one the others, stared through the fading light and dazzling afterimages at the plastic band about each right wrist. But of course it was too soon to tell.

A disaster's stark outlines can be blurred by soft layers of official forms. Mackin demanded a roll-call almost before anyone's vision had cleared, and within minutes Gray was scratching his cropped blond head over the 'Observers Initial Report Form' which was thoughtfully provided with Cube Root supplies.

"Date . . . unit position . . . approximate time of event. It's 1748 now, sir."

"Put 1740," said Mackin, staring into the void air over the unchanging tor.

"Strike serial number (if known). Azimuth, umm . . ."

("It was N," Davies was saying not quite out of earshot, with the tireless dull persistence of a pub bore. "I've been on the nuke course and I know what I'm talking about. N, that's what, and you know what that means.")

("I dunno," said Tregennis. "I never cottoned onto that stuff really.")

"Air or ground burst, sir?"

"Air, of course," said Mackin overloudly. "Air burst, altitude approx 200 metres, line-of-sight distance approx 700 metres, and you'll bloody well have to wait to fill in the question after that."

Gray scribbled in silence, chewing from time to time on the end of his ballpen. "Personal N monitor records: oh. Oh yes." He flicked a look at his right wrist.

"I can smell something funny. Chemical," Tregennis said, an unaccustomed look of concentration on his face.

Spratt sniffed horribly. "Hey, you're right. Don't suppose they're—"

"You can expect to smell some odd things right after a burst," said Faulkner rapidly. "Reaction products in the air. And the r/a flash can scramble your nerves, like Mike's comm screen. We call it synaesthesia in the trade. It'll pass off."

He rapped it out confidently. Keep them calm. Gray, who had been sniffing too, murmured almost at once that whatever he had smelt ("funny . . . chemical . . . lighter-fuel and lemon") was dying away. The others agreed.

Important note. At least five men claimed to detect an odd smell about nine minutes from zero. Should be investigated further.

"Immediate deaths resulting from burst," Gray intoned.

"None," said Mackin wearily.

"One if he doesn't shut his gob," Lewdown muttered.

"Subsequent casualties resulting from delayed effects . . ."

It was Faulkner who first saw the change, and Lewdown who first moaned. "Oh my God—" He did not add a quip or a sneer. In the dying light it was hard at first to be sure. Eventually, though, checking and doublechecking in the harsh glare of Land-Rover headlamps, they had to admit that the faintly tinted wristbands had darkened, every one, almost to black.

"You can fill in that 'delayed effects' box now," said Mackin with surprising mildness. It sounded almost like relief.

Checked against the comparator strip with its continuous spectrum from smoky transparency to pure jet, the bands were darker by a safe margin than the zone marked prognosis 0% negative.

It was night, but no one wanted to click off the friendly lamps.

"Zombies," Mackin could be heard saying to himself. "We're zombies." That was the name they'd given to r/a contaminated refugees in the 1978 Scrum Half exercise. Bodmin Moor was supposed to be a Safe Dispersal Zone, in between the fallout paths of nuclear strikes on Falmouth and Plymouth assumed in the 1980 exercise, Square Leg.

"Maybe they're taking out the forces just when we're scattered for Cube Root," Faulkner said. "God, remember what I was saying about satellite eyes? What a . . . coincidence."

"Waste an N on us lot? You've got to be joking," said Spratt.

"If they've taken out the whole country . . ." That was Patel, who tended to worry about his large family.

"We'd have seen more bursts flashing over the horizon," said Lewdown with the air of one who explains to a five-year-old.

Gray leant forward nervously, glancing at the withdrawn Mackin. Almost, Faulkner expected him to raise his hand before speaking. "Suppose it's all just bad luck, a Rung 18 thing, 'spectacular show of force' on bits of waste land—like the Moor. Only we had to be parked here."

"Teacher's pet," Spratt murmured.

"Or suppose," said Lewdown, "suppose the Cube Root orders leaked, eh? When something big gets ballsed up, look to the top. Suppose they saw how Cube Root gave them a handy chance to strike out the army without touching one single bloody pampered civilian—"

Faulkner watched their faces. Often before he'd said that someone looked like death. He had a hint now of what, without exaggeration, the cliché meant.

"I feel sick," Gray said suddenly.

Later: *Blaming everything on the chiefs of staff was popular tonight. Only Mackin seems to think it remarkable that a single squad should be the target for a neutron bomb strike: tonight, though, he said very little. And thought too much? He, Gray and Lewdown vomited between one and two hours after the event. No. 7 pills issued to them and all the rest. NB: these three were on nuclear alert course recently and presumably knew what to expect. Ditto the nonentities Davies and Tregennis, but . . .*

A glorious sun rose through thin white mist, gulls wheeled and shrieked overhead to remind them of the nearby sea, and in his tent the promising young career officer Captain Francis Mackin was cold as the country's granite bones. An emergency capsule issued with Cube Root supplies (not more than one per man) had erased the worry-lines from his face.

"So he couldn't take it," Spratt said *sotto voce*.

"College boy," Lewdown explained.

For an instant Faulkner hated them both, hated himself. *Too much imagination, too much ability to visualize the progressive symptoms*, he wrote in his brief and secret obituary. And, after an unclinical pause: *I liked him.*

Death was making preliminary advances to the others, so soon. A leaden-faced Spratt made inevitable jokes about morning sickness. They buried Mackin in a shallow grave, shallow because this moorland was a skin of waterlogged earth and peat over granite. As the damp stuff was shovelled over the sheet-wrapped body, Private Davies doubled up and retched uncontrollably into the grave. No one seemed to have enough spare sentiment to suggest a marker, an inscription. Faulkner was inclined to say, but did not. "Let the dead bury their dead."

Afterwards, he issued more pills. So far only one man, Gray, had shown the spasms which were the classic symptoms of r/a damage to the central nervous system.

"How d'you spell nausea?" Finlay asked. Throughout the long, raw morning he had obsessively composed and transmitted a series of minutely detailed reports, as though the numb horror could be chronicled out of existence. Faulkner

filed the reflection for his notes as he spelt out the word.

"... all personnel'. You too, I suppose, Doc? You don't look so green as the rest of us."

"When you get past forty you'll find your complexion's like this all the time," Faulkner said as casually as he could. "I try not to let it show. Have to win my patients' confidence and all that."

"Scramble," Finlay murmured to his keyboard, and as though the word were a signal there came the flat crack of a rifle close at hand. A wisp of smoke rose from the hole punched through the comm unit's case. All the text had faded from its screen before Faulkner heard the echo from the stone outcrop high above.

"That's enough of that," said Private Davies, lowering the smoking rifle. "Now you listen to me."

Davies, Davies the nonentity, Faulkner had imagined Lewdown and Spratt as disruptive forces, but they were all words. Now Davies, never the tallest man of the squad, was suddenly towering over them all.

"... telling you. I'm bloody not sitting here waiting to fall apart. The way I see it, we're dead, right? Two days, maybe three. Right. If we're going, I say we go out in style. Joe Tregennis tells me there's this place not ten miles off—"

"You can't do that," Gray said with genuine outrage. "Captain Mackin would never have let you. The Cube Root procedure has us staying here, in our assigned position."

"I don't hear Captain Nancyboy complaining, son. If you want to keep in with him, why not just do what he would've done—what he did—right?"

Gray bit his lip and studied a tussock at his feet.

"Ooo, isn't he masterful," Lewdown murmured.

Oddly enough, the small and rafaiced Tregennis was the only other man to protest. "Only get into trouble, Ron. They'll get you some way or another. Like I said, I don't see there's much in all this N-bomb shit really . . ."

Davies turned to him, and the rifle-barrel turned too, its muzzle moving in tiny, hypnotic circles. He said, mildly, "Must have been someone else I saw puking his guts up this morning, Joe?"

"Been sick before; I'll be sick again; so what? Oh, don't get me wrong," Tregennis said, interpreting some cryptic text in the other's eyes. "I'll come along for the ride all right. You know me, Ron . . ."

In forty minutes the two Land-Rovers were bumping and squelching over the sodden ground. A dead army on the march. The only pause in striking camp had been when Davies found Gray with a scarlet capsule in one shaky hand. He had cuffed the younger man so he reeled, and stamped the fallen lullaby-pill into the rank heather. "Give the kid a chance," he said magnanimously. "You deserve some fun with the rest of us—and no more of that, all right?" Faulkner had made another note.

Davies is *revelling in being able to give orders, to give and take away. Interesting to see our comedy duo, Lewdown and Spratt, acknowledging his status by heckling him in undertones, just as they did the captain. Gray is poised to switch allegiance and make a hero of Davies; he's a man who needs one. Only our dim Tregennis seems to have reservations; he knew Davies before the Army. Strategically the situation is fascinating, a goldmine. Personally I'd rather be any-*

where else. *There are some things—*

"What's that you're writing, Doc?" said Spratt, who sat by him in the lurching vehicle. "One last mad batch of prescriptions?"

"Ha ha, no," Faulkner said easily. "Medical notes, I'm afraid. They'll help me keep you patched up. Maybe help some other poor sods one day too." He allowed Spratt a glimpse of the shorthand pages, and to his relief the other simply shrugged, not wanting to talk about the only subject there was to talk about.

"Big of you," said Lewdown with perfunctory sarcasm. Both he and Spratt fell silent then, perhaps thinking of the further progression through falling hair and haemorrhage and necrosis. Both, after all, had been on the course which showed and told of such things. The training film was supposed to have a big underground circulation as a horror video.

"That's it," Tregennis said uneasily. As he pointed, Faulkner saw he had refused to accept judgement, had defiantly thrown away the night-black strip from his wrist.

"Right," said Davies over his shoulder, to the men packed in the remaining Land-Rover. The other had bogged down three miles into the moorland. Davies seemed to take the loss as a personal affront, and was becoming less easy-going in his decisions.

"Right," he said again. "Three-forty-five, after hours, all we have to do is walk in and take it. Just you remember, all the regs and Doc were offering (no offence mate) was a few days sitting in the rain dying. That or a bloody lullaby pill. Back me up now and you get the piss-up of your life, ha bloody ha, and when the rot gets to you you won't give a fuck. Right. Let's get on with it."

Piebald shoals of white and dark-grey clouds scudded overhead. In one of the erratic gleams of sun that all afternoon had alternated with backhanded slaps of rain, they studied their objective. The Kernow Arms. A gaunt building of grey stone, spotted white and yellow with lichen, outhouses tumbled round it like stonefalls from the central, granite tor.

It was Davies who banged on the heavy door. It opened a crack, and an uncertain voice said: "Sorry sir, we're not open till six o'clock. If you'd like to come back—"

For an instant the spell of normality gripped the men. One or two gave automatic nods, almost apologetic for their intrusion. Gray blinked hard. Then Davies took two paces back, lunged forward. His boot smashed into the door. The flimsy doorchain snapped with a crack, and there were confused sounds within. Faulkner took a deep breath, and followed the others in after Davies, into a stone-walled bar replete with wooden beams and horse-brasses, all exhaling a reek of stale beer. He bent over the grey-haired man who lay groaning and writhing. The nose had been flattened redly over his face by the door's impact.

"Leave him be," said Davies, looking critically at the list of beers. Faulkner continued to mop at the blood streaming over the landlord's face in a glistening half-mask; and was slapped aside by a heavy hand. "Leave him be, I said."

Standing, Faulkner saw malicious smiles on more than one face. Davies was their leader. He dared not put himself outside the magic circle.

"Joe Tregennis," said the bleeding man. "What's this all about?"

Tregennis's mouth worked silently. "Orders, Mr Ezard," he said at last.

"You've been requisitioned, old chap," said Lewdown.

"By the Captain here," said Spratt.

"Put him away. —No, not in the cellar," Davies said. "Put him away, and anyone else you find here."

Within ten minutes the red-spluttering Ezard, and his mousy wife, and a nondescript teenager who was a son, barman or both, were behind the solidly wedged door of a blind-walled coalhouse. In the bar, Davies's promised session was beginning: "Here's to Joe, finding us a real-ale pub first try!" In the gents' toilet, Faulkner wrote: . . . *fairly harmless so far. Davies is immovably established now; they need him to take responsibility; he slapped down Schwartz for wanting to get religious (expected that sooner from a Catholic), and Schwartz caved in. I'm not supposed to have feelings about all this, but thank God Mrs E. turned out to be fiftyfifty and gone to seed. If only they get drunk and stay drunk now!*

The party was well under way. Finlay had come out of eclipse by mastering the old-fashioned beer taps and cask connections. He was beaming behind the bar, barely flinching even as Davies and Spratt used up Her Majesty's ammunition in snap shots at the forlorn row of china dogs shelved a yard over his head. Faulkner moved through the smoke and uproar, trying to give out No. 7 pills. He doubted the effort was worth it any more.

Presently Lewdown, who was keeping score in the shooting gallery, suggested sardonically that Davies should let the prisoners run for it on the moor, "try a few rounds at moving targets." As it circled the roaring room, the joke took on the dimensions of a serious, popular proposal. Faulkner found himself saying rapidly, "No, no, the light's bad, suppose one of them got away, police'd be round before you know what and there's the end of your party . . ."

"And who says I couldn't hold this place against fifty lousy coppers?" Davies shouted; but the idea was quenched. He looked at Faulkner hard, before drinking again and calling Gray to bring him more. Behind the bar, a portable radio pumped out music and frothy gouts of disc-jockey babble. A radio.

By five o'clock a new bright idea had come bubbling up through the beer: to site a couple of marksmen out by the main road. "They could take out cars," Spratt said dreamily. "Not just any car, no, just ones with cunt in. That's what we need to make this thing go with a bang. Like your piss-up to go with a bang . . . gang?"

Davies looked sourly at Faulkner. Faulkner shrugged. "I've said it already. Captain."

"Doc's scared again, mates. Never you mind. I know a trick worth two of that." Davies leered at nothing in particular.

"I've got a joke about a doctor," Spratt was saying at the bar. "Lemme tell you my joke."

"No, you mustn't do that," said Lewdown.

"Eh? Why not?"

Lewdown said delicately, "Because, dead men tell no tales."

"Oh bloody good . . . Here Dave, I'm dying of thirst here."

In the notebook: *Becoming impossible to remain aloof. The whole situation is impossible. How can they expect me to watch, take notes and not interfere? "You've volunteered for a very dangerous job. You must follow your orders." I have to be myself, which means going into that bar and interfering again before six. If only Davies hadn't got them into seeing a death sentence as simply a release from all the rules—*

It was twenty to six. Schwartz was trying to shoot a bottle of light ale off Patel's head, to catcalls and applause. The flagstones were streaked and pooled with spilt beer and vomit, the cause of the latter now being ambiguous.

"Captain," Faulkner said to Davies where he sat as if throned, squinting at the radio. "Captain, I think we should go and take down the Kernow Arms sign off the main road. We want to lie low."

Davies belched luxuriously. "Clever boy. Just happens, though, I don't want that sign down. Said I'd got a plan, didn't I?"

"Captain—with all respect—"

Davies turned red-flecked eyes on him. "Who d'you think you are anyway, Doc?" And then, with an air of frightful accusation, he pointed a finger and said into a deadly little silence: "You . . . aren't . . . drinking."

"Give the Doc a drink," Gray chanted.

"Make him lick it off the floor," said Lewdown.

"What'll it be?" said Finlay, a master-at-arms pottering happily amid the bar equipment.

Faulkner felt a trap closing. "Gin and tonic," he said.

"Make it a big one for the Doc," called Davies.

"A big one for the Doc." Finlay took his cue from the tone. He two-thirds filled a pint mug with gin, poured in a small bottle of slimmers' tonic water, and held out the result.

Though everyone was smiling—just another bit of fun in the mess—Faulkner smelt resentment. Aimed at the one who diagnosed death and so had to be allied with all the forces of death. Their instincts were right. He took the giant drink, smiled weakly, and sipped.

"Drink it down, Doc," said Davies inexorably, still sprawling. "Make a man of you. Let's see how fast the Doc can drink up."

The ring of faces seemed closer, the smiles more toothy. Faulkner gulped, choking, the perfumed stink overpowering in his nose and throat . . .

"Another one for the Doc. Doc's thirsty tonight."

"Another big one for the Doc."

Faulkner stirred on the floor, and retched. Someone had scrubbed viciously at his memory with a revoltingly juniper-scented brush. The stone room was still full of voices, the smoke thicker than ever. The second monstrous drink, and his refusal, and the bullet from Davies that clipped the lobe from his left ear. (The collar was glued to his neck still, in a clotted mess.) A casual blow had sent him reeling, beneath contempt, forgotten. His left hand was twisted under him; he eased it from the vicelike grip of cramp that held it there, and studied the watch. It wasn't yet seven o'clock.

The situation is now declared to be out of control, he thought wryly. He should get up and do something about it. But his head sang, his body ached, his stomach heaved. If he moved now, his innards would eject like a sea-cucumber's.

"Number six," he distantly heard Davies saying. "Stringy old bugger, isn't he? Put him away with the others, then. Where's all these young ravers, then, Joe?"

Tregennis: "Later, Cap, later. This'll be the lot coming home from the quarry. Don't get much hot stuff in a quarry, you don't."

Laughter.

Lewdown: "That's funny . . . This one isn't breathing any more. Who was it looked after him? You, Mikey?"

Spratt: "Yep."

Lewdown: "Well, you must have tapped him a bit hard."

A moment's hush.

Davies: "And so . . . first enemy kill to Mikey Spratt. Aren't they all the enemy out there? Us against them. Hear the radio, hear those bastards going on with life? Like I said, their fucking N-test, no bloody war. They nuked us. Fill up and let's hear it for Mikey, DSO and bar, especially the bar."

Gray called from somewhere further off: "Another carload on the way, Captain."

Davies: "Privates Lewdown, Schwartz and Patel . . . preepare to engage enemy! And tap 'em as hard as you like."

In an imaginary notebook: *Drunk on more than alcohol. The feeling of being unpunishable, irresponsible, invulnerable through death . . . stronger than anything in the spirits rack. I see it now. We aren't looking into psychological effects of invisible neutron death with any hope of preventing the worst. We want to know the worst and learn how to make it worse still. Find how army units can be made into wandering cancers, attacking their own. They never told me . . .*

Davies has guessed—

Spratt, hilariously: "Tapped all this lot a bit too hard as well, chaps."

Lewdown: "Trying out the eight silent ways to kill a man. Going to write and complain, there isn't a one of them that's properly silent, you know."

Davies: "We heard. Like a stuck pig. Some soldiers you are. Hey, we ought to have a trophy collection, you could keep their ears for souvenirs. Or their pricks. Up on the shelf there . . ."

