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interzone/12

SF & FANTASY STORIES BY MICHAEL BISHOP,
M. JOHN HARRISON, PAMELA ZOLINE & OTHERS



interzone

No 12 Summer 1985

Editorial

It is a year now since we coined the phrase Radical Hard SF and announced a competition to promote such fiction in *Interzone*. The results of that competition have been disappointing. In saying this, we certainly do not wish to denigrate Lee Montgomerie's winning story, "War and/or Peace", which appeared last issue: that was a fine piece of writing, both radical and hard-edged. What has proved disappointing is that there were not enough stories of a sufficiently high standard to make it worthwhile naming any runners-up. We were forewarned that short story competitions always produce meagre results. Maybe so. Nevertheless, we feel the exercise was a useful one in that it threw a cat among the pigeons, drawing a lively response from many of our readers — including one or two who refused to renew their subscriptions because they thought we were about to fill the magazine with "spaceship stories"! It's a shame to lose those folk, but we do believe that a publication such as this can only thrive on controversy. For every reader we lose we may gain two.

Radical Hard SF was not intended to describe the whole range of *Interzone's* fiction — but as some label or another will inevitably be pinned on us, we would prefer this phrase of our own to the tired old designation *New Wave*. The latter dies hard. Faren Miller wrote a generous review of *Interzone: The First Anthology* for the April 1985 issue of the American magazine *Locus*. Evidently she liked the book, and her praise of the stories was very pleasing to us. But it was a little irritating when she referred in passing to "experimental British sf"; "the *New Wave* of Aldiss, Moorcock, and Ballard"; and even when she said of the book that it "recalls *Dangerous Visions*." Ellison's was a fine anthology in its day, and the *New Wave* of Moorcock, etc., was great while it was happening. But all that refers to a period of battles fought and won high on twenty years ago. For our present-day purposes the comparisons are irrelevant. We don't conceive of *Interzone* as a vehicle for *New-Wave* or experimental fiction. We remain committed to the kind of fantasy stories which have already proved so successful in our pages: Radical Hard Fantasy, perhaps we should call them, like Geoff Ryman's "The Unconquered Country" and Scott Bradfield's "The Dream Of The Wolf." At the same time, we would like to publish more good solid science-fiction stories, written to the highest standards — alive to the 1980s, adult, genuinely speculative, and based on real knowledge.

Perhaps it is time we made it plain that we are not just another literary little magazine. There are plenty of publications of that sort already. We are in a different game.

In this age of *Ghostbusters* and *Gremlins*, of fantasy gamesbooks and dragon-romances, genuine science fiction sorely needs encouragement. A living, continuing magazine, promoting the art of written sf, is the very best form of encouragement — or so we fervently believe. As yet, *IZ* falls short of the ideal we have in mind; but it is still the only magazine in Britain which is trying, and we intend that it shall go on trying. The Radical Hard SF Competition is dead — long live Radical Hard SF! (We have been warned that labels are a bad thing, but if you don't invent one of your own you'll have someone else's stuck on you — and usually it will be inappropriate and out of date).

If we seem to be calling for a return to "good old-fashioned sci-fi," well, it's partly so, but think on this: the French have a phrase, *reculer pour mieux sauter* — which means to draw back, the better to leap. We believe that science fiction

(particularly in Britain, the country that produced Wells, Stapledon, Ballard) has the potential to engender a serious, heartening and delightful literature for tomorrow — a literature which will tell us more about life in this decade and the next than a shelfload of Booker Prize-winning novels. Please write to *Interzone* and let us know whether you agree. Should *IZ* become more science-fictional and less "literary"? Should it adhere to a harder, clearer policy — or should it be open to anything at all which may loosely be described as "imaginative"?

David Pringle and Simon Ounsley

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Submissions: unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed, but must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope of good size — otherwise they cannot be returned. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Story submissions should be sent to any one of the following addresses:

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INTERZONE READERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

At the end of the first two years of publication we asked those who were due to renew their subscriptions to fill in a short questionnaire telling us what they thought about the magazine. The results were later published in *Interzone*.

This year, to encourage greater feedback, we're bringing the questionnaire to the attention of all our readers. Please fill in this form and return it to **124 Osborne Road, Brighton, BN1 6LU, UK**. You may detach this page from the magazine by cutting along the vertical dotted line on the left (there is an advertisement on the reverse of the page, so you will not be losing any of this issue's text). Alternatively, you may send us your answers in the form of a separate letter. We don't mind how it's done — we just want to hear from you! Answer as many or as few of the questions as you wish.

Which stories in issues 9-12 have you particularly liked?

Which stories in issues 9-12 have you particularly disliked?

If we were to hold a one-day *Interzone* conference in Brighton on a Saturday in May 1986 (to coincide with the Brighton Arts Festival) with a registration fee of, say, £3 a head — and with plenty of opportunity to meet the magazine's writers, artists and editors — would you be inclined to attend (a positive answer implies no definite commitment at this stage)?

Yes No

If you are not already doing so, why not take this opportunity to subscribe to *Interzone*? Just slip a cheque or postal order for £5 (payable to "Interzone") in with your completed questionnaire and we'll start your year's subscription with issue 13 (persons overseas please send £6 or \$10).

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LETTERS

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Which illustrations in issues 9-12 have you particularly liked?

Which illustrations in issues 9-12 have you particularly disliked?

What comments have you on the magazine in general?
(Please continue on another sheet of paper if you wish.)

GOLLANCZ SF

JAMES MORROW

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The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services Consortium Ltd.

Michael Bishop

"Gonna Change My Way of Thinking"

That Dylan would give up his career in music to become a computer-software impresario, few of us could have guessed. Not that this world-famous figure — in his various self-conscious incarnations as tubercular poet, blues guitarist, latter-day Dust Bowl hobo, Chaplinesque tramp, folk-rock hero, civil-rights and antiwar activist, poignantly struggling drug addict, electronic surrealist, country-and-western troubadour, self-proclaimed heir to Elvis, charismatic Christian balladeer, and devout repentant Jew — had failed to experience changes aplenty in his astonishing forty-plus years. No, of course not, for the resilient little man had already remade himself a dozen times, each time in a way that indisputably, if maybe somewhat annoyingly, testified to his ongoing private search for self-definition, meaning, and ultimate purpose; in short, to his search for both sainthood and God. Now, though, he was apparently looking for all these things in the latter-day terra incognita of the microchip. Or, if that is too hyperbolic, in the new spiritual aesthetic of a software developer with almost unlimited capital, an unparalleled publicity and distribution network, and the kind of personal magnetism that even the most dynamic commercial executive, not to mention the most promotion-conscious neophyte salesman, would kill for.

But this latest turnabout caught the doyens of contemporary popular culture even more off-guard than had the shift from acoustic folk purity to hard-driven electronic music documented by the appearance of the 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home*. It startled them even more than had his metamorphosis into a kind of froggy-throated upstart Ernest Tubbs — just listen to Dylan's inharmonious opening duet with Johnny Cash on "Girl From the North Country" — on *Nashville Skyline* in 1969. It certainly surprised them

more than had his re-emergence in the mid-1970s, on such albums as *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire*, as a stinging social critic and an image-making cartographer of the human heart. It even shocked, discomfited, and finally outraged them more than had Dylan's adoption of a fervent religious fundamentalism, which mind-boggling change in course he revealed to the world on his 1979 album *Slow Train Coming*. After all, each of these transformations had taken place within the context of his career as a musician, or, at least, had found gratifying expression within that context.

Now, though, Dylan seems to have abandoned his music — his chief and most eloquent means of defining the Dylan persona; some would argue, *his entire life* — to become another anonymous foot soldier in the Computer Revolution. Today, as nearly everyone knows, would-be programmers are more plentiful in our society than either would-be guitarists or novice harmonica players. Why, then, would this unique talent in American music forfeit his birthright for total commitment to a technological enterprise already well under way and maybe even too far out of the pen to lasso, ride to ground, and set free to trot off in more liberating and fulfilling directions? The answer, of course, lies in Dylan's assessment of this enterprise as a route to spiritual discovery — to sainthood and God — potentially more viable and rewarding than even the not-to-be-discounted route of songwriting and occasional on-stage self-sacrifice before the multitudes. And, of course, only a fool would fail to warn sceptics or scoffers that in no enterprise that Dylan undertakes can he for long remain anonymous. In only a year, in fact, he has gone from a (granted, well-financed) foot soldier in the Computer Revolution to a (truly innovative) field marshal in the free world's ever-expanding Software Wars.

"All Along the Watchtower"

Born in Duluth, Minnesota, and long a resident of upstate New York, Dylan renounced not only musicianship but also this country's sometimes spartan northern winters to relocate in the Sun Belt, the birthplace, incubator, and nursery of the computer-products industry. Although many, I suppose, would have expected him to take his fledgling software firm directly to California or Texas, he chose instead to headquarter the enterprise in Atlanta, Georgia, not solely for its dogwood-blossom Aprils and often lamblike Februarys, but also for the attractive commercial incentives held out to him by both the city's black political hierarchy and its white business community. (The mayor's civil-rights activity with Martin Luther King during the social upheavals of the 1960s is said to have counted as much with Dylan as the promised financial support of the Coca Cola Company.) Dylan himself lives in the small town of Duluth — a variety of self-mockery that has always appealed to him — several miles northeast of Atlanta, but commutes into the city every day with his car-pool partners, two of whom are management-level employees of his firm and the other of whom writes a regular column for the Business Monday section of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

Dylan christened — the term has a certain legitimacy — his young company Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services, or TS/3S, to give it its official stock-market abbreviation. He was himself the author of the first ten or twelve programs, which became such phenomenally popular additions to our universal software library that they continue to sell briskly today. (More about the programs themselves in a later part of my report.) The success of these early packages encouraged Dylan to hire two or three creative assistants, a small brigade of program refiners and debuggers, a dauntingly enthusiastic sales force, and a host of high-school- or prep-school-prowling talent scouts ever on the alert for young men and women with programmable insights into the BASIC God-to-Person/Person-to-God relationship. His first three creative assistants (all necessarily on part-time hire because of their commitments elsewhere) were Switzerland's Hans Küng, a renowned Catholic theologian; Lewis Thomas, former chancellor of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center; and Sherry Turkle, a sociologist and psychologist probably best known for a study of computers and human spirituality entitled *The Second Self*. Former Dallas Cowboy quarterback Roger Staubach also gave TS/3S valuable imaginative input, while singer EmmyLou Harris acted throughout the initial stages of the firm's organisation as a calming influence on all those susceptible to panic.

For the most part, then, Dylan declined to use professionally trained computer people in his upstart company. As foolish as this unorthodox tactic seemed at the time, it paid immediate dividends; and today, of course, Dylan's original company has affiliates or franchises all across the nation. In retrospect, we can see that although he may have abandoned music as a career, he had not really abandoned the improvisational techniques and the associational leaps of faith that typified his artistry — his genius, if you will — as both songwriter and performer. Not at all. Rather,

he had transferred all the most brilliant characteristics of his musical persona, wholly intact, to the pursuit of his brand-new career as a computer-software developer.

It seems reasonable to conclude, in fact, that Dylan first detected his dormant passion for programming in a recording studio, where master tapes, synthesisers, and sophisticated sound-mixing equipment gave him a profound subliminal clue to the likelihood of effectively tapping into God by means of advanced twentieth-century technologies. It probably made him wonder what Jesus might have accomplished if the Son of God had been able to cut a record of the Sermon on the Mount, or what greater impact the otherworldly St Francis of Assisi might have had if his prayer "Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace" had had even the remotest chance to go platinum. In a sense, the Nazarene had done pretty damn well without instantaneous communication between various parts of the globe; the Birdman of Umbria, too.