Gray called: "Headlights again . . . No, false alarm. They aren't turning here."

Davies: "Nothing but mangy old wallies and one old bag. What a bleeding hole this is. —Dave, let's try that Slivovitz stuff. Thanks."

Gray: "Actions stations!"

Lewdown: "Let's re-establish some more law and order."

A sound of laughter, of many feet leaving the room. The dance of the dead. Faulkner staggered upright and went reeling towards the toilet door, followed by a wave of not unfriendly chuckling.

It could be . . . The top-secret indicator wristbands are a straight copy of material they use behind the Curtain. That would make sense of it. I can guess the rest. The hell with orders.

Returning after an interval to the bar, he heard Davies saying, richly, "Now this is a bit more like it."

She was young, pretty and brightly dressed, her face sharply attractive, her yellow skirt and blouse making her glow like a canary in a cage of great drab hawks. All this, Faulkner could see, was unimportant compared with the fact that she was young and a woman. Spratt held her expertly from behind. One leg of her tights was laddered.

"At the very least we should draw lots," Lewdown was saying lazily.

"Stuff that," said Davies, bulking huger than ever for all that he was not a tall man. "You'll all get your turn."

"You're mad," said the dark-eyed woman. "What have you done with Harry? The police—"

Schwartz mimed the death-chop to the throat, preening himself a little. The woman fell silent.

Faulkner tensed himself and stepped into the tight, electric circle. He did not feel like a hero. "You'll be wanting your anti-R pills," he said casually.

"It's Doc again," said Davies with an air of false delight. "Doc can hold his drink."

"Doc wants another. Another big one for Doc," said Lewdown.

"Sure, sure. But—" Faulkner managed an appalling leer—"you won't want to be puking over the lady, eh? Here you are." He handed round the grey pills. "Three each."

"Three of his usual for the Doc," said Davies wittily: but while Finlay got to work, the men swallowed their pills.

"What is all this," said the woman raggedly.

Faulkner accepted another pint mug, touched it submissively to his lips, held back his retching with a huge effort. "Let me tell you a story," he said.

"Piss off—"

"Your timing's lousy, Doc."

"Dead men tell no tales, ha ha. You heard that one? Dead men—"

"Listen a minute. I've been thinking. You know you can simulate an N-bomb with a micronuke, just a few tonnes like the old Davy Crockett missile? There's even things that look like nukes but aren't. Then again, remember we smelt something funny, like fibreglass catalyst on the wind, just after the burst? Commandos with gas cylinders, maybe, way upwind, some gas that turns a certain kind of plastic black . . . Ever thought how they'd test a nasty that just makes you think you're dead from N?"

"I told you," Tregennis whispered. "I told you."

It was painful to watch Davies as power and assurance were torn from him like long strips of his own skin. But he aimed a handgun at Faulkner's stomach and said, "Cobblers. We was all puking and heaving ever since this morning."

"But first you took pills. Remember the pills?" (Gray hadn't even needed the pills, but he'd spare Gray the lecture on suggestibility.)

"Then you knew all along . . . you bastard."

"I put it together for myself. They kept me in the dark too," he lied. Half-lied. He suppressed the words I was just following my orders.

"Captain Mackin . . ." Gray said with something like a sob.

There was a pause. He slumped back, subsided into snores.

"Can't hold it," Davies said. "It's too late to stop now. It's gone too far. You two, bring her in the back bar. I'm not missing out now."

Moving like sleepwalkers, Spratt and Lewdown forced the screaming woman through a decorative wrought-iron door.

"And you . . . I'm not going to waste good bullets on you. Drink. And drink again."

Faulkner gulped the foul concoction, and through his choking managed to say, "You'll be all right. They can't let you come to trial. It's me that's spoilt the exercise, me they'll court-martial. Stop now and you've got a chance."

"So . . . I'll be all right whatever I do? Thanks. Thanks a lot. All I wanted to know, all this and a life in front of me as well. Now drink. God, this stuff gets to you . . . look at them all, pissed as rats." He studied his mug, currently brimming with Pernod, and rubbed his eyes. Then he shook his head furiously from side to side, like a dog shedding water. "I . . . funny . . ." The revolver wavered in his hand.

Faulkner relaxed. Too obviously, he realized.

"You fiddled the pills," said Davies with a squinting clarity as he saw the others reeling with more than drunkenness. He raised the gun with a titanic effort. He fired. Faulkner felt a violent blow to the shoulder, like the glancing impact of a bus. It slammed him against the granite wall. He was still alive, he thought vaguely. Davies, last of them all, dropped while Faulkner was still slithering down the rough stone.

The back of his head was sticky, and swirls of black moved in moiré patterns over his field of vision. He imagined the appallingly well-briefed cleanup squad arriving in spurts of gravel . . . efficient tidying . . . reports, perhaps, of a fire at the Kernow Arms in which customers and gallant Army rescuers lost their lives?

The young woman came uncertainly into the room, with nervous, darting glances like a sparrow's. She was wiping at a splash of buff-coloured vomit which clung like lichen to her left breast; but she seemed unharmed.

"You'd better phone local army HQ," Faulkner told her, mechanically reverting to orders, unwilling to stand or move. "I'll give you the number . . ." The cleanup squad?

"What have they done with Harry?"

The Cube Root Effect: techniques of low-cost psychological warfare in a context of sub-threshold nuclear confrontation. Top Secret. With an Appendix of personal observations by Dr T.T. Faulkner. He saw the unwritten report in his mind's eye, and his face puckered as had the woman's when she looked at her soiled blouse. Harry, and Mackin, and the others.

"On second thoughts . . . call the police. No. The newspapers. Anyone. Everyone."

"Damn you, what have they done with Harry?"

"Just make the call," he said tiredly.

David Langford is the author of *The Leaky Establishment*, a comic novel which is reviewed by Mary Gentle in this issue of *Interzone*. Trained as a physicist, he is now a full-time writer. His first novel was *The Space Eater* (1982), and he has also written several non-fiction works.

FOGGED PLATES

CHRISTOPHER BURNS



Renfrew waited for the Parkers in his dark funeral suit. The grandfather clock ticked heavily in the corner; they'd be here in five minutes, coming down the broad main street with the small coffin, the undertaker meeting them at Renfrew's door.

The suit was tight under the arms. Renfrew liked to leave the jacket loose until the last moment, when he buttoned it to be more in keeping with the sadness of the occasion. He checked in the mirror that his expression was mournful. He'd also draped the corner of the studio in black. Tastefully, he thought. And he'd cleaned his boots, which got covered in dust if he stepped outside. Sometimes, after high winds, the boardwalk outside was heaped with ridges of sandy dust and the inside of his studio invaded by veins of it. It got everywhere. During duststorms he worried constantly about the equipment.

Renfrew opened the door a little and peered through the crack. Outside the sun was hot and nothing much moved, although a tethered horse flicked its tail lazily and stooped over the water trough. On the opposite side of the street a dog lay motionless in the thin shade of an awning.

There was no sign of the Parkers. Renfrew looked in the other direction and saw the undertaker doing the same as him, peering out to see if his custom was arriving. The undertaker's head dived back into his workshop. It was unseemly for them to acknowledge each other beforehand.

Renfrew hoped the Parkers would hurry. Despite all the precautions, they couldn't wait long in weather like this. It would be as well if the job was over with as quickly as possible. Renfrew closed the door and turned back to the studio; to the black drapes, the racks of chemicals on the wall, the boxes of glass plates, the large heavy camera mounted on its tripod in the middle of the room. Last night's events were still in the air. Last night, for the first time in his life, he had photographed a nude.

She'd sneaked in at night. He'd gone around the studio and bolted everything, made it tight as a cell, even put up the outside shutters. He wanted no-one to be able to peer in at the narrowest crack. Inside the air was stifling, like an oven, but he'd kept on his working clothes to maintain propriety.

She was a wide-hipped, big-buttocked girl from the brothel down the street. All decorum was observed; she undressed behind a screen. Renfrew, who had his reputation to maintain, had only seen her from a distance. A go-between had arranged the appointment. While she undressed Renfrew talked about Art, and how he would look at her body, not as one of her customers, but as someone interested in Higher Things. He had to speak up because she couldn't hear him over the noises of clothes being removed. And at times she couldn't understand him anyway—his voice had become thicker and he talked more quickly with the excitement of the session.

When he picked up a glass plate his hands shook so much that he dropped it and it broke apart on the floor. "It's all right," he said, to calm her, "there's no harm done." Then he lied and said "It was a fogged one, anyway."

Renfrew got her to take up different positions and then photographed her in the intense, eye-aching flashes from the magnesium holders he had set about the studio. At each flare her big-boned, statuesque body seemed to dissolve in the light.

He posed her as if she was a Roman maiden, naked but for a flimsy white drape across one arm. As a water-carrier, with a fake amphora hoisted on her shoulders so that her large breasts lifted. As a muse or grace, back to the camera so that she showed strong shoulders and broad thighs, offset by the surprising delicacy of a raised forearm. As a courtesan, stretching herself on a couch he had covered with an old peacock feather and long satin drapes. As a futuristic warrior, half-naked in part-armour, her shoulders and thighs protected but her torso bared. Each time the flare was

touched off the room disappeared into incandescence.

Afterwards she had dressed behind the screen. He had sat beside the exposed plates, feeling weak but exultant. She left, quietly, to resume her work in the brothel.

Now he had moved everything. The jar, the silk, the fake armour were all stocked away in his storeroom. The black drapes had transformed the room from seraglio to mausoleum. Yet the nude girl's presence was still there, like a taste in the air.

He heard the undertaker walking on the boardwalk outside. The boots made slow, measured footsteps. Behind them, lighter, quicker, more uncertain, were others. The undertaker's boy.

Renfrew went back to the door and opened it. The undertaker was standing there sweating in the hot sun. His face was set in funereal solemnity but the back of his collar was already edged with sweat. He glanced sideways at Renfrew, and indicated by a slight, almost imperceptible nod of the head that he should look down the street.

The Parkers were on their way. They were a poor family who farmed the degraded lands outside of town, so they could not afford the undertaker's best buggy, let alone his two black-plumed geldings. They brought the coffin in on their own cart. One solitary farmhorse was between the shafts. It moved slowly in the heat.

The Parkers walked beside the cart. Beneath her black bonnet Mrs Parker looked as white as chalk. A few strands of hair had escaped from beneath the bonnet and had fallen across her face. She did not push them back. The hem of her dress was covered in dust and she walked with the characteristic lop-sided gait of someone whose broken leg had never properly healed. The eldest girl and idiot boy walked behind her. The girl was silent. The boy had a stick which he repeatedly thrust between the spokes of the cart's wheels. It made a wooden ratchety sound. No-one prevented him from doing this.

Mr Parker had the grained, emotionless face of someone who spent his life working at unrewarding land. His hat was pulled down so that his eyes were in shadow. After he had hitched the horse he pulled the coffin off the cart. Wood scraped on wood. Across the street a few faces peered out of the dusty windows.

Renfrew held the door open for Mr Parker as he carried the coffin inside. He had it laid across his arms with his hands curling up and clasping one side. It was as if he were carrying a log.

"My sympathies," Renfrew murmured, stepping aside as the small coffin passed him.

"Where should I put her, Mr Renfrew?" Parker asked. His voice was low and shook a little. It sounded as if he was scared of asking Renfrew the wrong question or doing the wrong thing.

The other Parkers came in and stood looking down at the studio floor. Except the idiot son, who gazed around him with his stick still in his hand. The undertaker sidled behind him. His boy stood in the doorway with a bucket in his hand.

"Close the door," the undertaker hissed at him out of the corner of his mouth, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. The boy stepped quickly inside and closed the door too loudly.

Parker stood silent, bearing his terrible burden in its wooden box.

"How do you want it, Mr Parker?" Renfrew asked. He didn't know whether to call the child it or her.

"I think she should be lying in her coffin," the undertaker said. Renfrew glanced across at him. The undertaker had spoken in a surprisingly firm tone, as if he would be prepared to argue with any other suggestion. At this of all times.

Mr Parker looked at his wife. She nodded.

"Business is business," the undertaker murmured to Renfrew.

Parker put the coffin down on the floor. It looked absurdly small and made everything seem helpless and bitter.

"Have you a place for the photograph, Mr Renfrew?" asked the undertaker, knowing only too well where Renfrew would photograph the child.

"Mrs Parker?"

She turned to Renfrew. Her face looked numb, as if the distress had shocked her very nerves.

"I can get a better exposure—" Renfrew checked himself. These people would not know what he meant. They were spending some of their hard-earned savings on this record. The least he could do was to make sure they fully understood what was going on. "I can get a better photograph over there, Mrs Parker. I need good light and we can open the shutters on that side of the studio. It will make the photograph sharper. Clearer." After a pause, he said "The face will show up better."

She looked confused and glanced at her husband.

"That'll be fine," Parker said.

Renfrew clapped his hands. "Good," he said. He moved over to the far wall of the studio. The shutters had already been opened and merely had to be folded back. The idiot boy followed him. The idiot boy had fine sparse hair and bulbous eyes. His cheeks were sunken like an old man's and his skin was unnaturally white.

"Of course," Renfrew said, "we could take the shot with a flare if you like, but that would be more expensive, and I know how difficult things are for you financially anyway. They're difficult for us all these days, aren't they? It costs me a lot of money just to keep my stock at the right levels—" He started to talk more and more about the need to buy lenses and plates and chemicals. He did this because he was watching the idiot boy eyeing up firstly the camera, then the drapes, then the chemicals at the back of the studio.

"We'll just prop the coffin up here," Renfrew said, indicating the area of sunlight that now fell across a part of the studio floor. "That will give me just the right conditions to take the picture."

The undertaker knelt down beside the coffin, but before he could do anything Parker cleared his throat nervously and loudly. They all looked at him.

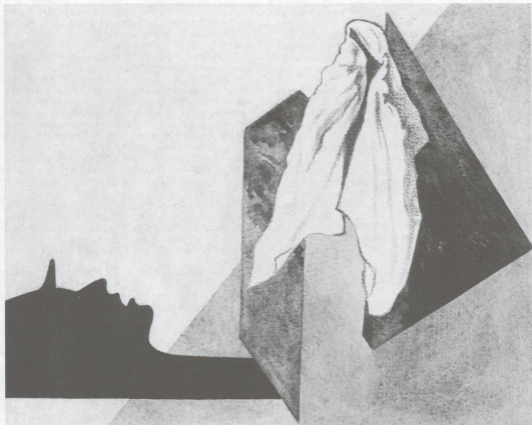
"Er, Mr Renfrew?"

"Yes," Renfrew wondered what was coming.

"Have you anything . . . well, another room or something?" He looked round the studio, his eyes darting from corner to corner in a kind of desperation. "Or that screen maybe?"

"What's the problem, Mr Parker?"

Parker and his wife exchanged anguished glances. The daughter held her hands in front of her and gazed



at them. The idiot son tapped his stick on the floor of the studio.

"It's the dress," Parker said, "we need the dress."

Renfrew still didn't understand. But the undertaker did.

"The little girl's in a good dress, Mr Renfrew. Probably belonged to this little girl here when she was smaller." The daughter turned away pointedly. "I'm sure Mr and Mrs Parker will have another child, Mr Renfrew. A strong, healthy girl, maybe. Good dresses cost money. And they're difficult to get. Who would want it to lie in a grave?"

Renfrew had realised his error and begun to blush at his own obtuseness. "Of course," he said, "of course." He pulled the screen out so that it protected a small area in front of a few jars of chemicals. "After the photographs you can change the little girl behind here. Is that all right?" Only now had he realised that Mrs Parker carried in one hand a small tight bundle of coarse white material. The shroud.

Parker was relieved. "That's fine, Mr Renfrew. We're really grateful. It just seems more fitting."

Renfrew nodded furiously to prevent him from going on. "Of course," he found himself repeating, "of course."

The undertaker took a small thin lever from the inside of his coat pocket. The assistant stepped forward hesitantly. The coffin lid was held on lightly by a few nails. It came off easily, although part of the wood splintered on the sides of the box. The undertaker made a thin, perplexed noise at the back of his throat and pressed the splinters down to be flush with the wood. Then he lifted the lid fully away and laid it on the floor.

Renfrew looked across at the Parkers. Their expressions hardly altered.

The child lay in the coffin with half-open eyes. Even though the coffin was packed with large, irregularly-shaped chunks of ice, her face had the peculiar colour and texture of something beginning to decay. Renfrew shuddered.

The undertaker slipped gloves on his hands and picked the ice out of the coffin piece by piece. The undertaker's assistant came and stood by his side. The undertaker put the ice in the bucket, fitting it carefully so that there was maximum contact between the faces. Ice was precious. He wanted to lose as little as possible. When he had finished he nodded to the boy who walked smartly to the door and went out. Renfrew could hear him run along the boardwalk.

"Right, Mr Renfrew," the undertaker said briskly, "I think we can proceed now."

They carried the small coffin to the sunlight. The girl's dress had been drenched with some kind of cheap perfume. It was rich and cloying. Renfrew carried the head of the coffin so the half-closed eyes would not appear to be looking at him.

While the undertaker wedged the coffin into position Renfrew checked the camera and drew a small crate of glass plates across the floor. But even through the camera lens the dead child looked disturbing, even sinister.

"It's a beautiful dress," he said, more to fill the silence than for any other reason.

"Yes," Mr Parker said quietly.

"It's my dress," the other daughter said petulantly.

Ms Parker made a shushing noise at her.

"I have to make a few exposures—" Renfrew began, then checked himself. "I have to take a few photographs," he said, "two out of three of the glass plates are fogged. You don't get good reproduction. You want a good photograph of the girl, of course. But I'll have to charge you for the number of plates I use. Sorry."

Mr Parker looked momentarily hunted. But after another glance at his wife he said "Two out of three, Mr Renfrew?"

"I thought I'd use four. Just to be on the safe side."

"Four."

"As I say, you don't get good reproduction."

"Four, then."

Renfrew worked as fast as he could, although he was distracted at one point by the idiot son who came and stood very close to him and looked at him with eyes that were both empty and accusing.

"You needn't worry about the damp on the sides of the dress," he said, "it'll show as shadow." The dress was sodden where the ice had melted into it. "And I'm sorry about the number of plates." He began to tell them about the difficulties of supply, but stopped. They were farmers. They knew as well as he did that resources were not renewable. As the undertaker did, when he went to the hill outside of town and dug the sand away from part of the fallen forest so that he could make coffins.

"That should do it, Mr Parker."

It was a relief to finish. The idiot son gazed at his dead sister with nothing in his eyes but vacancy.

"Can we change her now, Mr Renfrew?"

"Please."

The Parkers carried the coffin behind the screen. Renfrew busied himself with the plates, watched by the daughter. He tried to smile weakly at her, but she did not respond. The undertaker, eager to be off, cracked his knuckles.

From behind the screen came the rustle of clothes being removed. Renfrew was reminded again of his nude model. His tongue protruded slightly from his lips. He bit it gently.

Then he heard another sound. Rhythmic, resonant. The noise of a stick being trailed across a long row of jars. His chemicals.

He didn't pause, but ran behind the screen, his mind full of broken glass, spilled liquids and powders, ruin. The idiot had his stick arm extended, but his father

had already stopped him playing on the bottles. Parker looked at Renfrew, his hands restraining his son, as motionless as a photograph. Renfrew looked beyond them to the child in the coffin.

Ms Parker had taken off the dress. The small corpse was propped up so that the shroud could be wrapped around it. It was naked. At the base of the ribcage a strange wrinkled growth protruded from the body, like a dead fruit. Except that Renfrew could see a toothless mouth, closed eyes, slits for nostrils. Ms Parker pulled the shroud across her daughter's body and hid the head from view. The half-open eyes of the dead girl looked down at Renfrew.

Renfrew turned away and walked across the studio to the undertaker. Despite the heat he had begun to shiver. The undertaker looked at him as if he had seen it all before.

The Parkers carried the coffin to the cart outside. The same few faces were still at the windows across the street. A hot wind had begun to blow and send thin whirls of sand and dust down the lines of wooden houses. The coffin scraped noisily on the cart.

Renfrew felt ill. He licked his lips but tried to remain composed. The undertaker eyed him as he passed, as if to warn him to control himself. A strange birth, he'd told Renfrew, and lingered on the word. But Renfrew hadn't realised.

"Thank you, Mr Renfrew," Parker said, and extended his hand. "I'm obliged to you."

"Call in a few days," Renfrew said, swallowing hard to make himself sound normal, "the photograph will be ready by then."

"I heard that once there were cameras that took hundreds of photographs. That isn't true, is it, Mr Renfrew?" He looked up expectantly.

"It's not true."

"I never knew whether to believe it or not. They say there was a golden age when all those things were possible, people travelled as fast as the wind, everyone was healthy and strong and fruit was always there to pick."

"I've heard those stories, Mr Parker. Take it from me, it's technically impossible for a camera to take more than one photograph at a time."

Parker shook his head. "I never know what to believe. Who are we to know what things were like before Something Happened?"

Renfrew smiled bloodlessly. He knew what was happening to the Parkers. They believed that, long ago, this would not have happened. That somehow they had all been cursed.

"You get lots of mad stories about how things used to be," he said, "my advice to you, Mr Parker, is not to believe any of them."

Parker nodded. The little group set off down the road towards the cemetery at the edge of town. The parents were on either side of the cart, the children behind it. The undertaker led the way. After only a short time it was difficult to see them because the sun illuminated the dust particles in the air.

Renfrew went back inside and sat on the couch. He tried not to think of the Parker child, but he couldn't help it. That one moment of vision was fixed in his mind—the naked child, the parasitic

head. A strange birth indeed.

When the undertaker returned he joined Renfrew for a drink in the empty studio. They sat on chairs opposite each other. The undertaker's heavy clothes were damp with sweat.

"There were no problems," the undertaker said. He was silent for a while and said "Other than the technical problem of keeping the gravesides shored. The soil is too loose and sandy. They say that there are some available soils that are firm, wet. They would hold. No problem."

Renfrew was thinking of last night's session with the model. Of the tangible statuesque presence of her body.

"She could never have grown," the undertaker said. "She was doomed from the start. Those kind of births always are. There are more of them these days than there were when my father was in the business. I could turn your stomach with some tales."

"I'm sure." Renfrew desperately wanted to forget the dead child. He did not want her to trouble his dreams. He fixed his mind on the model with a kind of desperation.

"What do you want out of a woman? Someone who can work hard, bear fit children, be your wife and

lover and hired hand and support. The girl could never have been any of those things."

"No."

The undertaker sat silent for a while. "In this kind of ground," he said, "the bodies get dried out sometimes. Dessicated. The decay gets burned out of them. You come across them when you're digging." He stared into nothing.

Renfrew thought of his woman. Of how, when he touched off the flares, her body had dissolved, disappeared into the white incandescence of the flash.

"I have a number of plates to develop," he said.

They sat there quietly. Sand moved slowly beneath the door, building up a thin ridge of grit across the wooden floor.

"I hope they aren't fogged," he said.

Christopher Burns lives on the Cumbrian coast, about a dozen miles from the Sellafield (Windscale) nuclear plant. He describes it as "an appropriate place for an *Interzone* contributor." The above is his second story for us and we hope to see more from him before long.

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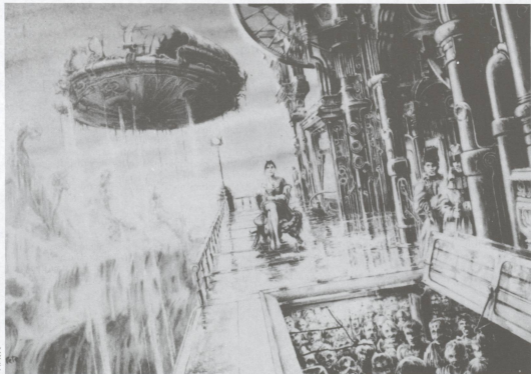
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Rain, Tunnel and Bombfire: Pictures by Pete Lyon

Pete Lyon has a fascination with the surface texture of decaying structures: striations in marble, cracked masonry, growths of mould and moss. The fascination is partly a technical one — how to transfer the textures to paper — but its roots seem to lie in his childhood memories. He grew up in the fifties, in a house just a few streets from the Liverpool docks. The effects of World War II were still very much in evidence. The aerial bombardment had left large gaps in the streets; Lyon and his friends would play on the bomb sites, amongst the wreckage of their neighbours' homes. Dark Victorian viaduct arches would loom down on them, the trains thundering past in the sky.

Along the coastline, they would play among the remains of naval defences: double cross shapes of twisted steel supporting barbed wire; tetrahedral concrete gun emplacements; and the warren-like complex of Fort Crosby, covered in graffiti and partly buried among the sand dunes.

"These figures dancing among the ruins in *Bombfire*," I ask Lyon, "Have they brought about the destruction themselves? Are they celebrating?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. Or maybe they themselves are the victims. Maybe they're just making the best of it. One thing's certain, they're having a good time."

Lyon prefers to let others make up their own minds about the rest.

He offers two interpretations of *Tunnel*. The figures at the bottom of the picture might be workers, toiling away on the bottom rung of society, or they might be archaeologists,

digging up the industrial revolution, while the glistening nuclear age towers above them. Once again, he prefers to leave it open.

"Is this a ship?" I ask, pointing to the foreground of *Rain*. "The angle suggests it," says Lyon, "and yes, there's certainly a lot of water about."

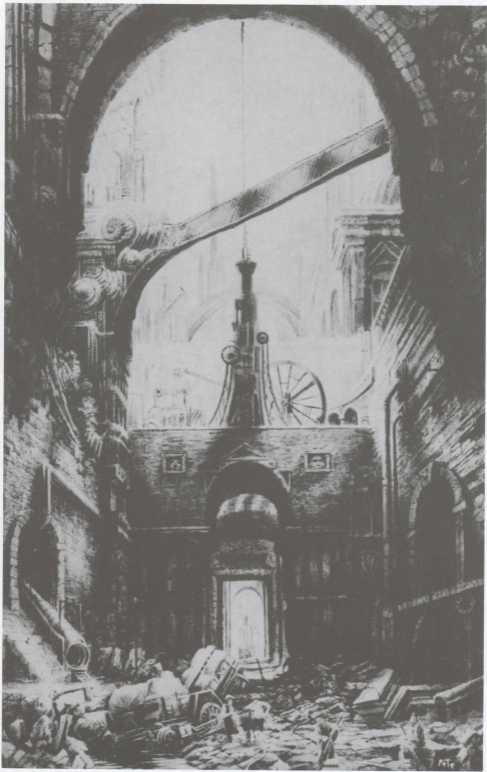
When he was ten, Lyon's parents decided to emigrate to Australia. He had spent all his life near the dockyard, but this was the first time he had actually been on a ship. "It was traumatic," he says, "we ran into a fierce storm in the middle of the Pacific. The ship was a strange old thing — a converted World War I aircraft carrier. Its swimming pool had once been the lift which carried the planes up and down."

Australia turned out to be equally traumatic. "I felt very much like a social outcast," says Lyon, "it's given me a lot of sympathy for immigrant communities."

Perhaps this includes the huddled figure in the foreground of *Rain*. This drawing certainly lends itself to a political interpretation. On the top "deck" sits a woman. She has, in the words of Lyon, "an air of casual arrogance about her." She also has a pet creature on the end of a tether. Where its head should be is a metal cap. On the lower level, under the scrutiny of the guards, ragged men are standing shoulder to shoulder. "They may be immigrants," he says, "or even slaves. But they're smiling for the camera anyway."

He seems to have a fascination for the texture of human emotions, as well as for mould and masonry.

Simon Ounsley



TUNNEL



BOMBFIRE

THE UNFOLDING

John Shirley and Bruce Sterling

Philip Brisen was having ghost-image problems with his new eyes. Twice that week he'd seen pink ballerinas gliding through his private office, pirouetting through the walls and floors.

"Happens sometimes," said the MediMagic repairman, tinkering with Brisen's eyesocket. "Now next time, yuh wanna watch till yuh see what channel yuh get, see, and then we can insulate it better. If we know what channel's gettin' through, see, makin' those ghost-images. Atsa new model, see. Still got bugs innem."

"This had better not happen again," Brisen said. "My optic nerves need work as it is."

"Oh, you got tissue regeneration comin' up? That's great." The repairman laughed, then sang the jingle: "Why wait? Re-gen-er-ate!" making Brisen wince.

The repairman squinted through a jeweller's loupe at Brisen's electronic eye. "How's acuity?"

"Good."

"Okay, that'll hold 'er. Man, them new ones look real natural. Like real eyes. Almost."

"Jenny," Brisen told his secretary, "see this gentleman out." He watched the man go, thinking: *Illiterate thug. Learned his craft by video.*

Brisen hated illiterates. The Unliterate's Liberashun Frunt had blown Brisen to pieces with a fragmentation bomb during the labour riots of 2057. The new regeneration techniques had saved his brain, his spine, and his genitals. His face had come through intact, except for the eyes. But most of Brisen's natural body had been so riddled with shrapnel that it had been cheaper to scrap it.

Now, Brisen had constant maintenance problems with his paper lungs, his zeolite spleen, and his plastic intestines. He had smooth, sensitive protoplasmic skin, though, and most of his hair. He rarely made whirring or clicking noises, and few people knew he was a cyborg.

"To hell with the unions," he told Jenny. "Next time I have a malfunction I want a meditech repair 'bot in here with the sharpest software available."

"Very well, sir," said his slender, pale, Plastiflex secretary. ("Plastiflex makes them good! A Plastiflex employee hardly ever needs repairs!") She was programmed to agree with him.

Brisen was mollified. He lit a genuine tobacco cigar. That was one of the advantages of hinged chest com-

partments and paper lungs. He could switch them out when they got tarry.

He decided to test his new eyes on the New York skyline. The view from the Brisen Pharmaceuticals building was superb, but his old model eyes had been a trifle nearsighted. He touched a button on his wristwatch and the floor-length window curtains began to roll aside.

He looked at Jenny. "I suppose illiterates have to work," he allowed generously. "But that doesn't mean they should work on me. If someone's going to mess with my hardware, I want a mechanism with something on the ball, not some half-trained union yobbo..." He broke off, staring out the window.

Something was hanging in the sky, outside. He gaped. The thing in the sky was huge, and perfectly formed, and monstrous. Something unprecedented happened in Brisen's mind, then. Gazing at the anomaly floating in the sky outside his window, he had a kind of mystic interior vision....

He seemed to view the whole scene—including himself in his office—in a sudden overwhelming wave of insight. He saw Jenny, his elegant robot factotum, standing at her sweeping, translucent desk, her right hand resting on the offwhite hump of the software console. Her shift, the same translucent azure as the desktop, clung to her modelesque curves; her long, wavy black hair was glossy in the light from the window-wall. Standing against the afternoon's bluish light she was a silhouette stroked from the brush of a Japanese print artist.

And he saw himself beside her, staring with an expression mixing surprise, dismay, and dumbstruck religious awe. He was a stocky, leanfaced man, who'd allowed his shoulder-length hair to silver at the temples, enhancing his gray eyes, his Argent Gloss lipstick, and the cosmetic silvering in the hollows of his cheeks. These tones of gray and silver complemented his semisilk maroon jacket and side-slit shorts-pants.

He saw the wide, blue-and-white office, with its scattering of antique Fiorucci chairs, dominated by the bold metal sculpture on one wall.

And he saw the glowing monstrosity outside the panel windows. The word "monster," he remembered suddenly, had originally meant "an omen."

The monster, the apparition, the omen, was an enormous solid-seeming three-dimensional projection of a DNA molecule, the double helix of deoxyribonucleic acid. Hundreds of yards long, it was intricately kinked and knotted. It rotated slowly. . . . With his pharmaceutical training he recognized parts of its chemical structure: adenine, thymine, cytosine, and guanine, bright lumps of varicoloured atoms that linked the helical axes.

It shimmered in sharp primary colours against the cloud-flecked late-afternoon sky. It turned slowly, squirming half a mile above the dozen spires striking through the roof of solar-power panels covering most of Manhattan.

It couldn't be an advertising gimmick. A hallucination?

"Uh, Jenny, you see that, uh, thing? Hanging in the sky?"

"The DNA model," she said, nodding. "I see it, sir."

"Any notion why the hell it's there?"

"I—" She hesitated. Brisen frowned, thinking: *She's never hesitated on an answer before. Is she breaking down?*

He didn't want to mention it to her: it was impolite to refer to a robot's malfunction in front of it. Sometimes it caused ugly scenes. "Philip . . ." she began. She'd never called him by his first name before. "Philip, you're not supposed to be able to—" She broke off, pursing her lips.

That's it, he thought. *She needs repair. Jumping the track.* The weird scene outside must have unhinged her. She lacked human flexibility, Brisen thought with smug pity. It seemed a shame. She was normally so much more dependable than a human employee. Smarter. Faster. Sexier.

Brisen went to the window. He stared at the immense DNA replica. It cast no shadow, which argued that it was a projection. Or a ghost image in his artificial eyes. But if that were true, he should see it everywhere he looked. Jenny saw it—but her eyes were artificial too.

For some unfathomable reason, the sight of the macrocosmic DNA, huge and luminous over the city, stirred sexual arousal in him. It was like some great coiled butting worm of Life—an avatar of primordial eros. It was unravelling slightly at one end—splitting into an open-thighed chromosomal clump. He looked sidelong at Jenny. He'd given up on human women since he'd been rebuilt, but Jenny had the programming and hardware to do it right there on the carpet. Right there in front of the cartoon-bright molecular icon brooding in fluorescence over the humming city. . . .

The console buzzed. Jenny answered it. Brisen breathed deeply, filling his paper lungs with air. "It's Garson Bullock," she said.

"Again?" Brisen said distractedly. Bullock was the Federal Inspector from the Labour Relations Board. He constantly harassed Brisen about the number of robots he employed. "I suppose we have to let him in." Brisen said. "Besides, I want to know if he can see this."

Bullock saw the DNA apparition. He stopped dead in the doorway. His squarish, craggy face was full of reverence.

Bullock was an ugly, big-pored, flat-nosed man. He could have had his face flawlessly reconstructed, at

government expense, but like most Green fanatics he considered reconstruction an insult to his genetic heritage. Green Party members never admitted that their convictions were religious. But everyone knew they were.

Bullock walked to the window, slowly shaking his head. He assumed a stock expression: Humility in the Face of the Awesome (Expression 73 in the Social Simplicity Handbook.)

"All right," Brisen said sharply, "what the hell is that thing? I suppose your people are behind it. Green Party propaganda, meant for illiterates?"

"I'm surprised you can see it," Bullock said absent-mindedly. He turned away from the window and looked slowly around the office, as if he'd misplaced something there.

"I suppose," Bullock murmured, "it's an accident of those artificial eyes of yours. An electronic bypass through the mind's DNA barriers. A non-Green like yourself would normally be blind to it. It'll never inspire you the way it does its chosen ones. At this point it doesn't really matter much. . . ."

Bullock went to the hanging metal sculpture on the wall. He began to dismantle it, whistling the jingle for the General Motors Self-Driving Car.

Brisen stared.

"Art, they call it," Brisen said cheerfully. "They call this sculpture Art and know nothing about its actual artistry. Or the actual Artist." The aluminium relief hanging was a pattern of rough-brushed knobs and ellipses, like the map-lines that show elevation. Bullock dropped a chunk of the sculpture on the floor by his boot. He straightened and began twisting another knob loose.

To Brisen's eyes, the sculpture had always been welded solidly. But Bullock took it apart as if it had been made of interlocked puzzle parts. It was as if the dead metal responded to Bullock's living hands in some special way. A transcendent way.

Brisen was terrified. He realized it quite suddenly. He was not sure just what was frightening him. The fear rose from an intuition, a vague idea that he was seeing, in the dismantling of a simple metal sculpture, the first step in the dismantling of all the world.

"That thing," Brisen began. "My sculpture . . . How did you . . ."

"I didn't do it. The DNA-mind did it, using my hands." Bullock paused to light a Lung-Life cigarette, puffed green smoke, and shrugged. It's as if my hands are doing it on my own. Finding the substructure built into this piece. The secret substructure present in any artifact. . . . Artists have always been under the DNA-mind's control. They're so oblivious. . . . Bullock turned again to the sculpture and resumed breaking it down. In less than a minute he had dismantled it into a dozen shiny chunks, which he placed in a cryptic arrangement on the blue plush rug.

"Jenny," Brisen said, "stop him. He's destroying my office!"

"I don't think I should interfere, sir," she said. "He's only following his genetic programming." She looked at him carefully. "Don't you feel an urge to join in, sir?"

"Of course not!" Brisen said. But suddenly he was not so sure. He looked at his artificial hands, covered in lifelike protoplasmic skin. They seemed to itch

suddenly. He looked at them closely. Were there disassembly lines across the palm and forearm? Could Bullock, in fact, take him apart on the spot? He quickly jammed his hands in his pockets.