But, of late, all over the planet, either a terrible secularisation or a dehumanising cultification of young people had been going forward, and few of those with access to commercial recording equipment — Dylan's own early self, idealistic but often adrift, included — had consciously made use of it to stem the rising tides of materialism and narcissism. Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority had not done the trick, nor had the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution, nor had various Hindu swamis, Marxist priests, self-proclaimed Oriental messiahs, and exclusive ex-science-fiction writers who also happened to be tax-financing founders of certain "rational" "religions." That most of what passed for contemporary Christian music struck Dylan as happy-talk spiritual Pabulum, and that some of the biggest fans of the 1980s' sanctified superstar, Michael Jackson, actually regarded their androgynous moon-walker as the Archangel Michael come to announce the harrowing event of Armageddon, so dismayed and demoralised Dylan that he simply could not in good conscience stay in the recording industry. To have done so would have been to profane both his own demanding hunger for God and his equally demanding need to nourish those with similar cravings.

"I Dreamed I Saw St Augustine"

Hence the midlife career change. Hence the revelation that he might be able to bring about his own self-fulfillment, and even that of people who did not yet comprehend the real nature of their private hungers, by writing innovative sacramental software for TS/3S, his own company. Hence, in short, the astonishing growth of the Tambourine Consortium and the rapidly proliferating sale of game programs such as *Pilgrims on the Path to Grace™* and *Spiritfall™*, domestic programs such as *Recipes for Would-be Believers™* and *Household Shrines™*, educational programs like *Become as Children™* and *Enlightenment Now!™*, and business programs of the popularity and usefulness of *Render Unto Caesar™* and *SanctiCalc™*.

Indeed, the success of Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services has to a large extent come about because of (1) the interdependence of all the original



Illustration by Rachel Sanderson

programs in the consortium's software library and (2) the continually self-renewing quest reinforcement available to users from Dylan's dedicated support personnel. (Nationwide, the firm has ten toll-free 800 numbers to which confused customers may apply for on-line help with balky software, their own honest misconceptions about what Tambourine programs can and cannot do, and even the technical resuscitation of crashed belief systems.) Because buyers benefit enormously from the interdependence of the various programs, augmenting their capabilities for spiritual growth with each new acquisition, the company depends on, and demonstrably profits from, repeat purchases and the almost zealous loyalty of its customers.

On the other hand, honesty and a hard-won distaste for guruism have led Dylan to insist that at the end of the Program License Agreement in the documentation issued with each Tambourine program, the following message must always appear:

BUYER BEWARE

although i am convinced that all souls/have some superior t deal with/ reject the notion that anybody's superior is ever of mere human origin/ no mortal can promise that if you only do so and so you'll touch God's face. or reach satori. or mend your tattered soul/no computer program can do those things either/we at Tambourine Software believe . . . an that means me and all the TS/S3 gang . . . that one kind of enlightenment consists in seeing/in seeing that only by continually renewing the quest for Ultimate Meaning does anybody have a chance t actually get there/so my products're designed t keep you always heading in the right direction and refreshed on your road/thats's all/but that's a lot/ so keep booting up with Tambourine an those boots'll carry you on your jingle-jangle way t wherever you want an maybe even deserve t get

— bob dylan

"With God On Our Side"

One program in the Tambourine Software arsenal — or *reliquary*, if a less warlike and more paradoxical metaphor is desired — both deserves and requires extended mention. This package, complete with one of the heftiest and most poetic instruction manuals ever released in this country, is *Orphilodeon*TM. Despite the foregoing addendum to every TS/S3 Program License Agreement, Dylan believes that *Orphilodeon* is the best single investment in software that the dedicated but less-than-affluent spiritual pilgrim can presently make. Why? Because it can be used effectively without recourse to other programs on the Tambourine list. It is so high-powered that the almost automatic trance state triggered by a user's holistic interfacing with the program invariably carries over into periods of heightened spirituality and God-consciousness away from the computer. A music-writing and -synthesizing program ingeniously designed for compatibility with nearly every type of hardware system available today, *Orphilodeon* in only six months, has already become the standard against which pragmatists and pilgrims alike will judge every other such program to come

along in the foreseeable future.

Just a few important points about this state-of-the-art piece of God-quest software. First, it reminds us of some inspired Dylan doggerel on an insert included with his 1964 album *The Times They Are A-Changin'*: "there's a movie called / 'Shoot the Piano Player' / the last line proclaimin' / 'music, man, that's where it's at' / it is a religious line" Well, *Orphilodeon* constitutes further proof, if anyone really requires it, that everything Dylan does has either a religious or a musical dimension, if not both at once.

Second, a pair of eloquent lines in the program's 783 pages of documentation (its extraordinary length an inevitable function of the fact that the author has displayed it all as verse) boldly declares that "the world all about us, t see an t touch, is frozen music / proud weepin architectures of unheard sound" (The absence of terminal punctuation both here and above follows Dylan himself.) Although not original with Dylan, this idea has probably never been more clearly demonstrated than in *Orphilodeon*, where its heartfelt implementation in the software enables even musical illiterates — pilgrims with hopelessly tin ears — to compose sublime oratorios and correspondingly sublime (quasi-psychedelic) graphics. Those transported by Bach enter a Bach mode of exponentially heightened creativity, while those lifted by Mahler, Monk, or McCartney enter superscript versions of their own preferred mind-sets.

Third, in an interview in *Byte*, Dylan has said that in writing this particular program he felt that the Holy Spirit had settled upon him, much as it had upon the men and women who composed the scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments.

And, finally, the cost of *Orphilodeon* varies from about \$560 to \$720, depending on whether one orders directly through Tambourine Software as a preferred customer or tries to buy the program in one of the expensive big-city branches of Soft WarehouseTM or CompuMallTM. Dylan admits that for individuals, as against large corporations with their own interface-worship facilities, the price may seem steep, either way. He adds, however, that even with supernatural help *Orphilodeon* took him longer to write than any other single piece of work from either his recording or his programming career (with the well-remembered exception of "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" from *Blonde on Blonde*), and that no one who buys this package really has to invest in other Tambourine products to achieve a satisfying modicum of enlightenment. *Recipes for Would-be Believers and Become As Children* might prove helpful to the neophyte saint, but neither they nor any other titles in the consortium's library are essential to a successful or, at the very least, an acceptable God-quest. So saith Dylan himself, and the vast majority of initial reviews bear out his witness.

"Mr Tambourine Man"

And what of the former troubadour? How has Dylan's latest change of direction impacted on his own spiritual explorations? On the powerful, protean personality of the searcher himself? How, in short, has the change changed Dylan?

"I'm closer," he told me in an interview last week in

the offices of Tambourine Software on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta. "Unlike Tricky Dick and Unlucky Lyndon, I can't see any all-redemptive light at the end of the tunnel, but I'm definitely closer to where I want to be and there's a kinda glow shinin' right off the very top of the road itself. It's the traveling that counts, but the stops you make along the way mean something, too. I just don't like to get stuck too long at any one stop. That's death. It's a worse death than your old-fashioned bodily dying. 'Course, getting stuck's just as old-fashioned, isn't it?"

Dylan looks good. Although he has always verged on emaciation, his slenderness now suggests that of an upwardly mobile advertising executive rather than that of an East African victim of famine. He has shaved his scraggly rabbinical beard and trimmed his flyaway satyr tresses. Last week, he wore a Brooks Brother suit, Gucci shoes, a Seiko watch. He refused to sit at his desk during our talk, but paced his office like a leopard awaiting its feeding time with a kind of serene anxiety. He was as light on his feet and just as deftly menacing, even though the menace seemed less an implicit physical threat than a postural gloss on my own fear that at any moment he might undergo a metamorphosis unlike any he has yet shown us. His bad teeth, always his worst feature, stayed hidden behind either his pursed lips or, on those occasions when he spoke, a strategically upraised hand.

"I useta say that square dress like this was a uniform, a well-bred badge of conventionality. Membership in the club, ya know. Conformity. Well, it works the other way, too. Motorcycle jackets, Mad Hatter hats, Jesus sandals, maybe even secular yarmulkes. It's all vanity, isn't it? Every bit of it. Well, I might as well be hung for a tycoon as a typhoid carrier." He smiled. "All that's important, really important, 's servin' my Somebody by gettin' my software around. That serves my neighbour as well as the Lord, and that's all I can foresee myself doing — or wantin' to do — from now till either the Rapture, or the Coming of the Hewbrew Messiah, or the pop of our homemade nuclear Big Bang. But who knows? It's a stop, and even stops must have a stop." He smiled again. "It's nothing to do with money, though, I can tell ya that. Bein' beyond money's made it possible for me to, uh, song-write and program, and the programming's reopened a door I was sorta beginning to think I'd never go through again."

Even though Dylan had granted me thirty minutes, our talk was repeatedly interrupted by secretarial messages, telephone calls, or Federal Express deliveries. Somehow, he managed to slide around these distractions, imparting continuity to what could have been a totally helter-skelter conversation. I used the interruptions to take notes on the layout, décor, and personality of his work space, a few of which I'll share with the reader in a moment.

"What's happenin' to us as a people is that after millions of defections from our name-brand faiths and denominations, and some sad and desperate reachin'-out to false faiths and pseudo-messiahs, well, what's happenin' is we're actually beginning to get more religious and spirit-oriented. Really, I mean. It's something that's gonna go deep, right to the roots of our souls, and this amazing spiritual revolutionis comin' at us in the long shadow of the computer revolution. No

one expected it, but it's happenin', and that's why I had to jump in."

(It occurred to me that the unpredictability of Dylan's many career-course changes has an analogue in the seemingly random way he chooses between endings when he pronounces a present participle aloud. Of course, this random observation fails to credit the sincere intentionality of the career changes.)

"I useta think that it'd be music that finally woke up our consciences and set our souls on the path to grace. That belief accounts for 'Blowin' in the Wind,' early on, and for *Slow Train Coming* and *Shot of Love* when I started pushin' forty. Youthful illusions die hard, 'specially when you got a talent. But it was a stupid way to think. If music were that powerful, Alexander Pope and Max Davis aside, why, you'd have to be astonished that Bach — I mean, Papa Johann and all the little Bachs — hadn't already won the entire world for Jesus. That Ravi Shankar never persuaded Governor Moonbeam to rename California Hindustan. That Itzhak Perlman hasn't been able to get Hafez al-Assad to pull his bullies out of Lebanon. That Columbia Records haven't gained complete control of the world commodities market."

"They haven't?"

Dylan lifted his forefinger, pointed it at me, sighted along it with a mischievous squint, and dropped the hammer of his thumb — but to signal wry appreciation rather than the obligatory pique of a former employee. (Weird gesture.)

Then he started pacing again and philosophically reminiscing as he paced: "Lots of times, it made me feel better, the music. The songs. But it proved a dead end, didn't it? A cul-de-sac with lots of lovely twists and some promising windows along the way, but a brick wall waitin' at the end for me to bang my head against, if I was still insane enough to keep at it."

"Which is how I came to see that there had to be another way. This way. The way of the computer, the program, and the interfaced would-be believer sittin' at his or her terminal. Finally, a technology that's put us on-line to faith. Finally, a technology that's made the rudiments of religion user-friendly. It's a little like the Japanese, with their accessible Shinto shrines. Nearly every household has one. Well, that's the way we're goin' with the personal computer. The Japanese, too. Everyone, nearly. People can get lost in a church or a synagogue, they can find themselves feelin' crushed by the weight of ritual and tradition. But not in front of a home computer. It's yours, and it's new. Its your altar and your shrine, and you can go to it to interface with the meditative spirituality latent in its microchips, which in turn're gonna boot you right on up to God. Every hacker a penitent, every homemaker a communicant. We'll pray with our fingers on the keyboards of our Apples, Ataris, IBMs, and Radio Shack specials. We'll go into our machines in order to go into ourselves, and it's the inside — not this suit or these shoes — that God sees. Tambourine programs — *Orphilodeon's* probably the best example — allows the computer to assume the role of medium, to mediate between the questing user and our own bravest concepts of omniscient deity. Each one of us becomes a church, we all of us worship in private at our own reflexively responsive altars."

"Isn't this just another kind of narcissism?" I asked.