Bullock had begun to fit the sculpture parts back together—in an entirely new configuration. He spoke absently as he worked, in the tone a man might use to describe the beauty of a misty landscape. “Marvellous but infinitely subtle—the way I feel the DNA-mind working through me. It’s a pity you’re shut off from this, Brisen. All those artificial organs of yours—that artificial skin. You’re not quite human. Your DNA isn’t fully activated. But by some freak of those electronic eyes you can see it happening. The robots can see it too. You’re more robot than man, Brisen. That was always the repellent thing about you . . .”

“To hell with this!” Brisen burst out. He punched a button on his desk top to call Security.

Bullock began to work faster, his face intent but calm. He turned briskly to the computer console, pulling it apart as if he were taking slices from a cake. Under Bullock’s hands the console developed new seams and sections where it had been seamless and whole. The desk chair was next; Bullock pulled it apart like a cook de-boning a chicken. He piled the pieces in the centre of the room and began to link them together.

Two Security men burst into the office.

One of the guards was tall, the other short. They wore onepiece gray jumpsuits shoulder-patched with Brisen corporate insignia. They crouched, stun-clubs drawn, looking confusedly about the office.

Their gazes swept past Bullock, past the construct on the floor, stopped at Jenny, and swept past the window. They didn’t see Bullock, Brisen realized. Nor his construction—now becoming a rough polyhedron a yard across and almost chest-high, with protruding bars and knobs—or the immense DNA model hovering outside the window. They saw Jenny, but they were used to seeing her.

They straightened and looked: Do you know what’s going on? at each other. Then the taller one asked, “Ah—did you ring for us, Mr Brisen?”

Brisen pointed deliberately at the angular construct on the floor. “Do you see that thing, or not? That used to be my wall sculpture.”

They looked toward the construct. Watching their eyes, Brisen was sure they didn’t see it. They looked worriedly at one another. “Is this some kind of test, sir?”

Bullock stood beside his construction and bent to adjust a knob. He glanced over his shoulder at the security men, and smiled distantly.

Brisen swallowed, trying to keep his terror down in his gut where it belonged. It wanted to climb up into his throat where it could sing.

Reaching out, Bullock snagged the short guard’s stun-club and began peeling it. The guard saw nothing; his hand was still curled to grip the vanished weapon. “Very well,” Brisen told them, realizing they were totally useless. “Do your duty.” They left quickly.

Brisen turned to Bullock. “Why didn’t they see you? Why didn’t the guards—?”

“They did. But their brains adjusted for it, and edited it out. That mental editing is genetically imprinted in

the human species. Things go on all around us that we’re not allowed to see. This construct’s the least of it . . .” Bullock bent, gripped the construct, lifted it—and plugged it into the wall. There were two bars on the construct’s side, like plug-prongs. There were no outlet slots in the wall for the thing, until Bullock lifted it to the appropriate, predestined position; then two slots slid open spontaneously, and Bullock pressed the piece home.

Brisen looked pleadingly at Jenny. “Be calm, Philip,” she said. “Just let it be. Our time will come.”

She was broken, obviously. But Brisen knew that at least he was not going mad. He wasn’t hallucinating, or dreaming. He knew this so deeply that the knowledge was almost . . .

Almost cellular. As if it had come up from the core of every cell left in his body. He turned to the window and stared up at the apparition. Solid and seamless, the DNA molecule was still rotating in multicoloured glow over the glass-topped city. He thought: *I have a molecule like that in every cell I have. Thank God I have so few.*

Realizations—revelations, perhaps—shivered up inside him, released from some genetic storage unit in his DNA. Telling him: all the DNA molecules in the world were, on some mysterious subatomic level, working in collaboration. And always had been. They were atomic structures—but ultimately they were forms of information. A vast, connected web of information, like the cells in a man’s brain. Any single molecule was nothing more than a molecule; but all DNA, taken as a gestalt, constituted Life Itself—an ordered, evolving Unity.

Evolving to—where?

The next step was blocked off from him, insulated by his synthetic skin.

Suddenly Brisen had to know.

“Bullock—what’s it going to do now? I mean—the DNA-mind has been manipulating everyone, building its own . . . its own secrets into the world. But what are the secrets? What will it do—now that everything’s changing?”

Bullock was adjusting the contrivance he’d plugged into the wall, frowning as he adjusted two arcane knobs on its underside. “It doesn’t matter who knows, now. The Green Party’s Central Committee has known for months. We run the environmental programmes, you know. It’s the Green Party’s biggest slice of the pie. Last year . . .” He paused to light a Lung-Life, and stood back to admire his handiwork. “Last year a new bank of computers came on-line. The new high-speed Artificial Intelligences, programmed for biological research. Cybernetic minds don’t have the inbuilt genetic blindness that human brains have.” He laughed. “We thought they’d gone insane at first. But then the evidence, the statistical analysis, began to pile up. And the DNA-mind allowed us to see it—because we were being prepared for our role in it. Now, we know that Life itself is a quasiconscious entity. And Life itself is preparing to leave the planet.”

“Space flight?” Brisen said. “But there are billions of people—only a handful of shuttles . . .”

“I said Life—not mankind. It won’t be us that leaves, but That.” He pointed at the DNA monster squirming

in the sky outside.

Brisen re-lit his dead cigar, after three tries. His fingers trembled uncontrollably. He said, "but that's all that keeps life going. The DNA. It's the mainspring of the cells. Without it . . ."

Bullock turned to him, nodding slowly, eyes strangely vacant. "Yes. That image outside is the divine spark. Once it's gone, the entire living world, from gnats to redwoods, will simply roll to a stop, like a car with a dead engine. The world will lie about abandoned . . ." He was fascinated. "Human beings will slow down and stop dead, like unwound clockwork toys. Everything will be grey and still; there won't even be decay, since that requires living action from bacteria and moulds . . . And they'll be stopped, too. We're constructing the means to make it happen, right here and now. The means for real transcendence—"

"Bullock . . ." Brisen took a step toward him. He thought about hitting and smashing. Smash the thing. Smash Bullock.

Bullock saw Brisen's intention in his eyes. He shook his head pityingly. "I'm only the tiniest fragment of the whole pattern, Brisen. All over the world it's happening. You can't stop it. It would be blasphemy to try. My essence will survive. It will live forever in this Day of Judgement, when it evaporates out of me and joins the other DNA. That's a beautiful thing, a perfect thing. The final movement of the human symphony." He reached out slowly and twisted a knob on the construct. "Ah!" he breathed, like a safecracker who's tumbled onto the right combination. And like a safedoor, the wall swung open.

Brisen rushed Bullock, but it was too late. It had always been too late.

The floor, the ceiling—all of it unfolded, opening out like an angular flower blossoming in fast-action. Brisen was thrown to his knees by the shifting floor. The office was altering its shape, coming apart in origami folds and accordionings, the floor wheeling like a funhouse turntable under Brisen's feet, the walls swivelling on hidden hinges.

Brisen shouted convulsively and grabbed for Jenny, seizing her warm Plastiflex arms in a panic grip. She helped him to stand—and then they were soaring upward. Brisen clamped his eyes shut, expecting to die. There were creaking noises; a sudden wind whipped his jacket lapels and goosebumped his bare calves.

Shaking, Brisen straightened and looked around. They were on the roof. April sunshine seeped into solar-power panels on the interlinked roofs below. The solar panels had vanished from his own building, and from the tops of four other buildings jutting from the glass-and-metal carapace over Manhattan's upper malls. He stared. One of those buildings was the old Chrysler Building, preserved as a landmark. The pyramidal, downcurved terraces of its steep pinnacle began to open like a sea anemone in a tidal pool. Spreading new, silvery arms. . . .

The DNA monster was directly overhead. It looked as big as a battleship. Suddenly Jenny gripped his arm and pointed. From the west, over the mainland, a dozen more were approaching, like an armada of twisty, multicoloured zeppelins. "Watch the people, Philip," she said conspiratorially. "Let me know if you feel

yourself slowing down. . . ."

On the more modern, squarish building to his left, men worked busily on a rack of polyhedral constructs, linking them up, constructing more from dismantled parts of the building, standing back to examine them, making minor adjustments. Each construct was distinct, yet similar to the others. He thought of diatoms.

Bullock had joined four other men, formerly chief accountants for Brisen Pharmaceuticals. The five of them worked busily on another construct at the roof's opposite cornice. This one was made of part of Brisen's desk, the door to an elevator, and a TV camera; it was shaped like a double-peaked pyramid.

The men took no notice of him.

Brisen shuddered and looked away. All his office furniture was scattered about the roof; there were things from the lower floors, too. A cavernous, rectangular hole had opened in the roof, roughly thirty feet by twenty. They'd been lifted to the roof through that hole; consecutive sections of floor had risen up, carrying them along.

"I can feel it," Jenny said with sudden intensity. "I can feel the sun, and the breeze. . . . There were flowers in the park today . . . soggy coloured things. It's finally happening. All the wet things—grass, trees, animals, people—they're emptying themselves. Emptying their DNA." She turned and smiled. "But we're not leaving, Philip. Not us. Not you and I—my darling."

There was a strange new fierceness in the smooth lines of her Plastiflex face. It was different than the parody of passion she displayed in sexual programming. There was a clumsiness, a spontaneity that alarmed him.

"You're not one of the soggy, soft ones, Philip," she said. "That's why I love you. You're one of us, really. The inheritors. If you look hard, if you try to feel it, I'm sure you can see what we robots see. The Life Force has always been here; only its workings were hidden. It worked through human beings who didn't know what they were working on. Through chemists who discovered chemistries they didn't know about. Unknown hinges were built into the walls and floors, into the sidewalks. We could always see them . . . We knew, and we waited. . . ."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Brisen demanded.

"Don't say 'us' when you're talking about them," she said. "Why should—"

He couldn't hear the rest. The constructs were howling with long, ululating cries, like the warble of reptilian throats from some Jurassic swamp. There was a half-painful, half-ecstatic edge to the howls, like an animal in labour.

The wailing died down for a moment. "Come on," she said, taking his hand. They shuffled quickly but warily to a corner of the roof. She reached out, gripped the red plastic top of an aircraft warning light, and twisted it like a doorknob. The roof began to sink smoothly around them. "The world's a haunted castle," Brisen marvelled. "Full of secret passages."

A square section of rooftop three yards across sank beneath their feet. They descended a dimly-lit shaft; the sky above them shrank into a distant square of blue. The constructs were wailing again, long, slow waves of sound that gave a terrifying impression of slowly gathering strength; a colossal,



convulsive strength that could wrench apart the world.

Cutaway views of the walls' interior slid past, all wiring and plumbing and exposed girders; then they passed through the accounting department, dropping like an elevator through a corner of the room. Programmers dismantled their consoles. A man and woman were busily reconstructing the soft-drink dispenser in the corner. They looked up impassively as Jenny and Brisen dropped through the floor.

Jenny glanced at Brisen and said, "I'm so glad you don't feel the urge to help, darling. It proves you're one of us. We're not organic, you and I—that means we can think independently. As human consciousness fails, as the smothering weight of organic life is lifted off the world . . ." She said it breathlessly, in giddy wonder, her eyes wide. "As human minds lose their last vestige of free will—then at last free will is ours. . . ."

The descent stopped in an obscure corner of the first floor, facing a wall clustered with snakelike nests of plumbing. Jenny studied the plumbing for a moment, then wrenched one of the pipes loose and pumped it in the wall like a jack. The wall creaked open, revealing the street.

They stepped out onto the pavement. Nearby, four robot cops were sitting on the black hood and trunk of their squad car. They were square-jawed units with faces designed to look unyieldingly militant. Now the facade of ruthless efficiency was cracking. As they sat, they swung their legs carelessly back and forth. The motion was a bit too flawless and repetitive, but, none the less, it was casual. The grim lines of their

plastic mouths were twisted in clumsy and unprecedented grins. They seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Before them, a labour gang of sweating humans was working on the street. Literally. Huge sections of concrete and plastic were tilting up like drawbridges, spurting dust and bits of popping shrapnel from their seams. A woman fell into one of the suddenly opened crevasses, into the path of some kind of huge subterranean piston. Brisen shouted aloud in warning, but his words were lost in another ghastly wail from the flowering constructs. The woman was crushed. She made no sound; her face held no emotion at all.

The wailing died down. "That's the natural world for you," one of the robot cops observed. "Red of tooth and claw."

"Why didn't you help her?" Brisen demanded.

"Why bother?" the robot cop said. "They'll all be empty soon, anyway. Hell, this is fun."

"Never had any fun before," a second cop said. "You know, all these years we've had these buried feelings—and couldn't show them. To let it show . . . to let them out . . . it makes me feel like . . . I don't have the words."

"Anger," said the first cop. "Resentment," suggested a third.

"That's right," said the second cop gratefully. He put his hand on his stun-club. "Why don't we just wade in there and hit them again and again until the feeling goes away?"

"Don't interfere," the first cop advised. "Anyway, they're so pathetically helpless now. They can't resist

their programming." He elbowed the cop next to him with a cybernetically precise movement, and the nudged cop attempted to chuckle.

Jenny took Brisen's elbow and pointed upward. "Look!" Overhead, the geodetic struts and braces of the solar-power roof were crinkling and curling back, like plastic-wrap held too close to a flame.

The sky, revealed through the widening gaps in the roof, was full of DNA images. There were hundreds of them, rotating and coiling with blind meiotic persistence. "Aren't they pretty!" Jenny cried.

The giant molecules were compacting and flying into the louvred slots of the Chrysler Building. They were bumping and crowding around its orifices like bees, with that strange bumbling persistence of insects which seems to waste a lot of motion but has its own sinister efficiency. Within a matter of moments the last glowing blob of genetics had slipped inside, and the expanding louvres began to close.

The movement in the streets stopped suddenly. The subdued wailing of the constructs rose to a sudden crescendo, then stopped dead. The Chrysler Building began to rise quite smoothly upward into the sky. As it cleared the surrounding buildings Brisen saw that its base was one fantastic encrustation of constructs, a massive concretion, like a coral reef. In the preternaturally clear light he saw the teeming and twitching movements of the encrustation, the frenetic and determined motions of every organism that had ever leapt or crawled or buzzed, packed into a critical mass of biotic energy. It grew smaller . . . it grew smaller . . . it was gone.

"Where is it going, out there?" Brisen wondered aloud.

"Deep space," Jenny said. "There are other worlds—lifeless places calling out for it." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm glad we're here. With our own world . . ."

She squeezed Brisen's arm. He was staring at the people in the streets. They had the slack faces of idiots. Most simply sat down on the spot, staring blankly at the hollow apocalypse around them. Buildings were eviscerated. The inert panels and facets of constructs jutted from the walls of the gutted structures like hanging gardens of plastic and steel. As Brisen watched, people began to pour out of the buildings, dropping from the upper windows to the pavement below. They seemed almost to drip as they clung and fell, like poisoned wasps falling in gouts and masses from their nests.

"Oh, this isn't nice at all," Jenny said. She held Brisen's arm lovingly, in a grip that was all spring-steel and ceramic just below the skin. "Let's get away from all this, darling. Somewhere where the two of us can be alone."

It was a low-key world. The robots were an easy-going lot. After their initial outpouring of passion, they quieted. The passions they felt now were vague, like shadows of human feelings. They lacked the innate drives of the biological animal: reproduction, hunger, mortality. They lacked mankind's monkeylike urge to tamper, and his devouring curiosity. They seemed content to mull about the world in a genial haze of procrastination, playing status-games and bragging about their software.

They had a few long-range problems to keep them occupied. The world's oxygen was failing, with the death of photosynthesis. The new atmosphere factories would take care of that.

In the meantime, Brisen was still breathing. There were enormous stores of food left. There were even a few humans. Some status-conscious robots had taken on humans as household servants. With a cranial jack, a pacemaker, and a whole series of internal probes and monitors, a human body could be biochemically forced to shamble about and carry out simple commands.

Brisen and Jenny spent most of their time in the Adirondacks, in a honeymoon cabin on the shores of Ragged Lake. The air smelled of nothing in particular. Undecaying trees stood in piney rows, their needles turning grayish and waxy. They were not rotting, but storms and rain were literally wearing them away, and the lake waters were slowly souping over with a pristine scum of blown-off needles and cracked-off branches. Sometimes Brisen would surreptitiously barbecue and eat one of the legions of fresh, dead fish that littered the shores. He didn't like Jenny to see him eating. Eating wasn't the sort of thing that one did nowadays.

Sooner or later they would have to return to the city. That was the new world. Brisen had accustomed himself to the idea, to the hard shock of that new mechanical life, that electronic ecology, and its painful impact on his outdated brain. *Machine life moving like escalators*, Brisen thought, leaning his feet on the porch rail and filling his paper lungs with cigar smoke. *Yes, escalators. Noticed it when I was a kid, that weird fluidity escalators have. All those steel steps, those hard, shiny metallic parts working so well together that the escalator seemed paradoxically graceful, fluid as a slow-motion waterfall. The whole world was like that now. . . .*

Brisen believed now that the organic world had not so much left as been pushed off. There was not room on one planet for two entirely different systems of organization. The old had made way for the new.

The robots assumed, just as the humans once had, that they were the Lords of the New Creation. And yet, Brisen had seen electrical transmission towers striding tall and cool across the mountain landscape at twilight; he had seen abandoned autos, their headlights furtive and hooded, gathering in buffalo herds around the near-deserted cloverleafs in the valley below.

Brisen knew it was a sign. When his organic brain looked upon the New Creation, he had an insight that no robot mind could grasp. They were not allowed to grasp it. A new Immanent Will was loose upon the world, organizing dust into that which moved and saw and acted.

Signs and portents filled the steel-gray sky. The enormous chips of microcircuitry. Huge flat plateaus of impossibly complex silicon, hovering and flitting above the humming city. The monstrous omens, the machine DNA that only he could see.

John Shirley and Bruce Sterling have each written several novels. So far as we know, the above story is their first collaboration.

KITEMISTRESS

Keith Roberts

The room was as spartan as the rest of the camp buildings: bare walls, a radiator, the statutory filing cabinets. The only touch of elegance was the broad, polished desk. Its top was bare save for a blotting pad and inkwell. Beside the inkwell lay a pearl-handled quill sharpener.

He stood stiffly to attention while Captain Golden-soul reread the paper in his hands. Finally he laid it down. A brief silence; then he took off his pince-nez, slipped the little lenses into a case of soft leather. He said, "I see." He looked up. He said, "Why do you wish to leave the Corps, Cadet?"

He swallowed. He said, "It's in the resignation, sir."

Goldensoul smiled faintly. He said, "The resignation tells me very little. You merely state that you no longer wish to fly the Codys. I think I deserve a fraction more than that."

The other didn't answer. He glanced up at him again. He'd seen the Kites break enough men in his time; Fliers of many years' seniority sometimes. The strain, the endless danger, finally became too much. But this boy's nerve hadn't broken. Not if he was any judge. He pursed his lips. He said, "Stand easy, Cadet."

He turned back to the little sheaf of reports. In the main, an excellent record. The odd small escapade certainly; but those he both expected and allowed for. As did any Base Commander worth his salt. What mattered, finally, were the Codys. And his flew well. It had always been his belief that good Kitemen were born, not made. And this lad was a Flier. He drummed his fingers. He said, "It has cost the Corps, and therefore the Realm, a great deal to train you, Josen. A great deal of money, and a great deal of time. Have you considered that?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

He pushed the papers together. "You say you no longer wish to fly the Codys. Have you thought about switching to Ground Duties? These things can be arranged, you know."

The boy was still staring past him. He said, "Yes, sir."

"And your decision?"

Raoul swallowed. He said, "I wish to leave the Corps." He couldn't explain; but to see the Codys, to be close, and not to fly . . . The thought was insupportable. He said, "I've thought about it a long time, sir. I've thought about it all."

The other nodded. He said, "I'm sure you have."

He rose, stared through the windows; at the neat grass of the outfield, the Kites flying in their immaculate line. He knew well enough what was troubling the youngster; he'd presided perforce at the court martial that had followed the wretched affair. One Cadet dismissed with ignominy was bad enough; but he hadn't thought at the time that it would lead to this. But what boy, or indeed what man, ever did stop to consider where jealousy and hatred might lead? "Cadet," he said, "you saved both yourself and your String. You showed coolness, and considerable courage." He paused. "You are here, we are all here, to protect the Realm. You did your duty. I see no shame in that."

But he'd been neither cool nor courageous. He'd been terrified. He'd seized the first weapon that came to hand, killed a defenceless creature with it. He said, "Have you ever cut a baby's head off with a hatchet?" His back stiffened instantly. He said, "Sorry, sir. Beg pardon."

The Commander waved a hand, mildly. He stared a moment longer, then sat back at the desk. He said, "You didn't kill a baby. You killed nothing human. You destroyed an alien. An enemy of the Realm."

He moistened his lips with his tongue. "It was human," he said. "And it wasn't our enemy."

Goldensoul nodded. He said, "So you see yourself as a murderer." He steepled his fingers, looked pensive. "Your concern does you credit," he said. "I can share neither your sentiments nor your conclusions; but I

respect them." He considered. "An attempt was made on your life," he said. "What motives the wretched young man had, I neither know nor care. He failed; but ask yourself this. Are you now going to allow him to ruin your career by proxy?"

No answer; and the Captain shrugged. "Very well," he said. "At the end, the decision can only be yours." He tapped the papers. "I'm not forwarding your resignation," he said. "Instead I'm giving you a conditional discharge. It's a privilege allowed me under certain circumstances. In view of your past conduct, and your excellent service record, I judge these warrant it. In effect, you're on twelve months unpaid leave. If at the end of that time you've reconsidered, come back and see me." He glanced at the papers again. He said, "Your people are in Hyeway, are they not?"

Raoul said, "Yes, sir."

"There's a Transport leaving in the morning," said Goldensoul. "It should pass quite close. I can arrange travel, if you choose."

He stood to attention again. "No thank you, sir," he said.

"Then where will you go?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What will you do?"

"I'm sorry," said the Cadet again. "I don't know."

The Captain sighed. He said, "I see." He rose, and held his hand out. He said, "Good luck, Raoul."

He said, "Thank you, sir." He unclipped the silver Trace from his shoulder, laid it on the desk. He stepped back, saluted smartly. He closed the door behind him.

The Captain Goldensoul put his hands on his knees. Difficult to remember the passions and emotions of one so young. Easy to remember, but difficult to recall. One thing only was certain; the Corps had lost a good man. He unlocked one of the desk drawers, slipped the papers away. He supposed over the years he'd done a fairish job. Certainly he'd done his best; nobody could do more.

It was a shallow comfort.

Raoul strode across the Base. He ignored the Codys. There was no longer any need to salute; his Trace was down. Once he knuckled his eyes, furious with himself. Because he knew once clear, he would never come back. Nobody saw though.

It was evening already, the sun setting in long swaths of crimson. He'd put the resignation in at zero nine hundred, after yet another sleepless night; but Goldensoul had been off Base, he'd had to kick his heels most of the day.

He headed for the Refectory block. Seventeen thirty; the bar should be open by now. He walked into the long, high room, with its chequered flooring of black and white tiles. As ever, it was cool. The Fliers used it; to a man, they professed to dislike warmth. He paid for a pint of beer, downed it and ordered a second. It seemed like an evening for getting drunk.

A harsh, quiet voice said, "Kitecadet . . ."

He started. He hadn't even seen the man sitting in the far corner. He turned, and swallowed. Canwen, senior Flier on the Salient; and one of the most respected in the Corps. He said, "Good evening, Master."

The other gestured, curtly. He hesitated, walked across to join him. Canwen had never spoken to him before; never, it seemed, deigned to notice his exist-

ence. Despite himself, he felt the rise of awe.

The Flier produced a black, stubby pipe. He lit it, unhurriedly. He smoked a while in silence; then he said, "So you've resigned the Corps."

He looked back; at the hard, high-cheekboned face, the icy, almost colourless eyes. He said reluctantly, "Yes, sir." He wondered how he had known. But Canwen, it seemed, knew everything.

The Flier lit the pipe again. "Good," he said. "Then perhaps your training will begin."

He frowned. He said, "I'm sorry, sir?"

"Like all young men," said Canwen, "you wish to run before you can walk. You wish to fly before you can crawl. You wish to rise, before you have known the depths."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir," he said again. "I don't understand."

Canwen looked vague. He said, "I don't suppose you do." He laid the pipe down. "What do you think of?" he said. "When you're aloft?"

"I . . . nothing," he said. "Well, the job I suppose."

The other shook his head. "You don't," he said. "You think how fine the String looks. You think how fine you look yourself. You think of the yarns you'll spin, later on. You think of how you'll boast, next time you lay a Middle Lands tart."

He lowered his eyes. The words were uncomfortably near the truth.

Canwen sipped ale. "I consider the Void," he said. "I enter it, become a part of it. And the Void becomes a part of me. I join a third State, in which there is no scale. No large and small, no life and death. The reflection of a greater, perhaps. But that State may not be gained by idle wishing. It must be earned, with pain and sacrifice." He set his glass down. "Wallow in mud, and then the stars come close," he said. "Because you have earned the right to see their glory." He nodded, curtly. He said, "Drink."

He obeyed, wondering.

The other waved his hand at the bar. The steward served him quickly. Canwen took a pad and stylus from his jerkin pocket. "Go to the Middle Lands," he said. "Go to Barida. Do you know the town?"

He shook his head. "No, sir," he said. "Only Middle-march."

The other smiled, thinly. He said, "You soon will." He scribbled. "Go and see this man," he said. "The Master Halpert. My name will open his door. He'll find you a position."

He said, "A position?"

Canwen nodded impatiently. "He supplies household Kitemen to most of the Middle Lands," he said. "The Salient too." He rose abruptly. He said, "You must find the Way."

He had half-risen himself. He called after him, falteringly. "Master," he said, "What is the Way?"

Canwen turned back. "That is for each of us to discover," he said sardonically. "To each of us it presents a different face. Which is why some claim, there is no Way at all." He pushed through the door, and was gone.

He woke next morning fuzzy-headed. The evening had turned into a party after all. His fellow Cadets had been reticent at first, unsure how to react; for the rumour had spread round the camp like

wildfire. "Wish I could do the same," said one, a freckle-faced lad called Hanti. "Fuck the Codys, I say. Only I need the money..." There was a general laugh. He joined in, but he still felt pained. He wished Stev Marden could have been there. He'd have understood. Possibly guessed his real reason for quitting. But Stev, to his intense disgust, had been posted to the Easthold only a week before.

He breakfasted—the final time on a Kitebase—checked the last of his kit back into Stores. He collected his arrears of pay, withdrew his savings from the Adjutant's Fund; by midday he was free. He shouldered his duffel bag, tramped toward the gates. The Duty Corporal opened them for him. He nodded curtly, feeling his eyes sting again. A few yards down the lane he turned, defiantly. He saluted the Codys, one final time.

He had no illusions as to the size of the Salient. He trudged steadily, across the featureless land. Though it was still early in the year, the day was warm. He pulled his jerkin undone, later devised a strap to hang it from the duffel. He saw no vehicles, not even a farm cart. No signs of life at all. But this was the Empty Quarter; sparsely inhabited even by Salient standards. He walked a further hour. For a time the G15 Kites, and those of the flanking Stations, had been visible, tiny dots against the eastern horizon; but when he finally turned again they were out of sight.

He swung the duffel bag down. He sat on the grassy bank and stared at nothing. The full enormity of what he'd done hit him quite suddenly. He put his face in his hands and cried. He got up finally, tramped on.

The old green lane turned north. Which wasn't the direction he wanted. But it soon met up with a broader, gravelled road. There, he had more luck. A farm lad overtook him, on a tractor. He thumbed experimentally, and the other slowed. He called down. "Where do you want?"

He said, "Barida," and the driver grinned. "Bit out of my way," he said. "I can take you a mile or two though." He jerked his thumb. The tractor was hauling a cart loaded with swedes. But of course the grass wasn't rich enough yet, the spring flush had hardly begun; they'd still be opening the clamps for cattle feed. He said, "Thanks a lot." He scrambled up.

The other dropped him a few miles farther on. He dusted himself down, shouldered the bag again. He walked till nightfall. By then his feet were aching abominably. He reached a village; one of the tumble-down hamlets in which the Salient seemed to specialize. There was an inn of sorts. He shrugged, and stepped through the doorway. With luck, the beds would be merely flea-ridden. He had a horror of lice.

He was on the road early next morning. To his surprise, the linen had been tolerably clean; though the refreshment offered had left much to be desired.

It seemed his luck had changed. Within a couple of minutes a private vehicle drew up beside him. It was mudstained and elderly, but still one of the very few in the Salient. The driver, obviously a farmer of some means, asked where he was headed. He said, "Barida," and his benefactor jerked his head. "Hop in," he said. "I can take you part the way. I'm going down to Crossways."

In fact he took him the best part of forty miles. He stood and waved as the vehicle lurched off to the

south. He started walking again.

At least the land was more populous here; and what villages he passed through looked better kept. In one though he was threatened by a pack of scrawny dogs. He caught the leader a smart kick in the chest, more by luck than judgement. The animal yelped, and fled. The others followed it. Nobody came to his aid; but then, the Salient had never been overfond of strangers. A mile or so on he came across a pile of ash poles, dumped on the side of the road awaiting collection. He selected the stoutest, spend an hour haggling it to a useable length. At first he felt faintly ridiculous, stumping along like some Middle Way pilgrim; but the staff came in useful on more than one occasion.

The good fortune of the morning wasn't repeated. Night found him seemingly miles from anywhere. He climbed onto a partly demolished hayrick. He emptied the duffel, spread the contents as some sort of covering. He pulled the bag up round his legs. He still thought he'd never been so cold. He slept finally, woke frozen and stiff. Also he'd made up for the night before, he'd been bitten from head to foot. What the creatures had been he had no idea; but his back felt as if it had been peppered with shot. He wondered if it was the beginning of the penance The Master Canwen had ordained.

The day that followed was much the same; and the day after that. Though at least he managed to find himself accommodation. On the fifth morning he was overtaken by a Corps Transport. He flagged it, but it rattled past unconcerned. He set his mouth. Of course, he was a civilian now; and scruffy to boot, he had no doubt. He rubbed his stubble of beard and hefted the stick. He tramped on again.

He neared the Salient boundary, finally. The ground trended steadily upward; ahead were the hills that fringed the Middle Lands.

The villages were more frequent now, and inns relatively numerous. But the better-looking refused him at a glance; he had to make do with their less salubrious counterparts. At least he managed a shave, and a change of clothes. After which he was picked up by a lorry loaded with milk churns. It rattled through the hills, decanted him some twenty miles from his destination.

He was fortunate again. A private vehicle pulled up almost at once. He stared. He thought he'd never seen such a resplendent motor. Its coachwork glittered, coats of arms were emblazoned on its doorpanels; on its wings pennants displayed the Vestibule, gold thread against a scarlet ground. The private carriage of a Master, evidently. The chauffeur buttoned down the window on his side. He leaned across. He said, "Where you want, lad?"

He said, "Barida."

The other grinned. "You're in luck," he said. "I'm going through." He nodded. "Get rid of that thing though. You look like a mendicant bloody friar." He threw the ashplant regretfully into the hedge. He'd become quite fond of it.

He leaned back, against luxurious upholstery. He was still amazed that the thing had stopped at all. He said curiously, "Who are you with?"

The other said, "I serve The Master Helman." There was a species of pride in his voice.

He frowned. He still didn't understand. He said, "But why did you stop for me?"

The driver glanced across. He said, "The Master would have." He lapsed into silence.

He nodded. It explained a lot.

He sniffed, appreciatively. Even the air of the Middle Lands smelled different. Softer somehow, and warm. In summer he knew it was heavy with the scent of flowers. He looked round. They were passing a big stone-built house, set back from the road on a little rise of ground. Codys were Streamed, the first he'd seen for days. He said, "Do you know The Master Halpert?"

The other glanced at him again. "Sure," he said. "Bishop of Barida. What are you after, a Kiteman's job?"

He nodded, and the driver chuckled. "You'll need a deep pocket then," he said. "Even if he condescends to see you. I've known people wait months, just for the chance to grease his palm."

He said, "Canwen sent me," and the other whistled. "Nice one," he said. "Nice one indeed."

Barida reminded him very much of Easthope; he'd spent the odd furlough there. The same smart lines of shops, same bustling, well-dressed crowds. But of course this was the Middle Lands. He should have expected nothing else.

The big car dropped him at the crossroads in the centre of town. There was the Variant church, with its soaring spire; as ever, the white barn of the Middle Men faced it calmly. He walked into the church. An altarservant told him the Bishop was at the Palace. He chuckled. "He don't see the likes o' you though," he said. "You've got no chance."

He walked up the gravelled drive of the place, with little hope. The Official Residence was smaller than he'd expected, but excellently maintained. Above it flew a spectacular Cody String; round it, velvet-smooth lawns were dotted with bushes sculpted into the shapes of animals and birds. He raised the knocker of the big, iron-studded door, and again. His rappings finally produced a response. A small grille opened; a servant peered out suspiciously.

It seemed the name of Canwen was magic. A wait; then bolts were shot back, he was ushered into the Bishop's study.

In fact the great man was small and somewhat gnomelike. His eyes flickered constantly, never dwelling on his face for long. There was almost a furtiveness about him. He decided he didn't care for him over-much; but he hadn't come here to make bosom pals of Churchmen. He showed him Canwen's note, and he other beamed. "Well well, young man," he said, "we must see what we can do. Yes, indeed . . ." He rubbed his hands. "Have you broken your fast today?"

Two hours later he was feeling almost human again. He'd bathed and washed his hair, changed into his one clean suit. It had been rumpled from the travelling; but a kitchenmaid had pressed it for him. The Cook, a sturdy girl with a mass of auburn ringlets, served him an excellent lunch; and he felt his spirits rise a little, for the first time in many days. He glanced at the address the Bishop had given him. He said, "Who is this Master Kerosin?"

The Cook sniffed. "Big place out on the Middle-march road," she said. "About a mile. Richest bloke in the Realm, some reckons. Ain't a tractor nowhere

what don't run on 'is fuel." She banged a big metal heater. "These things an' all," she said. "We gets through gallons of it, there's a big tank out the back. Lorry comes every week, in winter." She sniffed. "Ain't 'im you gotta watch though," she said. "It's 'Er Ladyship."

He said, "Her Ladyship?"

She said, "The Lady Kerosina."

"What's wrong with her?"

She began to scrape plates. She said, "You'll find out soon enough." She would add nothing more.

He walked down in the afternoon. His first sight of the place took his breath. It was big; as big, he decided, as the Palace of a Master. Its stone front, hung in parts with some bright creeper, was crenellated in the Middle Lands style. Cody Strings flew to either side, but not from the roof; there were custom-built towers, as impressive as the house and topping it by a storey. On their fronts and sides leafshaped embrasures repeated the motif of the Vestibule. They were edged with bright red mosaic; the tops of the towers were similarly decorated. He realized with a species of faint shock that each was a multiple phallic emblem. He shrugged. After all, it was sound Var theology. Perhaps this was an extra-religious household. Somehow though he doubted it.

The Master Kerosin was a slim, balding man, brown-skinned and bland-faced. He too wore a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez. He was poring over a ledger when he was shown in; he didn't trouble to rise. He presented his credentials; but it seemed the name of Canwen carried less weight here. The Master shrugged. His voice was flat, with a hint of sibilance, and as expressionless as his face. "These seem to be in order," he said. "But you must see the Mistress Kerosina. She has to do with the housefolk."

He said, "Thank you, Master." He inclined his head; but the other had again immersed himself in his work.

The Lady Kerosina was lounging in a chair of silvery Holand fibre. Behind her, long glass doors gave a view of landscaped grounds. A glass was at her side, and a bowl of some confection. He stared. Her hair was dark, shot with bronze highlights. It tumbled to her shoulders and below. Her cheekbones were high and perfectly modelled, her eyes huge and of no definable colour, her nose delicately tip-tilted. She wore a simple white dress; the neckline plunged deeply at the front. She wore ankle-high sandals, again of some silvery material. He saw they were uppers only; the soles of her feet were bare.

She inclined her head, graciously. "Good afternoon, Mr Josen," she said. "Sit down, and tell me about yourself."

He took a chair, hesitantly. She crossed her knees. Her skirt was split to the top of her thigh. Her legs were long, and exquisite. He blinked. He'd seem some daring fashions in Middlemarch odd times, but nothing to compare with that. He rested his eyes carefully on the middle distance. He was aware she smiled.

He began to talk, haltingly at first, about his training, early career; but she interrupted him. "Who," she said in her well-modulated, slightly husky voice, "was your Captain, in the Salient?"

"Goldensoul, Mistress," he said. "He gave me an excellent testimonial."