"And if everyone's worshipping alone, what about fellowship?"

"Are prayer, meditation, and study narcissistic? You don't usually call 'em that. As for fellowship, haven't you ever heard of networking? Of user groups? Of computer clubs? Of software conventions and computer fairs? A new culture's growin' up, a new culture with strong communal ties among its members — members who've begun to reclaim their spiritual heritage by tapping into the power of the microprocessor and the scriptural strength of inspired programs."

A tambourine, emblem of the company, hung from a peg on the wall behind Dylan's desk. He removed it from the peg and banged the jingly instrument against his hip as if to put a series of exclamation points after his final comment.

"Mr Tambourine Man." I said. "My favourite song on *Bringing It All Back Home*."

"Well, there's that," Dylan acknowledged, examining the tambourine in the childlike way of someone who has never really seen one before. "But something else, too."

What was he talking about? I had no idea.

Dylan gave the instrument a shake. Then he said, "One o' the failings of middle-age is that you start explainin' yourself. You see, it's a kinda musical floppy disk."

"In My Time of Dyin'"

After that, as our interview was winding down, he showed me the gallery of computer-graphic self-portraits on the wall adjacent to his office's magnificent picture window. What disconcerted me about these colourful renderings — one suggestive of a Bosch, another of a Goya, another of an El Greco, another of Picasso's *Guernica*, another of a drawing by Escher, still another of an early Mark Rothko, and yet another of an outlandish collaboration between René Magritte and Peter Max — was their deliberate morbidity. Each one showed the artist either dead or in the throes of dying, but no two depicted the same sort of farewell appearance.

"My God," I said.

"At least I didn't do a Buddy Holly plane crash or Chaplin's Little Tramp O.D.-ing."

However, he had done — with the aid of a computer — a 21-colour jet-ink printer, and an art program of his own devising called *StippleGenesis*™ — a portrait of Bob Dylan undergoing Karloffian electrocution on a concert stage, bursting into napalm flames on the edge of a Vietnamese rice paddy, going hell for Spanish leather over a Pacific-coast cliff on his motorcycle, reflecting himself unto annihilation in a disintegrating hall of mirrors, hanging more or less naked on a splintered cross on a hill above Jerusalem, and suffering cardiac infarction on an early-morning jog through a crowd of white-faced mummers in Central Park.

"Visually attractive," I conceded. "But not very uplifting. The reverse, in fact. A downer."

"Okay. You're entitled to pass that kind of judgment. But *StippleGenesis* is at least as helpful to the would-be believer as, say, our domestic program. Dying's always fascinated me. What I was doing here was tryin' to work out my belief that our awareness

of human mortality triggers the religious impulse, quickens it, invests our individual quests for satori or God with a hotfoot urgency." He hopped from Gucci to Gucci. "Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," he sang in his peculiarly nasal way.

"In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, a portrait of the dead Christ by Holbein prompts Prince Myshkin to exclaim, 'That picture might make some people lose their faith!'"

Dylan grew solemn again. He told me that he knew what I meant. That if a painting of the crucified Son of God could have that effect, how unlikely it was that a set of computer-generated illustrations of an erstwhile pop-music superstar's buying the farm would either seed or fertilize anybody's faith. Well, they weren't intended for the general public, and my seeing them had been an accidental consequence of our interview. More or less. Anyway, his private purpose had been different. To remind himself of his own youthful preoccupation with death, and to commemorate how it had led him to seek to rediscover God, and to declare in primary colours and a host of subtle shadings that both faith and computer technology were viable avenues to immortality.

"Immortality?"

"Once, I thought the songs'd do it. Now I'm dichotomized on the question. If there's a soul in this body, it belongs to God, and he's the Man who'll get it. But the personality — every nuance of the Bob Dylan persona and the Zimmerman nugget 'way down at its core — well, that'll survive in my software. It won't be me, not so that'll I know it, but it'll still be me, with the solitary disadvantage that I won't. You take what you can get and give the glory to the Lord. I'll still be writin' songs, I'll still be composin' programs, I'll still be puttin' on my boots to search for satori — but only in magnetic guise as a complex series of instructions to a microprocessor."

The president, chairman of the board, and foremost creative intellect of TS/3S took me to a bookshelf at the end of the computer-graphics gallery and showed me the vinyl-padded folder containing the documentation for the latest program from Tambourine Software. The title on the spine of the folder was *Bob Dylan™, 1.00*, his prototype personality-duplicator and the first piece of software ever to essay quasi-immortality by its programmer. The vinyl cover on the folder reproduced the artwork from his Columbia double album *Self-Portrait*, which I believe came out in the early 1970s while I was on active duty in the air force.

"Are you going to market it?" I asked him.

"Oh, no. Not this one. Never."

"Why not?"

"You don't sell yourself. I mean, you do, but not this way, not so you're merchandisin' your soul."

"Then what?"

"It's gonna go in a time capsule. A copy of it, of course. To be resurrected without benefit of body somewhere down the line when the world needs it." He laughed. "Or mebbe when I need it. Not that I think the two're identical, God knows."

My time was up. In fact, I had overstayed by seven or eight minutes. "You've been the victim of pirating before," I said, hurrying to put to Dylan the question that two of my editors had specifically directed me to

ask. "The Basement Tapes with The Band. Lots of other examples. How do you feel about the practice in this business, here at Tambourine?"

The question appeared to trouble him. Furrowing his brow, he pushed the *Bob Dylan* program back into its place on the shelf. He hiked up his suit jacket and slid his hands into the hip pockets of his trousers. "One day," he said carefully, "we're gonna set up a booth in the middle o' town and hand out our software for free. When it's completely debugged, I mean. When it's as near to perfect as we know how to make it. Nobody ought to hafta pirate God-consciousness. Nobody. Not even Ronnie Reagan."

I had flipped open my notepad again and was hurrying to set down these remarks as accurately as possible.

"That's off the record. Totally."

I closed my notepad and put away my pen. Off the record, I thought, but altogether permanently on the software of my reportorial instincts. It was too good a quote to deep-six in the waters of oblivion: "Nobody ought to hafta pirate God-consciousness." And, of course, it was the quote with which I ended my story.

"Most Likely You Go Your Way And I'll Go Mine"

Tonight, though, I sit at my own computer keyboard with pirated diskettes of *Spiritfall*, *Enlightenment Now!*, and, chief among my felonious acquisitions, *Orphilotheon*, trying to inter-

face in a meditative way with the phosphor dots that continuously refresh themselves on the screen of my microprocessor. I am also trying to anticipate Dylan's next unpredictable career move. Maybe, in hopes of touching the face of God during extravehicular activity on one of our shuttle flights, he intends to apply to NASA for astronaut training. Maybe, in the expectation of parsing the enzyme-coded melodies of our genes and of extracting from this cellular music the grace notes slotted there by the Ancient of Days, he plans to re-enrol in the University of Minnesota — but this time in a biology program leading to a degree in recombinant-DNA research.

Who knows? God knows. I pray to God through my fingertips, through my keyboard, through this machine. I pray for a brief burst of enlightenment about the intentions of His most mercurial contemporary prophet. After all, it's one of the ways I make my living.

Michael Bishop lives in Pine Mountain, Georgia. He won the Nebula Award for his highly original time-travel novel, *No Enemy But Time* (1982). His latest novel, due out this summer from Arbor House in the USA, is *Ancient of Days* — "which is not a sequel or a companion volume to *No Enemy But Time*, but which picks up and reorients some of the themes explored in the earlier book." He is currently working on a non-sf novel set in the contemporary American South.

NEWS

This is the last issue of *Interzone* which will bear Colin Greenland's name as an editor. Colin has resigned from the magazine and will be concentrating henceforth on his freelance writing career (he has a new novel in progress). *IZ* owes a large debt of gratitude to Colin, who has been with it from the first. He was one of the original "collective of eight" which included Malcolm Edwards and Graham James among others. The collective came together in the summer of 1981 in order to launch a new British sf magazine. *IZ* was the result, and Colin has left a considerable personal mark on its first twelve issues. We wish him the very best of luck in his writing.

We also say farewell to Abigail Frost who was the magazine's designer and paste-up artist for issues 6 to 11. Those tasks are now being undertaken by Roger Watt. Abigail was also *IZ*'s news editor for a couple of issues. We thank her for all her efforts.

INTERZONE: THE NOVEL

Some months ago the *American Publishers' Weekly* printed a small news feature on William S. Burroughs. It would seem that the aging hero of the Beat Generation has signed a contract with Viking Penguin for seven books that will be published over a period of five years.

The first to appear will be *Queer*, a hitherto unpublished novel written in 1951. That will be followed in 1986 by Burroughs's current novel-in-progress *The Western Lands*, described as "a Book of the Dead for the nuclear age." In Spring 1987 comes another unpublished novel, *Interzone*, which was discovered among Allen Ginsberg's papers at Columbia University Library. The manuscript was written before *The Naked Lunch*, and its title refers to the "ghostly half-world where much of Burroughs's fiction takes place."

The remaining four volumes in this ambitious programme will consist of short stories, interviews and letters.

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

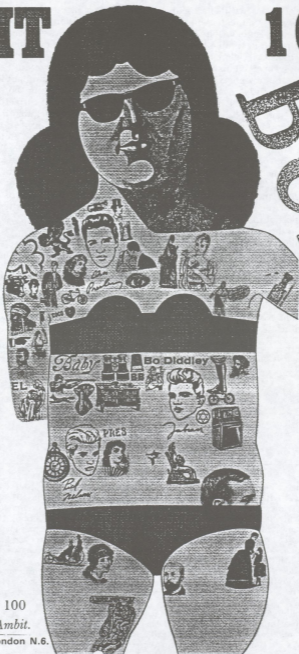
With effect from the next issue, number 13, we shall be "relaunching" the magazine, giving it a whole new look and adding some new features. The quantity (and quality) of the fiction which we publish will remain the same. The cover price will rise to £1.50 (£6 for a four-issue subscription). You can help us lay our plans for the coming year by filling in and returning the readers' questionnaire which you will find elsewhere in this issue. We feel very optimistic about the future of the magazine (our recently-published anthology, from J.M. Dent, has brought us much new publicity) but as ever we are in need of feedback from our readership. Keep in touch!

AMBIT

100

BURNING

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Little Ilya and Spider and Box

Paul J. McAuley

Ships lift at all hours.

Little Ilya, hiding beneath the monorail at the edge of the spacefield, saw a violet line bisect the night sky, the nullgee track switching on as abruptly as a searchlight, heard a moment later the laggard thunder of discharges amongst the fluxbarriers. She didn't see the ship itself, but the track between Earth and heaven was enough: a beacon, a symbol of the final escape from her mother that every ship represented.

The track shut off. Shadows under the monorail lost their violet edge, and Little Ilya could see the unfamiliar stars again.

Stars, huge perspectives, the metallic taste of exhausted terror, hunger and the scrape of dirty clothes on dirty skin: so different from the way things had been before her escape, but welcome, because they reminded her of the painfully won distance between herself and her mother, Ilya. She had stolen a credit note when she had escaped from the ranch — validated by a few skin cells, the sliver of plastic was worth twenty-five thousand Greater Brazilian dollars — but so far she hadn't used it. For one thing, it was too high a denomination to use in machines, and no one would accept that a girl seemingly twelve years old could have so much money — they would check and so Ilya would find out where she was. For another, part of the credit was needed to buy passage to Luna, and Little Ilya wouldn't use any of the rest to buy daily necessities, just as a priest wouldn't drink her breakfast coffee from a chalice.

Now all was quiet, Little Ilya took out Box and whispered, "Is it safe?"

"I am unable to say," Box told her primly. His voice was like the buzzing of an insect in the fluted tunnel of her ear.

Disappointed, Little Ilya stowed him inside her dirty silk dress. Box was clever, but only in certain ways. She hoped he was clever enough to get her to

one of the ships.