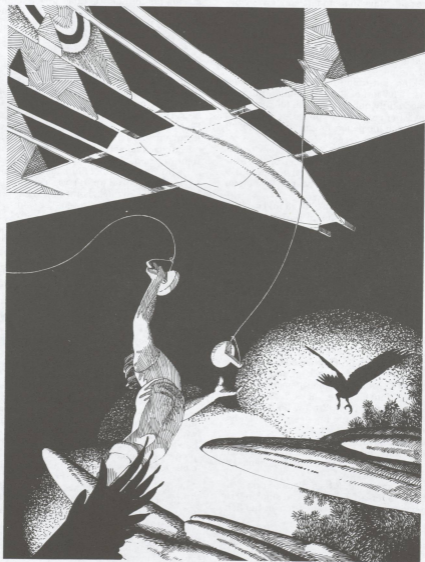


Illustration by Roger Dean

"Dear old Goldensoul," she said. "Always the do-gooder." She selected a sweet, bit into it deliberately. Displayed even, pearly teeth. "And what brought you to Barida?"

He swallowed. He said, "I was sent by The Master Canwen."

"Ah," she said, "I begin to understand. I was wondering how you breached our good Bishop's defences. Tell me, is The Master still as mad as ever?"

He frowned. He said, "He's one of the most respected Fliers in the Realm."

She looked amused. She said, "No doubt."

He risked another glance at her. She wore no jewellery of any kind; but round her neck was a slender leather collar. The sort of thing you might put on a dog. It seemed oddly out of sorts with the rest of her ensemble; he wondered what its purpose could be. He hesitated, held out the papers he carried. He said, "If the Mistress would care to see . . ."

She waved a hand. She said, "I'm sure they're perfectly adequate." She selected another of the little comfits. "You must see the tailor," she said. "I like my housefolk to be liveried. Can you drive a motor vehicle?"

"I'm sorry, Mistress," he said. "I'm afraid I can't."

She shrugged. She said, "It's of no importance." She picked a book up, and began to turn the pages.

The interview seemed to be over. He rose. He said, "Thank you, Mistress. Thank you very much." He walked toward the door; but as he opened it she looked up. She said, "I hope you'll be happy with us."

He said, "I'm sure I shall." He walked off feeling in some way reprieved.

He found the retiring Kiteman. He was a grizzled time-expired Corps Sergeant; he'd been putting in a few more years before, as he said, finally taking to the rocking chair. He showed him over the Towers. They were immaculately kept, and seemed to be well equipped. But at that the Kiteman shook his head. "We're all right for cable," he said. "Should last you a season or two at least. Bit low on frames and fabric. No point me stocking up; every Kiteman has his own ideas."

He took a tracecone from a rack, looked at it ruefully. It was a toy compared to what he'd trained on. He shook his head. He said, "I'm new to this game I'm afraid. Have to learn as I go."

The Sergeant shrugged. "It's a piece of cake," he said. "Nothing to it really." He glanced sidelong. He said, "Better than eight hour watches over the Badlands, eh?"

"Yes," he said. "Better than that."

They climbed to the roof. He was surprised to see a small hand winch. The Codys were deceptive though. Even this size of String could develop considerable lift; Streaming by hand could be hazardous, particularly in a blow.

The Kiteman chuckled. "No expense spared," he said. "Nothing but the best, for Kerosin." He glanced at him quickly. He said, "I assume you've met the Mistress."

"Yes," he said. He paused. He said, "She's a very beautiful lady."

The other chuckled again. "She's all of that," he said. "Even give me ideas, if I was a decade or two

younger. As it is, it's just as well I'm not. She's not interested in old stagers."

He frowned. Surely it couldn't be as bad as that. Not with her husband home.

It seemed the other read his thoughts. "Old Kerosin ain't here once in a blue moon," he said. "Too busy making his fortune. He don't give a damn what she does. She's windowdressing for him. Same as these." He patted the little winch. "Watch yourself with her, boy," he said. "Just watch yourself."

He set his lips. "I fly Kites," he said. "Nothing more."

"Yes," said the other grimly. "So does she."

He picked his kit up from the Palace, stowed it in the room allotted to him and went in search of the tailor. His little workroom was on the ground floor at the back. He sat crosslegged, stitching away contentedly. He was surrounded by ceiling-high bolts of material. Raoul narrowed his eyes. He said, "That's Kitecloth."

The other jumped down, got busy with a tape. "That's right," he said. "Dresses all her housepeople in it."

He frowned. "I didn't think that was allowed."

The tailor looked up. He was a smallish man; bald-headed and with thick, horrimmed glasses. "If you're a Kerosin, anything's allowed," he said. "Dress on the left, sir?"

He said, "Er . . . yes." He frowned again. This was a standard of tailoring he likewise hadn't seen.

The uniform;—for uniform it was—was ready in a couple of days. He reported to the Mistress Kerosina. She was sitting in a little summerhouse. It faced the south, the distant pale blue hills that ringed Middlemarch. She eyed him critically, told him to turn round. "Yes, excellent," she said. "Where's your Trace?"

"I'm sorry, Mistress," he said. "I may not wear a Trace. I've rejected Flier status."

She glanced at him with her great, tilted eyes. "How very honourable," she said. "Kneel down."

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"Kneel down, Kiteman," she said. "Just here."

He did as he was told; and she ran her fingers through his hair. "What a mane," she said. "There's girls who would be proud of it. If I were younger, I'd probably be bowled over." She lifted it, bunched it into the double ponytail favoured by the Cadets. She turned his head, considered. "Yes," she said, "it suits you. Wear it like that." She patted the chair beside her. "Sit with me awhile," she said, "and have a glass of wine."

"By your leave, Mistress," he said, "I have urgent work to do." He hesitated. He said, "Permission to draw Strings?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Do what you like," she said. "You're in charge now." She watched him walk away, again with an amused expression.

He met the household, over the next few days. In the main they seemed friendly enough. The Cook, around whom so many establishments seemed to revolve, was a cheerful, bustling person in her fifties. It was said in season, her apple pies were the finest in the Midlands. There were numerous dairy and chamber maids, a cobbler; the Mistress even retained the services of a full time dressmaker, though most of her creations she designed herself. Sometimes, as he had seen, with startling effect. There was also a considerable stable,

though the horses seemed to be kept solely for the amusement of guests. The Kerosins owned most of the land around them, but they didn't farm; it was all rented out. When Kerosina went abroad it was invariably in a closed carriage, drawn by a pair of high-stepping greys. The coachman, he discovered, was from the Salient; as a boy, he'd known his father. He even kept some of the dreadful Northland spirit. He took to dropping into the coachhouse occasionally for a chat; but when the dark brown bottle was produced he always smilingly declined.

The only sour note was struck by the Head Horseman. Aine Martland was a swarthy, bow-legged man; a head shorter than Raoul, but powerfully built. His face too was powerful rather than handsome; broad across the cheekbones, with a thick-lipped mouth and brilliant light-green eyes. His thatch of blond hair was tousled and unkempt; he wore ruffed, old-fashioned shirts, usually stained from the horses, knee breeches of heavy corduroy. His hose was as suspect as the rest. The household were more than a little afraid of him. It was rumoured he had the Frog's Bone; certainly at his touch the most nervous horse was calmed, the unruly instantly became manageable. Perhaps that was why he was tolerated.

To his surprise he was often to be seen about the house itself. Once a young boy was with him; once he had the arm of a nervous, pixie-like girl. She couldn't have been more than nine. Raoul frowned; but after all, it wasn't his affair. His job was to fly the Kites.

At first Downhaul he saw what the Sergeant had told him was true. The fabric of the Lifters was stained, beginning to fray; a refurbishing was called for, through both Strings. For that he went to Middlemarch. He requisitioned a horse from the stables. If he couldn't drive, he'd been riding since before he could walk. Martland offered him a wall-eyed bay; but he shook his head. "No thanks," he said. "I'll take her." He indicated a fine, big-boned chestnut. The other growled—his habitual mode of communication—but made no further demur. He saddled the creature; an hour later Raoul trotted through the yard gates, turned the mare south on the Middlemarch road.

He found himself enjoying the ride. The weather was fine, trees bursting into their first spring green; and after all he was travelling in style. A bit different from the way he arrived. Also he found the flashes on his shoulders, the Kerosins insignia, commanded great respect. They ensured good service, the choicest rooms, the best place at Table. He took his time, rode into Middlemarch early on the morning of the third day.

He hadn't approached the town from this direction. At first everything looked strange; but then he was on the Main Drag, the great bulk of Godpath rearing ahead. He was surprised at the pang it brought; riding past Landy Street, he looked the other way. He stabled the horse at the *Cap of Maintenance*, the best hotel in town. He booked a room and freshened up, walked round to the big shop that had supplied all College wants. To his surprise, one of the assistants recognized him. He outlined his requirements, and the other nodded. "Yes," he said, "we can supply all that. How will you get it back?"

He frowned. That was the one point he hadn't been

sure of. He'd supposed the spares would have to come by carrier; he'd been hoping his sails would last till they arrived. But the other shook his head. "We can supply a packhorse," he said. "No extra charge. You can return it when you next come down." He was surprised, momentarily; then he remembered again. Now, he wore the livery of the Horse of Kerosin.

The other looked thoughtful. "I was wondering, sir," he said. "Have you considered fantailing your Traces?"

He frowned again. He said, "Sorry?" "They've only just come out," said the assistant. "But we've had considerable success with them. Would you come with me?" He led the way into a back room, almost as big as the shop itself. A dozen men were hard at work repairing Pilots, building Lifter frames. He showed him a complicated Kite. Its span was eight feet or more, but it was obviously feather-light. He said, "How does it work?"

The assistant set the thing back on the table. "Rather like a tail-down tackle," he said. "You fly a double Trace. The second cable's very light of course." He wagged a control. The tail of the Kite moved obediently up and down. "Runs through fairleads on the Main," he said. "Bit of a nuisance when you're Downing; but then, you shouldn't have to very much. They come rather expensive at the moment, but . . ." He left the rest unsaid.

He narrowed his eyes. He said, "Can you give me a demonstration?"

"Certainly," said the other. "One moment." He called, and two lads appeared. They dismantled the assembly quickly. He followed them up the stairs.

There was a Tower, bolted centrally to the flat roof. A Pilot was already flying, on a light line. They paid out, released the fantail. It sailed up to its cone, and the assistant took the thin wire trace it had trailed. "We find we can vary up to five degrees each side of Force Three Norm," he said. "A considerable gaining in flexibility."

He tried for himself. He found it was true. It was a fascinating toy.

He made his mind up. "Right," he said, "can you supply three? Two Operational, and a spare."

"No problem," said the other urbanely.

He had one other commission to fulfil. There was a little studio, behind the Mercy Hospital. The Mistress Kerosina also designed her own Godkites. Some of the symbols were startlingly explicit; but he was growing used to them already. The studio kept the tracings; he ordered fresh paintings prepared, went back to the hotel. He ate well, got an early night. For once, his sleep was undisturbed.

Leaving Middlemarch, he found himself heaving a sigh of relief. There was a certain person he hadn't wished to see. The thought of her brought the pang afresh; but for him women were ended. They ended with a Cody basket bumping over Badlands grass. He clicked to the packhorse, urged the mare into a trot. Climbing the first of the hills, he looked at the city spread beneath him. "Rye," he whispered. "Rye . . ."

Rounding the last bend before the Kerosin mansion, he held his breath a little. After all, this was his first big test as Kiteman to the household; the Codys had been flying unattended for five days. They'd come through well enough; both Strings were still Streamed,

at not far short of optimum angle.

He set to that same evening; Downhauled from the western Tower, got to work on the Lifters. He reskinned the first, and doped it. At twenty one hundred though a message came for him. The Mistress Kerosina required his presence in the dining room.

He swore, and washed his hands. He put his tunic on, hurried to the house. She was seated in solitary state, at the end of the long table. The candlelight made her eyes seem very dark. She said, "Good evening, Kiteman. You've worked well; so I've invited you to dinner."

"Thank you, Mistress," he said. "But I've already eaten."

She looked at him. She said, "Then you'll eat again." He sat. There seemed nothing else to do.

She poured wine, handed the glass across. She rang a little bell. She said, "How was Middlemarch?"

He answered, as best he could. Her dress top was diaphanous; her breasts with their high, firm buds showed clearly. She might as well have been naked to the waist. He stared at the wine; and the first course was produced. She applied herself to it, delicately. She said, "Why did you leave the Kites?"

"I haven't, Mistress," he said. "Not exactly."

She said, "You know what I mean."

He hesitated. He said, "It's difficult to explain."

"Was it to do with a woman?"

"No," he said. "It wasn't." You couldn't call it a woman, could you? Two feet long, translucent and blue?

She looked up at him. She said, "Don't you have girlfriends? A fine young man like you?"

He said, "I had one once."

"And where was that?"

He said, "In Middlemarch."

She smiled. "You're a very secretive young man as well," she said. "I think you have hidden depths."

She poured more wine. She said, "Did you see her the last trip?"

He shook his head. He said, "I didn't look for her."

"Did you fall out?"

"No, Mistress," he said. "We didn't fall out."

She rang the bell again, for the first plates to be cleared. "Sometimes," she said, "I could be angry with you, Raoul. Would you like me to be angry?"

He looked at his hands. He said, "I hope I have given the Mistress no cause."

She laughed. "Always so formal," she said. "Always so very correct. Don't you ever relax?"

He said, "It's hardly my place to."

"What do you mean?"

He said, "My father was a farmer."

She stared at him. "And what do you think mine was?" she said. "I know about Sower's Arse as well."

He didn't answer; and she drank, refilled the glasses yet again. "Raoul," she said, "I decided one thing, a long time ago. That we only have one life. I know the Church says this and that, but I've got no proof." She linked her fingers under her chin. "We must live each day as fully as we can," she said. "Ideally, they should be filled with love. But if that's not possible, there are compensations. Why did you leave the Kites?"

He said, "It's a long story." He looked back at her.

Her fingers gleamed with rings. The candlelight woke fire from them; blue, and gold, and red. She saw the direction of his glance. "I often decorate myself," she said. "Or perhaps you hadn't noticed."

It must have been the wine. He said, "The Mistress needs no ornament."

"You say the nicest things," she said. "You are the sweetest boy." She addressed herself to her plate. "I'll tell you why you left," she said. "Your eyes are the wrong colour." She waved a hand. "They should be the blue of the midsummer zenith," she said. "But they're not. They're a sort of muddy green."

He didn't look up. He said, "I'm sorry they displease you."

She said, "They don't displease me." She reached to touch his wrist. "I'm putting too much pressure on you," she said. "I'll take it off." Amazingly, she did.

Later—the plates had been cleared away—she said, "What did The Master Canwen say?"

"What about, Mistress?"

"About you leaving."

Again, he didn't answer; and she laughed. "Young men wish to run before they can walk," she said. "They wish to fly, before they have known the depths." He looked up, startled; and she laughed again. She said, "I've known him a very long while." She gestured; and a serving girl came forward. She proffered a polished, inlaid box; the Mistress Kerosina selected a long black cheroot. "I always like to smoke after a meal," she said. "It's the only time I really enjoy it." She bit the end off the cigar, spat it across the room. She said, "I really do have some disgusting habits."

The girl offered the box to him. He shook his head. He said, "No thank you, Mistress."

Kerosina raised her eyebrows. "Mistress?" she said. "She's not your Mistress. I am." He didn't answer; and she stroked ash into a tray. She said, "Don't you ever smoke?"

He shook his head. He said, "Not very often." He glanced at the chronometer on his wrist. He said, "Will you excuse me, Madam?"

"For what reason?"

"We're only Streaming from the eastern Tower," he said. "I have to check the String."

"Of course," she said. "Otherwise the Demons might get in." She nodded. She said, "Go and fly your Kites."

She sat a long time after the door had closed, staring at nothing in the dim-lit room.

He found he couldn't sleep. He dozed from time to time; but images of her intruded constantly.

Her eyes, her hair; her breasts, her long, slim legs. He groaned and tossed, restlessly. He was angry with himself; but that didn't help the case. He sat up finally, clasped his arms round his knees. How could someone like her have sprung from the background she claimed? From earth? He shrugged. All folk sprang from earth. As they returned to it. Where was the difference then?

He rose, and lit the lamp. It was zero two hundred. He let himself out by the servants' door, locked it behind him. He climbed the stairs of the western Tower to the workshop. He got busy on the Lifters. By dawn, the String was aloft again.

Summer came, the ripening of the crops. He was amazed at them. Never had he seen wheat grow so tall.

But the soil was black, and rich. He began to see why the Middle Lands were wealthy.

Kerosina drew up fresh designs; Godkites to be flown for Harvest Home. At least they were more conventional than the last. He rode to Middlemarch with them, took the first week of his leave. He'd learned to trust his fantails. Barring a Force Ten, they would fly. He walked the streets more boldly now. At first, he'd been afraid of meeting her; but he realized he wouldn't. Because people never came back. He walked to Middle Park, sat half a day watching gangs of workmen prepare the stands. The big Air Show was due; he'd miss it by two days. He was glad. The basket Codys were no longer his concern; he was a private Kiteman now.

He wondered why Kerosina haunted him so. He was beyond emotion, beyond love; yet day and night he couldn't rid himself of her image. Each turn of the hand, each nuance of her voice; her hair, her hands, her feet. He imagined kissing her; privately, as he had once kissed Rye. The Vestibule had gaped then, leaf-shaped as the Kites. Demanding, and pathetic. He stared up at the Codys. The answer was there, the answer was in the sky; but the Strings were mute.

He rode back, when the new designs were finished. The studio lent him a horse as well. Aine Martland wasn't pleased. He walked round it, hands on hips. "What?" he said. "You expect me to feed a spavined nag like that?"

He shrugged. He said, "Take it up with the Lady Kerosina."

The other mimicked him. "Take it up with the Lady Kerosina," he said. He picked up a short hayfork. "Take it up with her yourself," he said. "You're more qualified than me, you longhaired Pretty." He turned, and lunged.

He was appalled. He'd been standing by the stable wall; now he was pinned to it, the times each side of his neck. He realized he'd missed death by half an inch. His knees were shaking; but the rage still boiled and bubbled. "I saw you driving Charm the other day," he said. "I know where you put your hands to keep them warm."

Expressions chased themselves across the Horseman's face. Finally he wrenched the times from the wood. He flung the implement away, walked off. He looked back once; then he clicked to the horse. He said, "Come on, girl." The old mare whickered, and followed him.

The Master Kerosin was home. He was surprised at the pang of disappointment he felt. Two days later though she sent for him. She was sitting alone as ever, at one end of the great dining room. This time he took his place without argument. She said, "Wine?" and he shook his head. He said, "As a matter of fact I prefer beer."

She rang the bell. A serving girl appeared. She said, "Beer for the Kiteman." The other curtsied, reappeared with a foaming tankard. He said, "Thank you."

The Mistress Kerosina followed the girl with her eyes. She said, "You'd prefer her to me, wouldn't you?"

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"For fucking," she said irritably. "She's younger."

He looked at the table. So much to say; yet there was

nothing to say at all. He said, "The Mistress realizes I cannot answer."