The monorail rumbled overhead. Little Ilya had almost been caught when she had ridden it into the administrative tower earlier that evening: Tolon, Ilya's bonded servant, had somehow guessed where she was going. But Little Ilya had seen Tolon's big, black-bearded head amongst the people in the tower's station before he had seen her — sometimes there were advantages in being small — and she had managed to find her way out of the tower, had followed the road to the gate where the crews entered. And there she had stopped, her nerve gone, until the lifting ship had reminded her of her purpose.

The gate was built of rough-hewn stone blocks, weathered and sooty as if it had stood for years before the spacefield had been constructed. A single glotube at the keystone of the arch showed Little Ilya the guard. She watched it let in a man, a captain's sigil winking like a firefly on his vest, then asked Box, "Can you fix the guard?"

"I am unable to say."

"It's only a machine, like the one you fixed to bring us up from the ranch. You can tell it a story so we can get inside."

"If it is the same."

"Of course it is," Little Ilya said, although she was not at all sure that it was. She clutched Box to her chest, stepped onto the road, and walked right up to where the guard hung its barrier beneath the arch. On tiptoe, her heart beating lightly, quickly, she held Box up to the grill.

She couldn't understand what Box said, a high chattering of machine language, but the guard's barrier suddenly rose, curtains of mesh folding back. In the moment Little Ilya stepped forward, a voice, not Tolon's but frightening all the same, said, "Wait. You wait right there!"

But Little Ilya was already running, through shadow (the monorail), into light, through shadow again. There was a railing, and she scrambled over it, drop-

ping into darkness and landing heavily on coarse wet grass. She lay still, breath knocked out of her: fear had wiped her more cleanly than the hypaedia.

When she dared to look up, she met the gaze of someone leaning at the rail, silhouetted in the glow of lights atop the monorail track. Little Ilya pressed her face into the grass again, but it was no good. She had been seen. She heard the thump as the person landed beside her, then a voice.

"What are you doing here? Lost?"

It was not the voice which had challenged her at the gate.

Little Ilya looked up. The crouching woman pushed pale hair from her narrow face. Her angular knees stuck out of her frayed pants. "Saw you run," she said. "In trouble?"

Little Ilya shook her head.

"Shouldn't be here, all the same."

"Are you a . . . freespacer?" She had picked up the word from trivia shows; it felt strange in her mouth.

"No. Not that at all, now." The woman's voice was harsh with an unknown accent, and as flat as that of some menial machine equipped with only a few stock phrases. She stood, towering over Little Ilya. "Go home, now. Keep away from here."

"Wait, please . . ." Little Ilya stood too, desperately fighting for words. One hand, thrust in her pocket, clutched Box, her talisman. "Tell me where I can find freespacers?"

"In the city, a sector north of the old houses, down by the docks. Freespacers in the bars and cafés." For the first time, the woman's voice edged towards a question. "But surely you are too young to be going there . . . and to be having anything to do with freespacers."

"I have to get onto a ship. Get to Luna."

"Do you, now." The woman's face was a white blur in the gloom. "So it is trouble."

"I ran away from my mother — well, she's not exactly my mother. If I reach Luna I'll be safe because their laws are different."

"All laws on Earth are strange," the woman said. "But then you are a strange people. Surely you belong with your mother. Go back, I will not tell the guard." She turned abruptly and swung herself neatly over the rail, and walked away.

Little Ilya sat on the damp grass in darkness a while, clutching Box and looking at the lights of Galveston glittering on the other side of the channel. Then she asked, "What shall I do?"

Starwind. The letters hung in a solid block of blue above the chromed door. Little Ilya reached for the doorplate. And stopped, frowning, as the brittle sound of breaking glass cut the general din inside: a woman screamed. Little Ilya, the back of her neck prickling, started on up the neon avenue.

It had not been difficult to find freespacers, but it was almost impossible to talk with them. The first bar she'd tried, a man had listened carefully to her, then shrugged and walked off; another had told her to wait, and she had waited a long time, people around her ignoring her, until she had decided he wasn't coming back. And in the second place someone had come around the counter and steered her right out into the street again.

A police cruiser swung silently over the avenue, its red underbeacon flashing, and Little Ilya quickly turned down a sidestreet, her heart thumping. She equated any authority with Ilya.

It was darker here: most of the glotubes had been smashed. Square buildings stood shoulder to shoulder, a bruised margin of sky between. Halfway down, a holographic projection of a tilted galaxy turned above a plateglass window. The window was cracked edge to edge. As Little Ilya hesitated at the door, it hissed back and the exiting crowd of people almost swept her along with them; a man, naked but for a breechclout, his head shaven, turned to stare, then hurried to catch up with his noisy companions.

Little Ilya stepped forward; the door hissed shut at her back.

A metal counter ran the length of one wall; the rest of the vaulted space was jammed edge to edge with small metal tables and metal chairs, less than a quarter occupied. Music surged in polyphonic rhythms to the pulsing light fantasy that covered the far wall. It was a lot quieter than the other two bars.

A man sat alone at a table near the door. Gathering her courage, Little Ilya went up to him and asked if he knew of anyone going to Luna. He looked up, then smiled broadly. One of his teeth was gold, a glint high up in the broad swathe of white. His nose was aquiline, his eyebrows straight, as black as his jet hair. "Luna? Luna, now. . . . What would you want there, little girl?"

"I have to get there."

"Yeah? Hey there, José!" He beckoned, and the short, swarthy man talking with a couple at another table stopped frowning and came over. "Wants to go to Luna," the first man explained.

"You intrasystems?" The first man began to laugh: then José joined in. "Intrasystems, huh?"

Nearby, a woman leaned an arm on the back of her chair and said, "Let me tell you something, honey. It's easier to get back home than get to Luna from here."

"At least she starts out with small ambitions," Goldtooth said, and laughed again.

"It would be easier to get to Luna on a swan-pulled sledge," the woman told Little Ilya, "than to get a ride here."

Little Ilya looked from one grinning face to another. She was beginning to feel frightened, hemmed in, by these strange people. She was used only to Ilya, to her silent wired servants, not this gross confusion. The first man crushed her shoulder with a meaty paw, squeezing the fine bones there; his breath, bent close, sweetly reeked. Little Ilya tried to pull away, but he held her firmly.

"Please," Little Ilya said.

"Just tell us why you want to get to Luna."

"Someone as young as you," another man added.

Little Ilya tried to pull away again, beat at the man's restraining hand. Someone else dipped into the pocket of her dress, pulled out Box. "That's mine!" Her sight blurred with indignant tears. "Please, give him back!" She struck randomly, felt skin snag under her nails. The man yelped in surprise, grabbed her hand. Someone else pushed a glass to her mouth; its rim ticked her teeth and a burning sweetness filled her mouth. She spat it out.

"A real fighter!"



Illustration by Lesley Buckingham

"As bad as a mechanic!"

“What is this?" Little Ilya recognised that inflectionless voice, the thin narrow face framed in a cowl of tarnished gold.

The woman said, "Let her alone." To Little Ilya she said, "Told you to keep away, child."

"We weren't doing anything," someone said un- easily.

The man still holding Little Ilya's shoulder added, "No business of yours, that so?"

"Well now, it is. Want to talk with her."

The man shrugged. "When she's finished telling us what she wants here. When did singleshp pilots care about any ass but their own, anyhow?"

The tall woman said quietly, "I've been on places you'd dry up and blow away in a second, places no one else has been to. Bad places, shuttle pilot. Remember that, when I ask something, and you'll be able to keep your schedules."

"So go talk to her," the man said, releasing Little Ilya. "If you can remember how to talk to people." Alone in the group, he laughed, then looked away.

"Come, child."

Someone handed Little Ilya Box, and she clutched him tightly as she followed the woman through the maze of tables to one right under the giant light fantasy.

"Sit." The woman's voice cut harshly through the music's pulse. Red light underlit her face: a devil mask.

Little Ilya sat.

"They don't mean anything. Bored mostly. Nothing to do between runs but drink and fuck and drink some more. Kept away from that when I was a freespacer, but know how it was, in strange cities, on strange worlds. What are you doing here, child?"

"Just . . . just trying to get to Luna."

"Go buy a ticket. Better still, go back home." There was a faint slurring in her uninflected voice and a slightly unfocused look on her narrow face: the woman had been drinking, as Ilya sometimes did. "Back to your mother, child."

"No, I can't." Little Ilya was frightened now that this person, this adult, would mistakenly hand her over to the authorities, and she began to cry in earnest.

"Surely not so bad?"

"She'll have me wiped again." Little Ilya felt the power of her tears, like a silver shield saving her from the woman's remote scorn. "I can't go back. I have to get to Luna."

"What do you mean, wiped?"

Unexpectedly, Box's intimate buzzing voice said, "The girl is older than she appears. She has been physically and psychologically constrained to remain a child, and laws here dictate that she must be treated as one."

The woman pinched her right ear. "How did you do that?"

Little Ilya sniffed loudly. "He's just Box. And he shouldn't let people know about him."

"Perhaps this person can help us," Box said. "She won't do that until she knows about you and why you ran away."

"Why," the woman asked, "did you run away, child?"

"Because of my mother. Because she was keeping me young and wiping my memory each year so I wouldn't change."

"Keeping you young?"

"By feeding her the anti-aging drugs," Box's small voice explained.

"She likes it if things don't change," Little Ilya added.

"If she can afford to keep you an agatherin, I suppose she is on it herself. Live long enough and you lose interest in change, live longer and you begin to distrust it. Seen it in people I piloted for, way back."

Little Ilya shrugged, and sniffed again.

"And who is Box?"

"He's my friend; I keep him in my pocket. He talks to you by tickling the drum in your ear which sounds hit to make themselves heard."

"Not the eardrum," Box said, "but the auditory nerve. I am really a storyteller, Spider. Do you like stories?"

"How did you know my name?"

"A component of my circuitry mimics the psionic talent which certain humans possess." Box sounded smug.

The woman, Spider, leaned back in her chair, suddenly wary. "You're reading my mind?"

"Not precisely," Box said.

"Please," asked Little Ilya, "you won't tell anyone?"

"If quiet, tell you what I can do." Spider spoke with the grave precision of someone quite drunk. "Take you to the spacefield, find you someone going to Luna. No place for a child, here."

"I'll pay you," Little Ilya said in a rush of gratitude. "Only . . . I can't get the credit charged right now."

"Keep your money, little girl," Spider said. "Found a world last trip that people can live on. Know what that's worth? No, you can't imagine. Have my own singleshp now, see, going out to find another world. Leaving at dawn, after the shuttles, so hurry to get you settled." She drained her glass, and stood.

Little Ilya watched the city's lights fall away on either side as the mono sped out across the water; drops of rain scaled the glass of the window, blurring her reflection. Imperfect rendering of Ilya's face. Ahead, the spacefield was a bruised glow against the long horizon of the ocean. Somewhere in the middle of it a nullgee track flicked on, a violet thread.

Spider, hanging on the strap beside Little Ilya, said, "They go up all hours, but only a few at night. You'll probably go up after the shuttles have lifted, at dawn. I have to wait until then too. Local laws, see." Unexpectedly, she spat at the window: her milk spittle clung, slowly elongating.

"But rules are good, aren't they?" That was what Ilya had told her, of the many rules that had hedged her life at the ranch.

"Too many here. An old world, too much fixed. Where I go, no laws, what you do defines you. Here, what others do, all that has gone before, does that. Have to follow old patterns." Spider looked at Little Ilya owlshly. "Don't really like people, none of us singleshp pilots do really, don't even like each other's company. Do this as a favour, you in such a bad way."

". . . Thank you." She could say nothing else.

When they got off the mono, the rain had stopped. The night air was cold, and each glotube had spun a little halo about itself. At the gate, Spider pressed her sigil to the keyplate and spoke her name; the guard retracted its barrier and Spider and Little Ilya walked beneath the arch.

"Here now, Seyoura." Light glistened on the man's slick uniform tunic, on the stock of his holstered pistol, as he stepped from his booth. "You can't take that child in here with no clearance."

"A relative," Spider said coldly.

"That makes no difference."

"Does with me. Goes in."

"I'm just doing my job," the man said, all sternness leaked away. He pushed out his lower lip, tried to regain a note of authority. "You singleship jockeys think you own the field. Well, I know your ship, Seyoura. *The Dark Wing of Sorrow*, right? You'll be back, and I'll remember."

"Think I'll be back?" Spider told Little Ilya, "Come on, child."

As they crossed the wide space towards the first of the bafflesquares, passing light after light, Little Ilya expected at any moment something would happen: a shout, the scream of a pistol discharge. She dared to look back only when they reached the beginning of the maze. The guard stood watching with his hands on his hips, the archway of the gate looming above him.

"He is merely a petty official," Spider said, "less than a peace officer."

"But won't he tell?"

"Once you're on a ship, you'll be safe. Your mother can hardly stop all traffic."

Bafflesquares reared all around, tall grey shapes like a forest of stiff angular sails between which narrow branching passageways wound. Glotubes on poles provided infrequent illumination. As they walked, Little Ilya asked, "How do you know where you're going?"

"There's a pattern." Spider seemed preoccupied, or perhaps she had reverted to her former mood, a silence that might be thought sullen had her face not been empty of emotion, a pale scrubbed mask. After a while, she added, "Each sector is a quincunx of pads, every pad surrounded by a ring of fluxbarriers and three rings of bafflesquares. Allright?"

Little Ilya nodded, although she did not understand.

"I suppose your mother is very rich," Spider said, after another pause.

"I suppose so."

"To give toys like the one you carry."

"Box? He's my friend. I suppose Ilya thought he was only a toy, but he helped me escape, he told me how my memory was wiped each year. To keep me the same, you see. Ilya likes things to be the same when she visits the ranch. Then Box told the shuttle to take us to the surface, and it did. Machines believe anything, if you know the right way to tell them."

Little Ilya didn't remember when her memory had been wiped, a whole year gone, a year of doing, thinking, being; but of course the very memory of the act would have been wiped too when the hypaedia had detached every spin-tagged RNA molecule in her

neurons. (She had read about the process after Box had unlocked the library's memory, but did not really understand; except that her memory would not be tainted if she stopped eating what the ranch's teachers offered, but she could not eat the shrubs and flowers of the gardens, and when she tried to eat the raw algal concentrate from which the teachers spun food, she had become ill.) No, she did not remember the day, any of the days, it had been done, but no doubt it had been like any other, waking to filtered sunlight with perhaps a school of fish watching her through the transparent ceiling, her clothes laid out and breakfast waiting. The only time anything changed had been when Ilya had visited the ranch, and that was why Little Ilya had loved her. But Ilya had been away so often in the mysterious cities of the land or on the other worlds, and then Little Ilya had had only Box for company — Box, and the simple-minded machines and bonded servants such as Tolon. So Ilya must have been rich, to own the ranch, to be able to buy passage to other worlds. Little Ilya had not thought about it before.

They passed between canted fluxbarriers into the circle they enclosed. The ship that sat on the pad was old: if it had ever had markings they had long ago faded in the raw sunlight of space. Light spilled from the open door midway up its side onto the mesh of the ramp which rose to meet it.

"Come on," Spider said, striding more quickly, and Little Ilya had to run to keep up with her, wondering why she was following this strange woman. Knowing only Ilya and her bonded servants (remembering Tolon's big head turning in the crowd of strangers, Little Ilya felt the shock of recognition all over again), she trusted no one in the strange world of the open air. Yet Spider had awoken something dulled by the endless parade of identical days at the ranch (turned back to the beginning at the end of each year), her curiosity. Simply, Little Ilya wanted to see what this strange woman would do next.

Which was to stride up the ramp, bang on the hull-metal beside the open doorway and call out hoarsely, "Hey there, old pirate!"

For a whole minute nothing happened. Light from the doorway brushed Spider's left shoulder (set in the lobe of her ear, pale hair pulled behind it, a tiny emerald gleamed). Little Ilya stood behind her: the light did not quite reach her toes. Then it was eclipsed.

"I never did think to see you again." The hair on his head and bare chest was grey; the cheeks of his puffy face were speckled with broken capillaries. His belly drooped over ragged red pants cinched with wire. He peered at Little Ilya, who took a step backwards, ready to run.

"When you sober up, you're doing your usual run." Spider had assumed the manner she had used on the freespacers in the bar and the guard at the gate: abrupt, disdainful.

"Sure. Want to sign on? Tired of seeking out new worlds?" The man's lips twisted: a smashed rosebud.

"This one —" Spider's thumb jerked to her shoulder — "wants passage out. Will pay. Take her tomorrow."

"Charity work, Seyoura Spider? Making up for your years of solitude?"

"You take her?"
"A young girl? Word's out that someone is looking for a young girl, from one of those private sea ranches at the reef."

"You ever worry about what you carry?"
"If it's dangerous, I can't do no favours. That's all."
"She will pay. If you don't mind credit."
"Credit can be traced. Besides, she's too young to have it."

"Her mother's."
The man smiled. "And I suppose she has a lump of her mother's flesh to validate it."

"She is her mother's flesh, you might say."
"A clone? Well."
"So there won't be peace officers after you, she shouldn't be around in the first place."

The man laughed. "Not honest ones, anyway."
"You get paid, you do the job. And know what freespacers say, about betrayal of trust."

"I remember it has been a long time since you called yourself a freespacer."

"Own a ship now. Like you. What else could I be?"
"You tell me."

"I think you know." Spider looked directly at the man, and after a moment he shifted his gaze.

"For you, I'll do it." Little Ilya sensed that the expansive way he said this was to hide his fear, his shame at giving in, his shame of his fear.

"Good." Spider nodded, and told Little Ilya, "Good-bye, child." She was halfway down the ramp before Little Ilya found her voice.

"Thank you."
Spider didn't look back, walked unheeding across stained concrete towards the gap between the angled blades of the fluxbarriers.

"Well now," the man said. "You're some little package. Come in before someone sees you."

The passageway seemed packed with invisible cloths; Little Ilya pushed through reluctantly yielding air at the man's broad pimply back. And then the air was simply air again.

"Pressure curtain," the man said obscurely, and added, "I'm called Kareem."

"Ilya," Little Ilya said politely. She glanced right and left as they climbed a turning metal stair. It was good to be inside again, away from the empty sky, but she was still frightened.

"You want to go to Luna."
This was so obvious that Little Ilya did not reply. She looked at the room into which the stair had brought them.

It was circular. Most of it was in darkness. Those glotubes that did work were crusted with dirt, shedding blotched yellow light on empty containers that might once have held plants, on soiled couches. In an arc on one side was a gravel bed carefully raked with sinuous patterns around a few black rocks, dry zen essence of a river.

"Not much, you're thinking, but it's mine, sure as that jockey's singleship is hers. Used to be an inter-system yacht, but the phase gaffle's been ripped out. Kareem Cargo." The man thumbed his chest beneath one sagging tit. "That's me, and this ship. Special attention for that special item. Such as you." He took hold of Little Ilya's upper arm: his grip was warm, dry and firm. "I can't think what Spider saw in you.

She's a loner, all those singleship jockeys are. Have to be. That's right, up here."

"Where are you taking me?"
"A cabin. I'd show you the bridge, but there're too many loose cables."

"Are you, are you the only one here?"
"Just me and the computer. Now don't be afraid. Right here."

He led her up a shallow ramp, opened a door. The room was small and dark; Little Ilya could make out a sleeping couch at its centre, nothing more.

"You get some sleep. Later on I lift, but we have to wait until the shuttles have gone, after dawn. So you have to keep quiet, see, or the Port Authority cops will be onto you and you won't be going to Luna." The door slid shut, leaving Little Ilya in darkness.

She sat on the greasy floor, her back against the couch. The room was as opaquely dark as the deepest marine trench, a darkness made blacker by the scintillae her sight projected onto it. If she watched the swimming specks, faces formed: Ilya, Tolon, Spider. Whenever she blinked they vanished, but they could always be summoned again. At last she drew out Box and whispered, "Can you open the door?"

"I am unable to say." Box added, "I am reminded of a story. Would you like to hear it?"

"If you want."

"It happened many light years away, in a nebula where stars were forming from the primaevial breath of hydrogen and helium. Two brothers had taken separate ships out to investigate. The oldest was content to observe from a safe distance, for there were dangerous fluxes within the nebula, and gravity wells that could rip a ship from contraspaces and explode it across the universe. But the younger thought himself braver, and certainly he was the better pilot, and he argued that only from within could they truly learn anything.

"The older man replied that it was too dangerous, but the younger was insistent, said that he would go in alone if need be. Then the older knew there could be no stopping him, and said that he would wait and pray for his brother's safe return.

"The young man laughed scornfully and flipped his ship into contraspaces, vanishing as abruptly as a blown candle-flame.

"Passage was not easily won, so close did the growing suns cluster, curving space so there were no geodesics."

"Just like the spacefield," Little Ilya said, remembering the grey blades beneath which she had walked with Spider.

"Skipping in and out of contraspaces, the young man at last reached what he had been aiming for, a vast infalling cloud scarcely thicker than the surrounding medium, the virtual beginnings of a star. He extended his probes and began to unravel the complicated forces; and became so intent on his task that he did not notice that his ship was slowly drifting into a denser region. When he finally decided to return and engaged the phase gaffle, the ship screamed as if in unbearable pain and the gaffle blew.

"So he was trapped, hidden in the thicket of the star nursery a light year from his brother. At sublight speed his ship would exhaust its fuel long before it

reached safety, so he did the only thing possible: engaged a beacon and lowered himself into coldcoffin sleep to await rescue.

"His brother had realised that something was wrong long before the beacon lit up his communications board, but had reasoned that to simply plunge after the young man would certainly be disastrous. In the meantime he had found out by patient observation what his brother had won in a much shorter time. When at last the beacon reached him and he knew he would have to overcome whatever dangers had snared his brother, he did not shrink from his task. With painful caution he at last reached his brother's crippled ship, hanging before a vast dark cloud hardly lit by the fuzzy points of birthing suns.

"But the young man's ship seemed truly dead: its computer was dumb, the lifesystem at the temperature of space. The older brother did not realise in his anguish that the young man was waiting in his coldcoffin, and did not dare venture onto the ship for fear of his brother's dead reproachful face. Blind with grief, he killed himself.

"Yet he had not failed. The proximity of his ship set in motion machinery that revived the young man, and when he had recovered he crossed to the other ship, the twin of his own, committed his brother's body to the heart of the birthing star and took the ship out of the nebula, brought the precious cargo of knowledge home."

After a pause, Little Ilya asked, "Did you get it from Spider?"

"Some of it," Box admitted.

"You meant that only people who take chances can escape, didn't you? That if you don't take chances you lose."

"I deal only in archetypes. It is not my function to explicate."

Which is what Box always told her when she asked him what his stories meant. Little Ilya made a face in the darkness. It didn't matter anyway. How could she take chances, do anything, locked in this dark room?

Time passed. She was dozing when the door hissed open, surprising her with light. Silhouetted in it was Tolon's burly figure.

Tolon came directly to her, taking her arm and pulling her up. Not roughly, for he was not programmed for cruelty — Ilya took her own pleasure in that respect — but his strength caused her to rise surely and irresistibly, and she had to follow him out into the dim dirty lounge.

Kareem stood beside the gravel bed, his hands pressed together before his belly. "You see she is safe," he said to Tolon.

"She is safe," Tolon repeated. He was a large man, thick-shouldered as a bull, in simple black coveralls. The silver plates of his access terminals gleamed on his temples. "You have been paid," he told Kareem, "so you will tell no one of this. It is not your affair."

"Of course, of course." Kareem nodded rapidly, and pressed two fingers to his lips. "Not a word."