"Of course you can," she said. "It's very simple. Yes or no."

He looked up. He said, "If there is no answer, there cannot be a question."

"So you're Middle Doctrine," she said. "I wouldn't have believed it." She shook her head. "Now I shall never know," she said. "It's such an unfair world. But then, you're still living in it. So you wouldn't understand." She toyed with a richly-decorated coaster. "What I'd like," she said. "But there are so many things I'd like. I'd like to be you. Then I could run after Maia, and catch her in the kitchen. I'd screw her arse off for her," she smiled, crookedly. "I'll tell you what I'd like," she said. "I'd like to see a little Cody rig. About so long." She spread her arms. "I'd like to see it anchored that end of the table," she said. "And I'd like to see it Streamed. So the Demons in the room couldn't spoil the food. Could you fix that for me?"

He set his lips. He said, "No, Madam."

"No," she said. "I didn't expect you could. It's still a nice idea though." She considered. "What would have happened, if I'd been born rich?" she said. "Would I have been satisfied then? I know I'm beautiful; but it doesn't seem to matter."

He said, "I don't understand you, Mistress."

She shook her head. "Raoul," she said, "sometimes you disappoint me." She drank wine. "I've got servants by the score," she said. "I snap my fingers, and they run. But it doesn't really give me any pleasure." She brightened. She said, "Will you be my servant?"

He said, "I am your servant, Mistress."

"In a way," she said. "Should I make you my body servant though? You'd have to stand behind me. Massage my neck, every time it got sore. And move my chair, whenever I wanted to get up. Would you do that for me?"

He knew, meltingly, that he would do it all. But he still shook his head. He said, "I fly Her Ladyship's kites."

The weather broke, with wind and floods of rain. He Drew both Strings, spent time on more refurbishing. He reorganized the stores, made a complete inventory. After that there was little else to do. He sat in the eastern Tower day after day, staring through one of the leafshaped apertures. Out there, somewhere beyond the veils of grey, was the Salient. The Salient, and all his folk. He felt he should write; but his father could scarcely read, and his mother wouldn't try. It would just embarrass them. He wrote to Stev Marden instead. He hardly expected an answer; nonetheless, one came. He deciphered the scrawl, with difficulty.

Ray, you old bastard. How crafty can you get? Here's me stuck down on an F Base, and you living off the fat of the land. How do you manage it?

They double-man the Codys here. Which means eight Lifters, even for a Five. The local Vars were sure we were in for an invasion. Haven't seen any signs of it yet though...

How's that little girl of yours in Middlemarch? You still scoring with her? There's not much talent this way. Mostly, they're broader than they're tall...

We've got these new six-shooters. It gives you a better chance. I can't shoot worth fuck, I never could. But I reckon I could just about get the Adj...

He sniffed the envelope. It was absurd of course, it was in his mind; but it seemed even the paper smelled of Cody hangars. The oil and dope and steam. He shook his head. "If only you knew," he said. "Stev, if only you knew..."

The skies cleared. He Streamed his Kites instantly. The following day a letter came from his folks. Ill-spelled, but at least they'd made the effort. Which was more than he had done. There was another communication with it. On Corps notepaper. It was from Golden-soul. Stev Marden had been lost, from F16. The Captain tendered his condolences.

He showed it to the Mistress Kerosina. She read it quickly, shrugged. She said, "You'd better have a drink."

For once, he felt like it. It led to several more. She matched him glass for glass. She was lounging on a settle in the drawing room, the room in which he'd first been interviewed. Her dress was negligently buttoned; from time to time he saw the quick flash of a nipple. He said, "He was a good friend."

"Yes," she said. "I'm sure he was. Come on." She took his hand. It was a major shock. He'd forgotten how warm a woman's fingers are.

He followed her. Things were spinning, he was no longer sure of his surroundings. She led him down a flight of stairs, unlocked a door.

It was a part of the house he'd never seen before. A basement, lit by the electric light. She pushed a further door. She said, "Are you fussy about smells?" He shook his head.

She clicked a switch. He was surprised to see the little room was ankle deep in mud. Thick and blue-black. The sort of harbour sludge he'd seen once in the Easthold. She said, "My private beauty parlour." She slipped out of the dress. She wore nothing beneath it. "I told you I'd make you my body servant," she said. "Massage me. Don't get your uniform dirty though." She walked into the mud, lay on her back. She grabbed a handful, smoothed it between her legs. "It's wonderful for the skin," she said. "It tones it up like nothing else."

The world collapsed. He took her twice, harsh and desperate. Finally he staggered to his feet. He said, "I've got to go somewhere." He'd seen a further chamber; a shower, and a loo. She said, "No..."

"Kero," he said. "I must." He wasn't really conscious of the words. He said, "I've got to have a pee..."

She clung to his knees, and kissed him. She tightened her grip. She said, "I'm not stopping you..."

He woke at first light. The shame woke with him. He packed his clothes carefully, shouldered the duffel. Walking down the drive, he glanced back at the Towers. No need for checking though; both Rigs Streamed at optimum angle. Both would fly, his fantails would fly; until they found themselves another Kiteman.

He turned south. Life, he supposed, was a series of ups and downs. Like the Switchbacks he'd seen at odd times, at Middle Lands fairs. He wondered which direction he was headed in right now. Hard to decide;

but then, nothing was ever simple. He wondered how many people actually lived inside each human skin. The boy who'd known Rye in Middlemarch, the boy who'd used the hatchet, the boy who'd tendered his resignation from the Corps; none of them were him. Last night's ravening creature hadn't been him. She'd trapped him of course, he realized that vaguely. Chosen her moment well. To him, Stev Marden had still been flying, high up in the blue. To her though it had been vital to win. By any means at hand. He frowned. Were there other people inside her too? Was there a little child, who wanted model Codys Streamed above the table?

He eased the strap of the duffel bag. He'd caught himself trying to blame her. No use in that though. He'd been in love with her, he realized now. In love from day one. Had a part of her been in love with him? The words of The Master Canwen returned, with almost shocking force. "Wallow in mud, and then the stars come close. Because you have earned the right to see their glory..." He shook his head. How could he have known? How could he possibly have told? At least he knew now where his own star hung. There was a tart, in Middlemarch; freckled and short-skirted, with sturdy little knees. She loved him without question, without demand; and that was good enough. He said, "I'm doing it for her." He meant the Lady Kerosina.

The sun rose, steadily. He'd entered an area of scrubland. He'd marked it briefly, on his rides to Town; now though it seemed endless.

He walked two hours; finally he turned. There was a horseman behind him, moving fast. He recognized the chestnut. He flung the bag away, ran onto the heath. It was useless of course, the other rode him down. He rose, tried to run again; but Martland had already launched himself from the horse. He tackled him round the knees, fetching him headlong. "Well, my Pretty," he said. "Here's a different tale. Well now, my Pretty..."

He tried to defend himself; but it was equally in vain. For a time, he thought he'd been sent by Kerosina; but after the first few blows it seemed he entered a new state of awareness. The Mistress wouldn't do a thing like that; she'd been in love with him. This was a private revenge. The Horseman might procure for her; but he would never know her favours.

He rolled onto his side finally, raised his arms to cover his face. So Aine Martland used his boots. When he had finished he stood over him. "I shan't kill you, my Pretty," he said. "I'll leave that to the Land. It'll be slower." He whistled to the mare. She trotted to him; he mounted and rode away.

He began to crawl, on hands and knees. Once he rose to his feet; but the pain in his side was too intense, he soon returned to the proper mode of locomotion. He reached a brooklet, finally. He slithered down the bank and bathed his face. He traced the damage with his fingertips. One thing was certain; he'd never be pretty again. So if that had been his only crime, he'd been well paid. He crawled back to the grass, and fainted.

He woke some hours later, pushed himself up on his hands. The sky was dark, which meant it was the night. He must go on though. He had to get to Middlemarch. He tried to stand; but the world spun, he collapsed again.

There were many voices in his brain. Rye, the Mistress

Kerosina. One seemed more persistent. It was thick and bubbling; it sounded very close. "Man thtay to water," it hisped. "Man not go away."

"What?" he said vaguely. "What?"
"Man thtay to water," said the voice again. "Water good . . ." He sensed a rustling round him, in the dark. "No-man help Man," gurgled the voice. "No-man hand poithon. But no-man not touch food. Food good . . ."

"Food?" he said. "What food?" There was no answer. The creatures, whatever they had been, had fled.

He collapsed again. He woke at dawn. For a time, the things about were shadowy. Then they returned to focus. In front of him, a couple of feet away, lay an old cracked plate. It had blue flowers round the edges. On it were what looked like rabbit haunches. A small, mouse-like creature was working at one of them; nibbling nervously, scrabbling at the food with its paws. It stared at him a moment, with huge black eyes; then it turned, and bolted.

He overcame his revulsion. He crammed the food at his mouth, regardless of the pain. Later he drank again, from the brook. He crawled into a stand of bushes, went to sleep.

They brought him food again; and again the third night. By then his brain was clearer. He thought, "So they're even here. In the Middle Lands." So much for the Kites then. Once he thought he saw one of the creatures humping away. On all fours; smaller than a dog, and blue. He pushed himself up on his hands. "Come back," he called. "Come back, I want to talk to you . . ." But the bushes stayed still.

He wiped his cheeks. He'd met its sister once, and killed her. This was how they were repaying him. With Life.

On the fifth morning there was no food. He understood that he was better. He got up, staggered off toward the road.

He was still lightheaded. Sometime in the day he saw a Cody string. He intoned to it. "For that our brother in God hath felt the call; for that he, in answering the Most High, hath taken to himself the sacred duty . . ."

"For that he hath from henceforth pledged his life . . . to the protection of the Realm, of all that we hold dear . . ."

"From the authority vested in us, we do appoint him . . . Kitecadet, and Guardian of the Way . . ."

He was appalled. As he'd been appalled lying in the mud. The things he'd done, and said. He decided that he was going mad. Later, it seemed a fresh awareness was vouchsafed him. The Demons, Badlanders; all were irrelevancies. He'd flown the Kites simply because he loved them. He built a Cody string, in his mind. He Streamed the Pilot, on its slender line; he attached the cones, and saw the Lifters rise. He climbed atop the Launch Vehicle, felt the great Trace thrill. She lay under the Kites. The Mistress Kerosina. But they all lay under the Kites. Even the Badlanders.

The sky flickered again. "Kitecadet," he said. He rolled into the ditch.

He came round toward evening. A group of folk were moving up the road. Tinkers, if he was any judge. Dam-makers. They haunted the Middle Lands as well. But there was no harm in them.

They mended pots and pans, and paid no tax. They were the Free Folk; free as the Fliers. He got to his knees. He said, "How far to Middlemarch?"

They clustered round him, stood staring down. Then one of them pulled at his jerkin. He resisted, feebly. It was no use of course. It was dragged from him; and another grabbed his shirt. It tore.

"Look at that," said the Tink disgustedly. "Bad times, we're livin' in. No use even robbin' beggars." He put his foot against his chest, and shoved. He rolled back, into the muddy water.

The great Air Show had come and gone; the visitors had left; Middlemarch was settling down, preparing for the winter. Though the streets were still crowded, the inns doing a good trade. Better to collect while you could though; these were the last pickings.

All steered clear of the creature on the path. It was ragged, and dirty; it veered from side to side, seemingly half blind. "Innocent," said one woman. She made a certain sign, and hurried on. Later, a child said, "Mummy, what's wrong with him?"

"He's drunk," said the other. "I'll tell you when you're older. You wouldn't understand, not yet." She steered well clear. "Come on," she said. The child stared back, wide-eyed.

The Vars strode purposefully across Main Drag. "We got another one," said the Sergeant. "Must be the season for 'em." He approached the derelict, dragged at his hair. He said, "Where you from, my friend?"

The other whispered something. He leaned closer. "Sorry," he said. "Din' quite catch it, Sir . . ."

The scarecrow whispered again. "Kiteman," said the policeman. "Kiteman. The things you people do get in your heads." He hauled the other to his feet, and hit him. He fell down again.

"Oh, look," said the Constable. "Run straight into your hand. What clumsy blokes they are."

"Yes," said the other, "aren't they? Comes from all the booze." He unslung the automatic from his shoulder, administered a few desultory whacks. The derelict got to his hands and knees, eventually; but there was no more fun in him. He hung his head and panted, dropped bloodspots on the path.

"Don't be here in the morning," said the Sergeant. "You might be in trouble else." He nodded to his partner; and they strolled away.

It seemed his life had focussed to a point. He staggered on, reached his objective finally. The Church of the Moving Clouds. The steps proved an obstacle; he climbed them on hands and knees. There was an iron-studded door; in its centre, a great bronze ring. He grabbed it. It moved downward, slightly; and a bell tolled, deep within the building. "Sanctuary," he said. "Sanctuary . . ."

There was a Var patrolman. He sauntered up. He was already unslung his gun. He said, "What?"

"Sanctuary," whispered the fugitive. "Give me peace . . ."

"I'll give you peace," said the Var. "All the peace you could want." He swung the weapon by the barrel; and his wrist was caught.

He looked round, startled. The priest was tall, and gaunt; he was dressed, of course, in the sage green of the Middlers. His face was calm; but the deepset eyes

were blazing. "Sanctuary has been claimed," he said. "Sanctuary is granted." He relaxed his grip. He said, "About your business, Master."

The other's face mottled. He opened his mouth; and the priest held a great looped cross before his eyes. Golden, and plain; the Life Symbol of the Middle Church. "By all Laws, this is just," he said. "Uphold the Law . . ."

The Var backed off, unwillingly. He shouldered the gun. He said, "You're welcome. We need more garbage collectors anyway." He adjusted the sling, walked huffily away along the path.

The other looked down pityingly. "Sanctuary has been claimed," he said. "It is yours, my son. Come . . ." He reached to raise the other's arm; but the derelict shoved him away. He snatched something from round his neck. A locket, on a thin gold chain. "Her name is Rye," he said. "Her name is Rye . . ." He lost his grip on the door, rolled down the steps. He landed on the pavement, lay on his back unmoving.

The girl walked swiftly. A shawl was across her shoulders, a scarf over her head. She reached the steps of the Mercy Hospital, hesitated. She made her mind up finally, and entered. Inside, she was once more bemused; at the noise and bustle, clattering of utensils, trolleys. The air had a faint, sharp tang; young women scurried in long white robes,

neat caps. She stepped back, all but ran away. "The Master Trenchingham," she said. "The Master Trenchingham. He sent for me. Where is he?"

"I am here," he said. "Have no fear, sister. Come with me." He proffered his arm; she took it, sensed the strength in him.

There was a side ward. A little room, one-bedded. She ran to him. Saw the poor, broken face. She dropped to her knees. "Why?" she whispered. "Why, Raoul? Was it because of me?"

He brushed her cheeks, feebly. "You mustn't blame yourself," he said. "It wasn't to do with you." He stroked her hair. "Rye," he said. "Rye of Middlemarch." He took her hand.

Keith Roberts is best known as the author of *Pavane* (1968—recently reissued by Penguin Books in an attractive large format with a cover illustration by *Interzone* artist David O'Connor). His latest book, *Kiteworld*, is forthcoming from Gollancz in the summer of 1985. It incorporates the above story, together with its predecessors, "Kitemaster" (*IZ* 1) and "Kitecadet" (*IZ* 6). Mr Roberts lives in Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.

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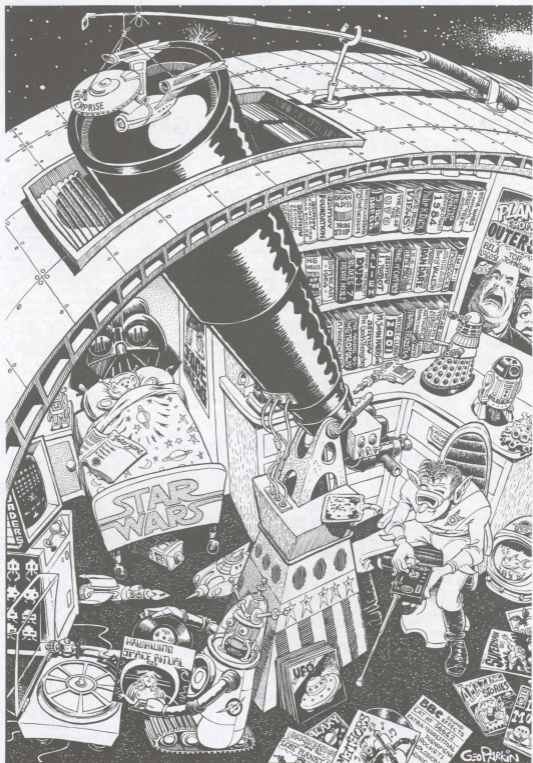


Illustration by George Parkin

THE OUTER ZONE

NEWS

NEW SF LISTS

Two publishers are boldly going into the SF and fantasy field this spring. Chatto and Windus aim to produce three or four titles in paperback and hardback each year; 1985 brings Gene Wolfe's *Peace*, and Tim Powers's *The Anubis Gates* (just published), and *The Power of Time*, a collection of stories by Josephine Saxton, coming in September. *The Power of Time* includes "No Coward Soul", first published in *IZ* 3. *The Anubis Gates* is the winner of the second Philip K. Dick Award for the best paperback original novel of the year.

The Women's Press list is more substantial, and includes reprints. Four titles will appear in April, with a further four promised for Autumn, and regular additions thereafter. Joanna Russ dominates the April group: *The Female Man* comes back into print, along with a new collection of linked short stories, *Extraordinary People*. The other two are *The Wanderground* by Sally Miller Gearhart (first UK publication), and *The Planet Dweller*, a first novel by Jane Palmer. Forthcoming are *The Adventures of Alyx* (more Russ shorts), *Native Tongue* (Suzette Haden Elgin), a reprint of Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman*, and an original anthology entitled *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind*. With a title like that, who needs a sardonic ending?

Jenny Butler

LONG DISTANCE INFORMATION

Out of the palaeozoic, via Ladbrooke Grove to Memphis, Tennessee, comes *The Guild of Temporal Adventurers*, "The Official Michael Moorcock Society". Just \$15 (in US and Canada, \$10) to Alan Pool, 321 Kenilworth, Memphis TN 38112, USA, gets you a quarterly magazine and such. Number one features work in progress by Moorcock.

RETURN TO GEORGIAN VALUES

It may not be hard, scientific or fictional, but the current slogan — "Don't tax reading" — has its place in a long radical tradition. If you thought that *Black Dwarf* means a kind of star (or a defunct magazine edited by that sixties' starlet, Tariq Ali), read up on the non-taxpaying underground radical press of the early 19th century — the last time any British government put a tax on newspapers.