The grip in Little Ilya's arm tightened: Tolon pulled her towards the stair. Then the passageway: night air suddenly cool on her face: globules hung in misty darkness: birthing stars. She stumbled, half-running to keep up as Tolon pulled her towards the fluxbarriers;

he walked with the unheeding rhythm of a machine.

A machine. Little Ilya gripped Box inside her dress pocket and said, "Tell Tolon that I am Ilya, Box. Tell his machinery that!"

Tolon looked around when she spoke. Then he let go of her arm and backed away a pace or two, assuming an attitude Little Ilya remembered, that of inactive attention, his head slightly bowed, his arms slack at his sides.

"Stay there," she said in as certain a voice as she could command. "You just stay there!"

She began to back away, moving step by step towards the shadows. Tolon stood still in a puddle of light, an actor awaiting his cue. The cone of Kareem's ship reared behind him as flatly as a painted backdrop. Then Box said in her ear, "I can no longer speak to him." And Tolon moved forward!

Little Ilya ran.

Tolon could easily have outpaced her, but she slipped through a narrow gap between two fluxbarriers where he could not reach her. She stood still, breathing hard and watching Tolon through the gap with the same terrified fascination with which a mouse watches a cat. He hammered the fluxbarriers with the heel of his hand, then turned away, and Little Ilya ran again.

Fluxbarriers, bafflesquares, lights, shadow. Her feet ached from slapping concrete; her breath dragged painfully at the bottom of her lungs. Twice she skirted freighters sunken to their waists in huge pits, silver spheres as big as the dome that enclosed the ranch.

She had just entered a new part of the maze after crossing one of the roads which split the groups of pads when she heard footsteps: not Tolon's, these were too soft. The woman ambled into view a moment later, light glistening on the metal catenaries of her left arm.

Little Ilya took a deep breath and asked, "Can you tell me where *The Dark Wing of Sorrow* is?"

The woman smiled. "You're a long way off, I think. That isn't any freighter. This is where the freighters are, you see."

Little Ilya shook her head.

"A moment . . . here." The woman bent over a pad on the wrist of her flesh arm, popped its buttons with the fine metal fingers of the artificial one. "You want berth west one five."

"Thank you."

"Isn't that a singleship? Hey there, wait!"

Little Ilya ran.

And, out of breath, slowed to a walk a minute later. The knife of a cramp twisted in her side with each step. West one five — but she didn't know where she was. If she went back to the Administration Building perhaps she could find out . . . except they probably knew about her. Ilya would have seen to that. And she still had to escape Tolon, finding her way out of the field.

She asked Box, in despair, "What shall I do?"

"I am unable to say."

"Why not?"

"I am not a decision-making machine, except in the limited sense of selecting appropriate texts for entertainment."

"I just want to get out of this maze, but I don't know

how."

"I possess that knowledge."

"How?" Little Ilya demanded unsteadily.

"From the woman, Spider."

"Then tell me how to get to her ship!"

It was a long walk. Twice, Little Ilya hid in shadows as people passed. She was very tired, and it was tempting to lie where she hid, to sleep, but she remembered that Spider had said her ship would leave soon after dawn. It was her only hope, and as she walked she began to convince herself that Spider would take her away.

West twelve. West thirteen. Both small pads were empty. So was the next. Little Ilya began to walk more quickly, her heart quickening too.

West fifteen. The singleship, a long cylinder constricted at its waist, rose towards the overhanging edges of the fluxbarriers which surrounded it: the calyx within the corolla of an immense metal flower. There was no ramp, but a ladder dropped from a hatch. Inside, another ladder rose through a narrow tube towards the nose. The hatch at the end was open, and as Little Ilya neared it she heard sounds as if of struggle, a contained thrashing that quieted, started again.

She hesitated, remembering when she had once gone to Ilya's rooms without invitation and had found her mother playing with Tolon: both had been naked. At first, Little Ilya had thought that they were fighting, but then she had seen that her mother had Tolon's command unit in one hand, playing it with bunched fingers as her other hand clutched her servant's humped shoulders. Little Ilya had been punished for that intrusion, and that had been the beginning of her resolve to escape, completed when she had discovered, from Box, about the annual hypaedia treatments.

Now, as she crouched in the narrow tube, sounds like muffled speech came from above, then more sounds of struggle. Her heart thumping, Little Ilya peered over the edge of the hatch.

Spider lay under a console, her arms and legs bound and her eyes glittering furiously above the gag thrust between her teeth.

After Little Ilya had freed her mouth, and when she had finished swearing, Spider said, "He came here, questioned me — on my ship. My ship. Something wrong with him, metal plates in his forehead. Ah, easy."

Little Ilya untwisted wire from Spider's wrists, started to loosen that at her ankles. "It was Tolon. He's a criminal Ilya purchased. There's something in his head that makes him do what she wants."

Spider rubbed the red weals circling her bony wrists. "On this strange world you use convicts for personal gain?"

"He found me too," Little Ilya said. "But I got away."

"He might be back. He took handweapon batteries, has a bypass to get into ship. We will call the peace officers — or no. Ask too many questions." Spider stood unsteadily, all her assurance gone. "Come, child. Must get away from here."

In the chill glare outside, Little Ilya asked, "Where will we go?"

"I can go up after shuttles, not until then. Understand?" Spider began to walk towards the gap in the

fluxbarriers and Little Ilya followed her.

"I think so. But should we just run away?"

"I have no weapons, child. But I suppose we can hide outside. If he does not come, good. If he does..." Spider shrugged. "We will see."

Little Ilya didn't know whether that meant Spider was willing to take her with her, if Tolon did not come back, and she was too shy to ask. They squatted behind a bulky machine near the entrance to the circle of fluxbarriers. Spider peered out nervously, rubbing her wrists, and Little Ilya slumped on cold concrete, exhaustion finally overcoming her fear. She slept, and was awoken by the thunder of a ship lifting in the distance. Light salted the tops of the fluxbarriers, made the glotubs' irradiance seem shabby and failing. Spider was still watching the entrance. Another ship rose, closer, and Spider looked around at Little Ilya.

"Isn't it safe to go yet?"

"Soon." The woman's narrow face was haggard.

"I'm sorry."

Spider understood. "I volunteered to help, child. Only myself to blame. All the years I kept away from other people, and then I get into trouble as soon as I become involved." Her smile was a weak, short-lived thing. "Patterns, they draw you in."

"Are all freespacers like you?"

"Singleship pilots, not freespacers. We go out alone, see, to places imperfectly known. Great risks, large rewards. Keep away from other people, from each other. Don't like people, that much."

"What do you like? Just being alone?"

"Out there are worlds and worlds, untouched. I... well, I like those."

Unexpectedly, Box said, "This world is also real, Spider."

Spider's smile lingered this time. "Your friend is intelligent, for such a small machine."

"Size is not everything," Box said. "My circuits are far more efficient than your brain cells and I..." His voice faded, then a ship thundered nearby.

"Stray flux from the beam," Spider said. "Interferes with unshielded machinery."

"You're alright, Box?"

". . . Yes."

"Launch window soon," Spider said.

Little Ilya nodded, not understanding. Another ship rose, the thunder of discharges amongst the fluxbarriers rolling in the confined spaces. She must have dozed again, for she awoke with Spider's thin fingers digging into her shoulder. Yet another shuttle was riding its beam up to orbit, and above the din, Little Ilya heard Spider's rasping whisper, "Is here."

Little Ilya watched Tolon cross to the ship and climb the ladder.

"Hatch is locked," Spider said, "but he has bypass. There."

Tolon swung himself through the hatch.

"What can we do?"

"Wait. See if he goes before launch time."

Little Ilya had expected Spider to have thought of something. "Suppose he doesn't?"

"Then we cannot go."

Tears started in Little Ilya's eyes. She had come so close. She could run now, find some other way . . . but

she knew that this was her only chance. By now Ilya would know she was at the spacefield. So she would have to deal with Tolon; despite all the turns she had taken to escape him it came down to that. She had fooled him before, with Box's help, but that only worked at close range. She couldn't leave him and get onto the ship, for then her control would be lost. But it was her only chance.

Tolon appeared at the ladder again, and Little Ilya knew what she had to do. She ran towards him.

Tolon dropped lithely from the ladder, and as he strode towards her, massive, unstoppable, Little Ilya told Box urgently, "Make Tolon think I'm Ilya. Tell him now."

Tolon stopped a few paces from her, his square-jawed face slack. Little Ilya looked up at him, disbelief fluttering in the hollows of her exhaustion.

"He's safe?" Spider stood in the gap between fluxbarriers.

"He thinks I'm Ilya now," Little Ilya explained. "As long as Box tells his machinery that, he'll do what I ask."

Spider circled Tolon, pulling her lower lip thoughtfully. She was as tall as he was, but so slight as to seem a different species. She touched one of his forearms, placed a hand on his broad chest, took it away. Her manner was playful, almost flirtatious. "What now, child? What will we do with him?"

"I thought you could tie him up, so we can leave."

"Is that all? After what he did to me? On my ship?"

Spider touched Tolon's chest again, ran her palm down the front of his coveralls. Then rocked back, struck his face with the flat of her hand. Tolon didn't move. A thin line of blood ran from one corner of his mouth. Spider turned, her pale face flushed at the angles of her sharp cheekbones. Little Ilya stepped back. "I have a better idea," Spider told her. "Make him come with me."

Little Ilya gave Tolon the appropriate order without thinking. She was accustomed to obeying, after all. She stayed close to Tolon so that Box could keep telling his machinery the lie about Ilya as they followed Spider through the maze of bafflesquares, across a gleaming road, between bafflesquares again. Another shuttle lifted, so close that Little Ilya heard the rattle of discharges grounding on fluxbarriers.

"Here," Spider said at last. They had reached the close rank of fluxbarriers that circled a pad. "Tell him to stay here. When the shuttle goes up it'll scramble his machinery. No trouble then."

"Stay here," Little Ilya told Tolon.

"Come, child." Spider gripped Little Ilya's arm. When Little Ilya resisted, Spider tugged at her and said, "Launch window soon. Hurry."

Before Little Ilya could explain, Spider had dragged her too far. Box said, "I can no longer speak to him." And Tolon sprang.

He struck Spider and Little Ilya simultaneously, knocking them both to the ground and striking Box from Little Ilya's grasp. As Box's plastic case clattered away, Tolon kicked Spider, sending her sprawling against a fluxbarrier. Almost leisurely, he grasped Little Ilya's shoulders and pulled her up, his face an indifferent mask, his grip inescapable.

The bafflesquares on the other side of the passage began to move. Like plants seeking the sun, they

ponderously rotated towards the beam of the neighbouring pad to capture air molecules accelerated to lightspeed by contact with the nullgee track. Each gained a pearly nimbus; the air stank of ozone. The roar of discharges pounded in Little Ilya's ears, a fusillade so loud it was a sensation more akin to touch than sound, a dizzy battering. Tolon let her go, clutching at his head. His big fingers blunted on the metal plates at his temples. He sank to his knees, then pitched forward with an abrupt spasm.

The noise of the lifting shuttle diminished. Spider got to her hands and knees, then her feet, working first one shoulder, then the other. She picked up Box and handed him to Little Ilya. "Come, child. We were lucky, I think."

At the ship, Spider lifted Little Ilya into a narrow bunk and fastened her in. The pillow was hard and thin, but Little Ilya was tired. She slept, and dreamed, and her dreams were not of chase but of the fish that swam free outside the dome of the ranch, turning and turning in still blue depths.

When she awoke, Spider was at the control station, sitting on the edge of a big chair and studying the scattered lights. Little Ilya sat up and Spider looked around. The cabin was so small they could have touched.

Little Ilya asked, "Is it time to go yet?"

"Past time." Spider touched a switch and the screen lit: roiled with white swirls, a blue marble was tipped in black velvet. "Reach Luna in a few hours. Let you off there."

". . . Thank you."

Spider shrugged, uncertain of what to say. It had been a long time since she had been thanked for anything she had done.

Little Ilya took out Box, told him where they were going. But his familiar tickling voice did not answer. She turned his sleek shape over, told him again. Nothing.

"The flux," Spider said, after a moment. "Must have hurt your storytelling machine as well as Tolon." Then, "Please, don't cry. There will be others, on Luna. Get one there, child."

But Little Ilya was not only crying for the loss of her friend. She was mourning, although she did not realise it, the passing of her childhood, gone as irrevocably as the years Ilya had caused to be wiped over and over, the lost legion of her unknown sisters. After a while she was able to stop. On the screen, the blue and white marble of the Earth was slightly smaller.

"Don't know much about storytelling," Spider said, "but would you like to hear how I discovered a world?"

Little Ilya rubbed her eyes, essayed a smile.

"Well." Spider hesitated, recalling the necessary incantation. "Once upon a time. . . ."

Paul J. McAuley was born in 1955 and has lived in England all his life except for a recent two-year sojourn in Los Angeles. He has a PhD and now works as a research biologist at Oxford University.

The Fire Catcher

Richard Kadrey

Preston promises himself that when this bottle is empty, he will stop taking the pills.

The black market barbiturates are strong, much more potent than the sleeping pills he used to get from the Army infirmary in town (but why call a dozen T-shacks, barracks, and a million tons of rubble a town?). Still, without the booze to wash the pills down, Preston knows he would never get to sleep.

Once, Preston once took some of the pills to an Army lab and had them analysed. It turned out that each pill was completely different, a crazy-quilt combination of whatever the manufacturers had lying around: Thorazine, MDA, megaludes, Nembutal. Sometimes, Preston purchases small amounts of raw opium. This he mixes with vodka to produce his own crude version of laudanum. At times, all of this effort strikes him as amusing. He is well aware that any of the drugs, combined with all the alcohol he drinks, could kill him, and what would General Bower say then?

Preston is an assassin for the American Occupation Army in Europe. Lately, though, he has been having some trouble leaving his work at the office.

Within a half-hour it becomes clear that the pills are not working. The blinking cursors on a dozen computer terminals are about to drive him crazy. Preston takes two more pills and gulps them down with vodka from a plastic cup. He goes to the bedroom to get his coat, but pauses to close the door of his wife's empty closet.

Three a.m., Berlin time. A sour metallic-smelling rain mists down. Preston needs a drink. Six pills to the wind and he isn't even drowsy yet. The beam of his flashlight plays over the unlit ruins.

Each day the Army busies itself clearing the streets, pushing pulverized buildings back onto the blasted foundations from which they have fallen. Jumbled concrete blocks and twisted wire abut each other in long rows until the residential blocks begin to resemble

one vast and continuous BLOCK.

Preston moves the beam of his flashlight over the empty buildings, hoping for some romantic sense of connection with the ruins, as if among the shattered stones might lie the antidote to all his unnamed fears. Yet, in the end it always comes back to the same set of fractured images: Preston in the dark. Preston in the ruins, in the rain, alone.

It has only been a few days since she left but already he has forgotten her face, what he said to her, what she said to him. She is gone; that is the only truth. He watched her pack, watched her board the transport for New York.

He had tamed the most complex computer systems in the world, yet he could not stop his wife from leaving. But he only lost control once.

When she was walking up the boarding ramp to the plane and Preston was standing on the other side of a barbed wire fence, he screamed out her name. Just once. Everybody on the airstrip turned to stare. He hurried back to his bunker and got drunk. Later, he discovered gashes on his hands where he had gripped the barbed wire.

Back in the computer bunker, Preston turns his attention to the monitor where the pharmacy codes for the state hospital in Leningrad are displayed. He begins typing, changing a number here, a number there. A white wave of interference shimmers across the screen, washing out the display. A bad connection? he wonders. Preston gets up and checks his fibre-optic leads. He cracked the pharmacy system just a few minutes before and is anxious now to call attention to his presence. As the interference subsides, he begins to work quickly.

Finding the room number is easy. High Party officials are always given special accommodations and kept well away from the general hospital population. However, locating the proper drugs is another matter. In the state hospitals, paranoia reigns. All of the drugs



Illustration by Ian Sanderson

are listed either by complex chemical codes or by obscure euphemisms that mean virtually nothing to Preston, an outsider. He works his way through the drug catalogue, a page at a time, occasionally shifting to another system when his LED alarm flashes, indicating that someone at the hospital is trying to access the pharmacy listings.

Finally, Preston finds the chemical symbols he is looking for. After that, it is a matter of a few seconds to change the Party official's daily B-12 shot to a lethal dose of Succinyl Choline.

Before he exits the system, Preston dumps the contents of a slave disc throughout the hospital's patient records. The disc contains approximately a million words of English pornography (with pictures) and ten encoded hours of American rock music.

The Army told him earlier to dump the porn. The music, Preston added himself.

He takes two more hits of Speed. From his seat at the console, Preston can see the unmade bed across the hall. He has not slept in the bed since his wife left. He has not slept at all. He is, in fact, afraid of the room. The contours of the rumpled sheets, the stark geometry of the empty closet imply an end a thousand times more terrifying than all the rubble overhead.

They call him the Fire Catcher because he once held the nuclear blaze in his hands, and he snuffed it out.

1996: Alone, Preston entered the matrix web that was the Soviet nuclear missile system. He sliced through the web; boiled through 3-D grids, smashed time-vectors, system checks, fail-safes, dummy files. Preston the Visigoth, the madman, the cybernetic assassin, had breached the Russian program, and it had yielded up its prize.

On the eve of World War Three, Preston had locked the Soviet missiles in their silos. A day later, American and French paratroopers landed in Vladivostok and began shooting their way west. A Soviet submarine, *The People's Victorious Liberator*, torpedoed the British Naval base at Gibraltar.

Preston returned to the United States. There, the President gave him a medal, calling Preston a great humanitarian.

Preston married an anthropologist named Nina Abreu and they settled in New York. Preston continued his research on developing intelligent security programs for computer systems.

Fought with conventional weapons, the war Preston helped to shape seethed back and forth across Europe for twelve years without a winner. In the first two years of the war, twenty million people died.

Preston sips some of his homemade laudanum while he completes his report on the Party official's death. When the report is done, he queues it into General Bower's private security file. Above the console, a bank of red and green LEDs flash a warning. Preston checks out his lines. The CIA is monitoring him again. He switches on the slave disc and jams the Agency lines with the same porn he dumped on the Soviets.

Taped to the side of the slave drive is a wallet-sized

hologram of Preston's wife. He rips the rectangle of plastic from the drive and holds his lighter to it. In the wedge of flame, the hologram melts; his wife's face twists, turning in on itself, liquefying, and finally fading completely as the hologram drips away.

Later, Preston goes to the base infirmary and stares through blue-grey bullet-proof glass at the Soviet flyer who had been shot down a few days earlier. There, he reflects on the nature of sweet circumstance. Over forty million dead, and the small woman with the Red Star and serial number tattooed on her forearm is only the second war casualty Preston has ever seen. The first was his wife. How alike they seem to him now.

Preston wonders if the flyer is awake, if she is aware of the burns that have blackened her skin, if she can sense that the interrogations will begin soon.

Looking at the soot the burning hologram left on his fingertips, Preston begins to cry. In a few minutes, an embarrassed guard asks him to leave.

They gave Preston a long list of names when he was recalled to Europe. To the base, he was the Fire Catcher; officially he became known as Project Earwig. An earwig is an insect that will sometimes burrow into the body of an animal, lay its eggs, and continue through the animal's body, eating its way out. When the earwig's young are born they repeat this pattern, often destroying the host animal.

Preston carried out his first assassination a week after he cracked the Soviet data base. His victim was a minor official in the Politburo. Preston simply entered the Party records and erased all traces of the man. After that, the man's official State Access Card would no longer function. He could not enter his home, retrieve his car, buy food. His comrades refused his panicked calls; assuming a new Purge was underway, they avoided him.

The man was found a few weeks later, frozen stiff to a bench at a bus stop in his hometown of Gorky.

Preston was a methodical worker. He made back-up discs of all his work. He had records of every system he had ever cracked, from his high school records code (where he manipulated other students' files for a fee), to the Soviet missile system. It was easier than re-cracking the systems each time he went in.

He kept the discs in a lead-lined floor safe under his bed. Besides the discs, the safe contained a .45 calibre hand gun, sleeping pills and an emergency bottle of vodka.

His system clear again, Preston enters a military override code into the lines for the United States and clears a data path straight to New York. Then he enters the phone company's lines and accesses his home phone, transmitting a playback signal to the CIA tap he had discovered three months before.

His wife's voice, thin and shot through with static, crackles out of a tiny speaker over his console.

Her conversation is nothing; it is ordinary. She is speaking with a friend whose name Preston remembers as being something like Judy or Julie. He fast-forwards the tape. The conversation is the same. The mundane life of the city. The price of eggs, the refugees from Europe that crowd the subways, a day on the

beach at Coney Island. Preston listens for his name, but no one mentions him. He plays the whole thing through again before shutting down the override.

Something burns in Preston's throat. A sudden wave of drowsiness engulfs him, but it's too late. He does not want the pills to work. Preston stumbles to his dresser and pulls out a bottle of amphetamines, downs a handful. In a few minutes, he vomits the whole thing back up, but he is no longer sleepy.

Love is a dangerous concept. People do strange things for love, but Preston is aware of this. Love of a spouse, love of a country, an ideology. Love as strength, as power, as fear.

"Murder," Preston once told his wife, "is the American moral equivalent of enlightenment. The ultimate expression of the self."

In the first two years of World War Three, twenty million people died.

The President once gave Preston a medal. Preston was well aware of the symbol implicit in the decoration: he was a hero; he was loved.

Preston's wife married him for love. A victim of circumstance, he knew that she had left him for love, too.

In the next eleven years of World War Three, forty million people died, all victims of circumstance.

There are terrifying mathematical possibilities in the dimensions of empty closets and vacant dresser drawers. The sheets of an unmade bed reveal clues to a whole landscape of conflict; the crease in the blanket, the trajectory of shadows on a pillow imply the flow of armies in the shapes left by two bodies moving together.

All of this, Preston is aware, has something to do with the price of eggs and the feel of wind at the beach, but he has trouble making the connections.

Preston touches the rigid face of the Soviet pilot. Her skin is dry and coarse, delicate as rice paper. She stirs for a moment and opens her eyes. Preston has never seen such fear on a human face before.

Her eyes are wide and grey, sunk deep in the immobile black mask of her ruined face. Lightly, Preston touches his fingers to her lips. "Don't be afraid," he says in Russian. "Everything is going to be all right."

A dying guard stares at Preston from the floor; on the guard's chest, a red orchid of blood widens, seeping through his knotted fingers. Preston sets his gun on the bedside table. From his pocket, he pulls a remote trigger switch.

Before he left the bunker, Preston went to his safe and removed one of the back-up discs. Sitting next to the flyer on the bed, he punches in a code that loads the program.

A thousand miles away, klaxon horns sound. Underground doors, rusted and full of grit, slide, screaming and groaning, open to the night.

The Fire Catcher opens his hands, and flame takes the sky.

Preston offers the dying guard a glass of water. "Don't worry," he tells the guard, "I'm supposed to be here." Turning to the pilot, Preston almost tells her he loves her, but he knows that is not true. He loves what she might have been, what she could have been, under different circumstances. But none of that matters now. Preston thinks of unmade beds and empty closets. The foolish icons of love. It occurs to Preston vaguely, for the first time, that he, too, might be a victim. He thinks of this and can almost smell his wife's body, but they are all burned away before he can recall her face.

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Richard Kadrey was born in New York in 1957, and now lives in San Francisco where he works as a technical writer for a computer software company. The above is his first published story, although his collages have been used as illustrations in various magazines (including *Interzone*, issues 7 and 9).

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2. All stories should be typed, on one side of the paper only, preferably on white A4 paper, and must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of good size.