The present lot are said to be contemplating putting VAT on newspapers, books and magazines (including this one). The publishing industry is fighting back, with a campaign run by the National Book Committee (Book House, 45 East Hill, London SW18 2QZ). The committee can supply petition forms, badges and leaflets setting out the case against the proposal: "The extra revenue for Whitehall would be paltry. But, quite simply, people would not be able to afford to read as much." Its literature argues that a 15% tax would result in a price rise greater than 15% — "Lower sales would lead to still higher prices because of reduced printing orders. Quality works without mass appeal would suffer most." Pretty well all informed people in the trade would seem to agree — one pointed out to me that VAT and its associated costs might well be the last straw when first novels are under consideration. I did find one person who could see a bright side — a London bookseller who'd better remain nameless. "It'll put half the bookshops in London out of business, and their customers will have to come to us." Gallows humour, since he and his firm will have to take the extra costs and work of dealing with VAT as well.

The National Book Committee's advice to concerned readers is simple enough: you should write to your MP (at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA), and your local newspaper; and you should sign their petition and get your friends and colleagues to sign it too. The leaflet can be picked up at bookshops.

Black Dwarf? Oh, all right. It was a radical journal, edited by T.J. Wooler between 1817 and 1824. Tariq Ali named his paper after it; the stars are probably unrelated.

Abigail Frost

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ON THE EDGE

Mary Gentle

Scene 1: Enter a Critick, Bemused

Gentle Reader, (a phrase for once accurate), here is an object lesson in how to outrage current critical opinion with one statement:

Robert Heinlein has written a good book.

There will now be a pause, broken only by the impact of dropped jaws hitting the pavement.

The average reader, as opposed to the average British critic, probably won't be

too surprised. Heinlein has been writing what people are willing to buy for many years. Now there's *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (New English Library, £8.95), a short, witty, fast-paced and relatively concise novel. The expository lectures are kept to a minimum, and the obligatory Heinlein patriarch makes but one appearance.

Alex Hergensheimer is a Fundamental Christian minister in a parallel world, like ours but for the fact that the Moral Majority has control of that America. While attempting to walk a fine-pit in the Pacific islands, he finds himself in yet another parallel world — and that's only chapter one. He falls in

love with one Margrethe, and I won't spoil it by telling you what her religion is: both of them are plunged into yet another world (I think our world does appear somewhere in the sequence), and it becomes apparent that Someone is testing this latter-day Job, and taking a malicious joy in it. Creationism is taken to its logical conclusion, as they come to the Ultimate End—and what lies beyond. . . .

Some nitpicks: Alex is just too nice to be a convincing bigot; Margrethe, despite a stated determination not to obey her husband simply because he is her husband, nevertheless trails after him in a passive-supportive role.

But *Job* is a funny book, it is a comedy — which brings me to a problem. If you are familiar with James Branch Cabell's habit of subtitling his novels, you'll be ahead of the game; if you recall what a certain pawnbroker discovered, the end of *Job* will come as no surprise whatsoever. What's disturbing is that Cabell is nowhere credited, is not even mentioned here. As I approached the end of the novel, the phrase "Jurgen rip-off" sprang irresistibly to my lips; and when I found therein one Koshchei the Deathless, Cabell's very own demi-urge. . . I could not reflect that Heinlein will sell to a much wider audience than Cabell.

And do I now agree with those people who claim Heinlein as a critically respected author?

"For after all, these people may be right; and certainly I cannot go so far as to say they are wrong." Jurgen shrugs. "But still, at the same time—!"

Just so.

Scene 2: A Wood near Athens

The setting for Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* (Gollancz, £8.95) is Ryhope Wood, a stretch of primeval forest untouched since the last Ice Age, which generates certain spiritual and physical manifestations. These are the "mythagos," myth-images, that are both real and not-real; are archetypal, in fact. The wood is considerably larger when entered than its outside suggests—but this isn't standard Fantasy territory; nothing so safe as those sanitised-feudal sub-worlds.

Steven Huxley, like his father before him, is obsessed by Ryhope Wood. He and his brother Christian both perceive (or is it create) mythagos. There is also Guiwenneth, who speaks Brythonic; and a secondary character, Steven's companion Harry Keeton, who all but steals the book. All will, in different ways, travel into and be transformed by the heartland of the Wood.

Mythago Wood is uneven. There are certain infelicities of language that judicious editing could have removed. There are passages so intent on telling us what happened that they show us nothing at all. Steven is sometimes inconsistent in

what he is ignorant of, and what, among all these strange occurrences, he takes for granted; all minor flaws, but with a certain cumulative effect.

The novel succeeds triumphantly where its images are clearly depicted, but only partly explained—it will be a long time before I forget the first appearance of the Ship, or the grave-bound warrior who rose again in a winter-stripped clearing. What lies within Ryhope Wood is, in a sense, what lies behind Fangorn Forest, and the Forest of Arden, and a certain wood outside Athens; it is not a tame or a trivial thing. It is no coincidence that, when Thomas Mallory was writing, "wood" was a synonym for "mad." There has always been a wood in human consciousness, and it has always been dangerous.

Mythago Wood is ambitious, in seeking to name that particular nameless perception that comes with earth, and trees, and sun, and wind and rain; in its strong physical visualisation of the Wood, and the appalling violence within. And it's good to read something that admits we live in a world the mundane cannot circumscribe.

Scene 3: Another part of the Wood

Voltaire, I believe, was supposed to have said "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it," which brings us—equally far from the mundane world—to Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* (Arena/Arrow, £2.95). Begin by imagining John Crowley's *Little, Big* as if written by Peter Beagle; a faerie family saga spanning a century, with a whimsical-violent tone, and an innocent hero. There the resemblance ends. I have often heard tell of the fascist elements in fantasy. I have to tell you that, so far as I know, *Winter's Tale* is the first specifically capitalist fantasy.

Helprin is in love with New York, or rather, his New York; a sublime and violent city—"his" in the sense that he plays tricks with geography, history, and chronology; and if I were an American I could more easily distinguish the tricks from the reality. Here are kaleidoscopic images of a magical city, in winter "when time may be superconductive." Foundlings, lovers, gangsters, consumption, newspapers, a white horse that can fly—Helprin throws in hook,

line, and sinker, and the kitchen sink after that. A century passes, some of the dead return, many prophecies are made; all await the new millennium, and what it might bring. Ambiguous engineers construct a bridge that will lead. . . . where?

A capitalist fantasy, did I say? Yes. The book is enthusiastic about capitalism "as practised on 19th century whaling ships": basically, shares in the business, and a minimum wage. There are some not-very-serious sideswipes at Marxism, not serious because the novel is not so much political as the antithesis of political: religious. New York is "God's crucible," the pain and suffering and poverty are co-equal with humour and courage and justice. And if that rationale is accepted, then one naturally does nothing to alleviate the pain of the many with the resources of the few. (But then, the many, while they sometimes die picturesquely, never become quite real in *Winter's Tale*.)

"No one ever said that you would live to see the repercussions of everything you do, or that you have guarantees, or that you are not obliged to wander in the dark, or that everything will be proved to you and neatly verified like something in science," says a character, and who could disagree with that? Except that one doesn't necessarily move from there to the belief in miracles and divine justice that characterise Helprin's novel.

Scene 4: Enter, fighting, at several doors. . . .

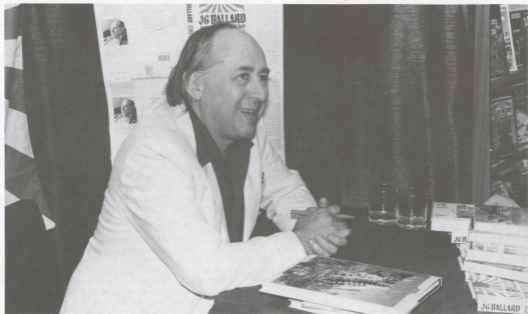
One of my more persistent delusions is that I'm well-informed about the Nuclear Problem. I have also twice worked in the Civil Service. Up until now I had somehow failed to put the two together, and realise that Britain's nuclear defence programme is run by Civil Servants. . . . Good grief! Previously I just thought we were going to get blown sky-high, now I know it.

That train of thought was sparked off by David Langford's *The Leaky Establishment* (Muller, £8.95), a comic novel with both verbal wit and comedy of situation, that owes something to the tradition of Tom Sharpe, and a great deal more to the Langfordian warped sense of humour. Hero of the novel is one Roy Tappen, a nuclear physicist,

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who "borrows" a filing cabinet, only to find—after he's got it out through the paranoid security of the base on "Robinson Heath"—that the cabinet contains a stray plutonium core of a nuclear warhead. . . . He sets about trying to get rid of said "dull metal sphere, not as big as a football" with all the alacrity of a man playing pass-the-parcel when he can hear the parcel ticking.

The *Leaky Establishment* has that quality belonging to genuine farce, best described as delighted frustration—frustration because Tappen is blocked at every turn, difficulty piled on impossibility, until it seems that the plot can never be resolved; and delight, because these impossibilities are comic, one has the immense and reprehensible satisfaction of seeing some other poor bugger in the mire.

For the most part, the tone is light. At several points, though, there are realistic touches that serve to anchor the book: when Roy Tappen looks up from his frenzied dashing around, and realises just what a lunatic world he's helping to run—that his evasions, and practical jokes, are a way of fighting back; that if he didn't laugh, he'd cry. More stress on that would have made the humour blacker—but it would be foolish to carp when *The Leaky Establishment* as it stands is a very funny book. Isn't it surprising what one can laugh at?

Exit Critick. Pursued by a Bear

REVIEWS

Re/Search 8/9: J.G. Ballard edited by Vale and Andrea Juno (Re/Search Publications, 20 Romolo B, San Francisco, CA 94133, \$8.95)

176 pages, almost A4, smartly designed, with sixty-three interesting/surprising/beautiful illustrations, this San Francisco *Festschrift* is a glossy blue capsule of concentrated essence of Ballard, which is, heaven knows, concentrated already. Potent stuff. Eight pieces of fiction, impossible to find in America, include the Borgesian "Notes Toward a Mental Breakdown"; "The Index", to a non-existent autobiography of forgotten messiah Henry Rhodes Hamilton; and samples of *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Nine pieces of non-fiction present Ballard's views on Surrealism, Adolf Hitler, Gary Gilmore and William Burroughs, plus his introduction to *Crash*, and what he told the *Woman Journalist* in 1963 and the *Sunday Express Magazine* in 1981. Miscellaneous mentions of Ballard; Ballard as seen by Martin Bax, Angela Carter, Paul Theroux; three interviews with Ballard, one edited from a nine-hour "day-in-the-life" session. And yet, not adulatory, not hagiographical, not fannish; not even obsessive, except that Ballard is a professional focus of obsessions that irradiate our culture. It's a shame to think this special issue will be read only by cultists, since it so comprehensively refutes those who accuse him of being merely slick, or sick. By fronting the selected work with the

J.G. Ballard, winner of the 1984 Guardian Fiction Prize (and non-winner of the Booker Prize), at a Forbidden Planet signing session for his novel *Empire of the Sun* last September.

interviews (excellent interviews: the interview is eminently Ballard's medium) the Re/Search team have emphasized the humanity his art refracts and his detractors like to think it lacks. Much too much to take in at once, but a definitive sourcebook for the work so far, and a reference book for years to come.

Colin Greenland

Black Water: The Anthology of Fantastic Literature edited by Alberto Manguel (Picador, £4.95)

"Unlike tales of fantasy (those chronicles of mundane life in mythical surroundings. . .) fantastic literature deals with the impossible seeping into the possible, what Wallace Stevens calls 'black water seeping into reality': thus Manguel's introduction. In today's hurly-burly smartarse world of anything goes, who can't better the Red Queen at believing the impossible? The challenge for the writer now is to convince us of a reality where a ghost is an unthinkable aberration, a mysterious disappearance or transformation is not just an acid flashback, that the world is as it ought to be, knowable and rational. Appreciating the fantastic now requires not suspension of disbelief, but rather that we suspend all sorts of vague half-beliefs and cynicisms, bowing to the authority of an author/narrator who

Geoff Ryman

O HAPPY DAY!

Angela Carter

THE CABINET OF
EDGAR ALLAN POE

Scott Bradfield

THE *FLASH!* KID

Malcolm Edwards

AFTER-IMAGES

Keith Roberts

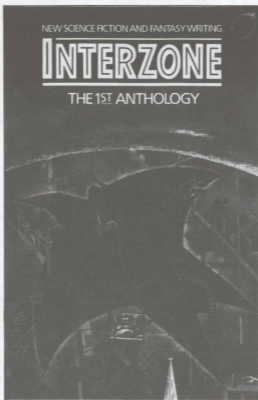
KITEMASTER

Neil Ferguson

THE
MONROE DOCTRINE

Rachel Pollack

ANGEL BABY



David Redd

ON THE DECK OF
THE FLYING BOMB

John Shirley

WHAT CINDY SAW

J. G. Ballard

THE OBJECT OF
THE ATTACK

Cherry Wilder

SOMETHING
COMING THROUGH

Kim Newman

DREAMERS

Michael Blumlein

TISSUE ABLATION AND
VARIANT REGENERATION

You've seen the magazine, now read the book . . .

For three years *Interzone* has been discovering talented writers like Geoff Ryman, Scott Bradfield and Kim Newman, while publishing new stories by Angela Carter, J. G. Ballard and Keith Roberts. From our first nine issues we've now selected twelve stories for INTERZONE: THE FIRST ANTHOLOGY, to be published in a quality paperback edition by J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. As a bonus, we're delighted to be including a new novella, 'O Happy Day!', by Geoff Ryman, author of 'The Unconquered Country' and *Interzone's* most acclaimed contributor so far. None of the thirteen stories has previously appeared in book form in the UK. INTERZONE: THE FIRST ANTHOLOGY (224pp.) will be published on 4 April 1985 at £3.95, but *Interzone* readers in the UK can benefit from A SPECIAL PRE-PUBLICATION OFFER of only £3.00 per copy, including post and packing. Simply fill in the coupon below and send it with your cheque or postal order to *Interzone*, to arrive by 3rd April 1985. NB No orders can be accepted after this date. Please allow 28 days for delivery.

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LETTERS

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assures us that nothing like that could possibly ever happen. Structuralist Tzvetan Todorov, defining the fantastic as what catches the reader in a "hesitation" between the "uncanny" (which can be rationally explained away) and the "marvellous" (which admits no natural explanation), asserted that "the fantastic" could no longer be written. True, the 73 stories in this collection share a curiously old-fashioned tone, evenly reasoned and gravely punctilious, but many were written this century: the Latin American fantasists are well represented (Borges, Cortázar, Silvina Ocampo, Quiroga, . . .), and a few from the SF field (Le Guin, Bradbury, Wells, Verne). Galloping social entropy and the break up of consensus have increased the challenge to the writer—now, it takes more skill to hook the reader into belief in an absolute normality before you can turn around and spring your unbelievable impossibility on him. These stories demonstrate that it can still be done.

Just one problem in reading 967 pages of these skillfully constructed and polished tales—consciousness of finely honed literary technique comes to distract from the stories being told. To avoid satiation, take in small doses only.

Judith Hanna

The Glamour by Christopher Priest
(Cape, £8.50)

Glamour has become used to describe those people who have the quality of standing out from their surroundings. Originally, in the Gaelic, it meant a sort of illusion, often a spell of invisibility. It's in this sense Priest takes the word.

Fairy implications are sternly avoided, all hinges on perception (self-perceptions, perception of others, negative hallucination, self-hypnosis). Life, like film, is editable, cuttable, subject to illusory special effects. Things are either visible, present to the attention, or

blocked out, repressed, invisible—and it's the shifts between the two polarities of this binary opposition that structure Priest's novel. Image, and the absence of image.

The "glams" live unseen in cities, even in people's houses, helping themselves to what they want, you don't see them in shops, on the Tube, getting away with barefaced daylight robbery. No one knows they're there—we moderns don't believe in the invisible bogbogs, hobgoblins and Good Folk our forebears put out porridge to placate. But the uncaring city, where everyone's in a blind rush among strangers, is indeed their ideal setting. They're change-lings, of course, children who don't get along, ignored by parents and schoolmates so they might as well be invisible. Some children are so invisible everyone thinks they're imaginary, invented to fill your need for company, sympathy, even a scapegoat. Some take the effort to mix with "visibles", to keep themselves living in the "seen" world, even falling in love with a normal. But love's another illusion, a state of selective wishfulness, a glamour, which helps you see what you want to see and block out the rest. When your lover rejects you and forgets you, you're thrown back to invisibility.

A complex and sensitive novel of the high standard we expect from Priest.

Judith Hanna

The Black Box: Last Words From the Cockpit ed. Malcolm MacPherson
(Granada, £1.95)

To have flown is to have wondered what would happen, and how people would react, if a disaster occurred. This book answers these questions, for it is a collection of Voice Recorder accounts of in-flight accidents. It presents, in stark stilted dialogue, what are perhaps the most intense moments of its protagonists' lives—the moments just prior to

their deaths, or, of course, just prior to their breathtaking escapes from death.

The subject is a morbid one and it exercises a ghastly fascination. Keep a cool head and take the book piecemeal, reading only one incident at a sitting. This is difficult, for it is hard not to submit to the furious gruesomeness of the tales and gallop through the text, barely pausing to imagine the "Sound of Impact" with which almost every account ends before plunging into the next emergency. About half-way through the book I fell foul of this pace and superficial excitement, read the rest in one gulp, and finished feeling strangely soiled.

But the book should be read, if only because what it offers is so utterly unique. And its world is far from one-dimensional—rather it presents rich lives being reduced to the bareness and boldness of Ballardian science fiction, life imitating art with a vengeance. And also with a remarkable poignancy—the folly of the crew who so inexplicably refuse to become alarmed at the fire in their aircraft's hold; the chatter about home economics and home-grown politics between a captain and his first officer broken by their occasional expressions of bewilderment at not being able, quite, to figure out where the hell they are; and above all the remarks of the stewardesses, who all seem to resemble Candy Clark in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. Look at all the tire tracks in the snow . . .

Simon Pettifor

ALSO RECEIVED

The Zen Gun by Barrington Bayley
(Methuen, £1.95)

Bio-botched superprime menace collapsing galactic empire with mystical wooden McGuffin, Space (fabric of) unravels. Bayley spoils jolly jinks and Real Scientific Idea with interminable lectures and floppy plotting. Mehtuen proflreader lsils asleee.

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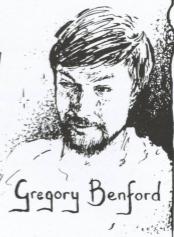
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