3. Please type your name and address, and the word-length of the story, on the top sheet of the manuscript.

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Laser Smith's SPACE ACADEMY

LASER SMITH, OF WHOM IT CAN BE SAID HIS SURNAME IS SMITH BRACES HIMSELF FOR AN ARDUOUS AUDIENCE WITH ONE OF HIS LESS PROGRESSIVE CADETS, THE UNCERTAIN KIRK KOZMOS.

ASTRAL GREETINGS, SMITTY— I, ER... BROUGHT YOUR BOOK BACK

WELL DONE... THAT WAS FAST - THOUGH IT IS A COMPULSIVE READ, NO?

I'M NOT SURE... I MEAN, ...ER... WELL I'M NOT ACTUALLY THAT FLUENT IN SERBO-CROATIAN, SO IT WAS KIND OF DIFFICULT TO... U'KNOW?

NOW THAT REALLY IS UNCONSCIONABLY SHALLOW OF YOU, KIRK. **INSPIRED** FICTION OF JAHKAS' QUALITY TRANSCENDS MERE LANGUAGE BARRIERS.

THAT'S WHAT I KEPT TRYING TO REMIND MYSELF, SMITTY, BUT...

BY THE WAY, WHAT'S THAT ON YOUR HEAD?

WHAT? MS.. HM.. ANTENNAE YOU MEAN?

HOW NAÏVE OF ME... - A PAIR OF ANTENNAE!

HERE WAS I IMAGINING IT TO BE NO MORE PERCEPTIVE AN INSTRUMENT OF SENSORY AWARENESS THAN A WIRE COATHANGER AND TWO PICKLED ONIONS!

is it so obvious?

THAT SORT OF WAYWARD ENTHUSIASM PROVIDES A MOST INSUBSTANTIAL COVER FOR FUNDAMENTAL SHORTCOMINGS SUCH AS YOURS, KIRK.

NOW ABOUT THIS JAHKAS NOVEL - YOU REALLY MUST APPLY YOURSELF...



I DID INDEED - ALTO SPOCK ZAMATOOTRA, JEAN-MICHEL STARRE & SIDE ONE OF JASON PLUTO'S COSMIC ROADSHOW. IT DIDN'T HELP ONE JOT.



MY DEAR KIRK, I'M NOT SURPRISED! FAR TOO MAINSTREAM...

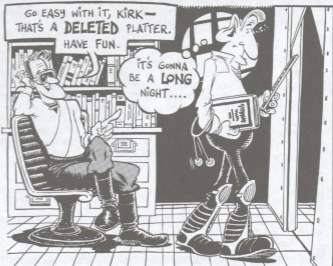


...TO COMPREHEND JAHKAS ONE MUST PLUNDER THE VERY BOWELS OF OBSCURITY TO FIND APPROPRIATE AURAL ACCOMPANIMENT



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A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium

M. John Harrison

On the day of the enthronement of the new archbishop, the "badly decomposed" body of a man was found on the roof of York Minster by a TV technician. He had been missing for eight months from a local hospital. He had fallen, it was said, from the tower; but no-one had any idea how he had come to be there. I heard this on the local radio station early in the day: what excited me about it was that they never repeated the item, and no mention of it was made either on the national news broadcasts later in the day, or in the coverage of the ceremony itself. Mr Ambrayeses was less impressed.

"A chance in a thousand it will be of any use to us," he estimated. "One in a thousand."

I went to York anyway, and he came with me for some reason of his own — he paid visits to a second hand bookshop and a taxidermist's. The streets were daubed with political slogans; even while the ceremony was going on, council employees were working hard along the route of the procession to paint them out. The man on the roof, I discovered, had been missing from an ordinary surgical unit, so I had had the journey for nothing as Mr Ambrayeses predicted. What interested us at that time was any event connected with a mental or — especially — a geriatric home.

"We all want Viriconium," Mr Ambrayeses was fond of saying. "But it is the old who want it most!" That night on the way home he added, "No-one here needs it. Do you see?"

The 11.52 Leeds stopping train was full of teenagers. The older boys looked confused and violent in their short haircuts, faces and jaws thrown forward purple and white with cold; the girls watched them slyly, shrieked with laughter, then looked down and picked at their fingerless gloves. They stuck their heads out of the windows and shouted "Fuck off!" into the rush of air. Later when we got off the train we saw them hopping backwards and forwards over a metal barrier in the sodium light, unfathomable and energetic as grasshoppers in the sun. Sensing my disappointment

Mr Ambrayeses said gently, "On occasion we all want to go there so badly that we will invent a clue."

"I'm not old," I said.

Mr Ambrayeses had lived next door to me for two years. At first I was only aware of him when I was trying to watch the news. A body under a coloured blanket, slumped at the foot of a corrugated iron fence; the camera moving in on a small red smear like a nose-bleed cleaned up with lavatory paper, then as if puzzledly on to helicopters, rubble, someone important being ushered into a building, a woman walking past the end of a street. Immediately Mr Ambrayeses' low appreciative laughter would come "Hur hur hur" through the thin partition wall, so that I lost the thread. "Hur hur," he would laugh, and I felt as if I was watching a television in a foreign country. He liked only the variety shows and situation comedies.

His laughter seemed to sensitise me to him, and I began to see him everywhere, like a new word I had learned: in his garden where the concrete paths, glazed with rain, reflected the sky; in Marie's café, a middle-aged man in a dirty suede coat, with jam on his fingers — licking at them with short dabbing licks like a child or an animal; in Sainsbury's food hall with an empty metal basket in the crook of his arm, staring up and down the tinned meat aisle. He didn't seem to have anything to do. I saw him on a day-trip bus to Matlock Bath, wearing one sheepskin mitten. His trousers, which were much too large for him, so that the arse of them hung down between his legs in a gloomy flap, were sewn up at the back with bright yellow thread as coarse as string. The bus was full of old women who nodded and smiled and read all the signs out to one another as if they were constructing or rehearsing between them the landscape as they went through it.

"Oh look, there's the 'Jodrell Arms'!"

"... the 'Jodrell Arms'."

"And there's the A623!"

"... A623."

The first time we spoke Mr Ambrayes told me, "Identity is not negotiable. An identity you have achieved by agreement is always a prison."

The second time, I had been out buying some Vapona. The houses up here, warm and cheerful as they are in summer, become in the first week of September cold and damp. Ordinary vigorous houseflies, which have crawled all August over the unripe lupine pods beneath the window, pour in and cluster on any warm surface, but especially on the floor near the electric fire, and the dusty grid at the back of the fridge; they cling to the side of the kettle as it cools. That year you couldn't leave food out for a moment. When I sat down to read in the morning, flies ran over my outstretched legs.

"I suppose you've got the same problem," I said to Mr Ambrayes. "I poison them," I said, "but they don't seem to take much notice." I help up the Vapona, with its picture of a huge fly. "Might as well try again."

Mr Ambrayes nodded. "Two explanations are commonly offered for this," he said:

"In the first we are asked to imagine certain sites in the world — a crack in the concrete in Chicago or New Delhi, a twist in the air in an empty suburb of Prague, a clotted milk bottle on a Bradford tip — from which all flies issue in a constant stream, a smoke exhaled from some appalling fundamental level of things. This is what people are asking — though they do not usually know it — when they say exasperatedly, 'Where are all these flies coming from?' Such locations are like the holes in the side of a new house where insulation has been pumped in: something left over from the constructional phase of the world.

"This is an adequate, even an appealing model of the process. But it is not modern; and I prefer the alternative, in which it is assumed that as Viriconium grinds past us, dragging its enormous bulk against the bulk of the world, the energy generated is expressed in the form of these insects, which are like the sparks shooting out from between two huge flywheels that have momentarily brushed each other."

A famous novel begins:

"I went to Viriconium in a century which could find itself only in its own symbols, at an age when one seeks to unify one's experience through the symbolic events of the past.

"I saw myself go aboard an airliner, which presently rose into the air. Above the Atlantic was another sea, made of white clouds; the sun burned on it. The only thing we recognised in all that immense white space was the vapour trail of another airliner on a parallel course. It disappeared abruptly. We were encouraged to eat a meal, watch first one film and then another. The captain apologised for the adverse winds, the turbulence, of what had seemed to us to be a completely tranquil journey, as if apologising for a difficult transition from childhood to adolescence.

"In Viriconium the light was like the light you only see on record covers and in the colour supplements. Photographic precision of outline under an empty blue sky is one of the most haunting features of the Viriconian landscape. Ordinary objects — a book, a

bowl of anemones, someone's hand — seem to be lit in a way which makes them very distinct from their background. The identity of things under this light seems enhanced. Their visual distinctiveness becomes metonymic of the reality we perceive both in them and in ourselves.

"I began living in one of the tall grey houses that line the heights above Mynned."

You can't just fly there, of course.

Soon after my trip to York I got a job in a tourist café in the town. It was called The Gate House, and it was attached to a bookshop. The idea was that you could go in, look round the shelves, and leaf through a book while you drank your coffee. We had five or six tables with blue cloths on them, a limited menu of home-made pastries, and pictures by local artists on the walls. Crammed in on the wooden chairs on a wet afternoon, thirteen customers seemed to fill it to capacity; damp thickened in the corner by the coats. But it was often empty.

One day a man and a woman came in and sat down near one another but at separate tables. They stared at everything as if it was new to them.

The man wore a short zip-fronted gabardine jacket over his green knitted pullover and pink shirt; a brown trilby hat made his head seem small and his chin very pointed. His face had an old but unaged quality — the skin was smooth and brown, streaked, you saw suddenly, with dirt — which gave him the look of a little boy who had grown haggard round the eyes after an illness. He might have been anywhere between thirty and sixty. He looked too old for one and too young for the other: something had gone wrong with him. His eyes moved sorely from object to object in the room, as if he had never seen a calendar with a picture of Halifax town centre on it, or a chair or a plate before; as if he was continually surprised to find himself where he was.

I imagined he had come up for the day from one of the farms south of Buxton, where the wind sweeps across the North Staffordshire Plain and they sit in their old clothes all week in front of a broken television, listening to the gates banging.

He leaned over to the other table.

"Isn't it Friday tomorrow?" he said softly.

"You what?" answered the woman. "Oh aye, Friday, definitely. Oh aye."

And when he added something in a voice too low for me to catch: "No, there's no fruit cake, no, they won't have that here. No fruit cake, they won't have that."

She dabbed her finger at him. "Oh no, not here."

Tilting her head to one side and holding her spoon deftly at an angle so that she could see into the bottom of her coffee cup, she scooped the half-melted sugar out of it. While she was doing this she glanced round at the other customers with a kind of nervous satisfaction, like an eskimo or an aborigine in some old TV documentary — the shy, sharp glance which tells you they are getting away, in plain view, with something that is unacceptable in their own culture. It was done in no time, with quick little licks and laps. When she had finished she say back. "I'll wait while tea time for another," she said. "I'll wait." She had cunningly kept on her yellow and black check overcoat, her red

woollen hat.

"Will you have a cup of coffee now?" she asked. And seeing that he was gazing in his sore vague way at the landscape on the walls, "Their watercolours those, on the wall, I'd have to look to be certain: watercolours those, nice."

"I don't want any coffee."

"Will you have ice cream?"

"I don't want any ice cream, thank you. It cools my stomach."

"You'll be better when you get back up there, you'll get television on. Get sat down in front of that."

"Why should I want to watch the television?" he said quietly, looking away from a picture of the town bridge in the rain. "I don't want any tea or supper; or any breakfast in the morning."

He put his hands together for a moment and stared into the air with his solemn boyish eyes in his delicately-boned dirty face. He fumbled suddenly in his pockets.

"You can't smoke in here," said the woman quickly, "I don't think you can smoke in here, I thought I saw a sign which said no smoking because there's food about, you see, oh no: they won't have that in here."

When they got up to pay me he said,

"Nice to have a change." His voice was intelligent, but soft and clouded, like the voice of an invalid who wakes up disoriented in the afternoon and asks a new nurse the time. "It's a day out, isn't it?" They had come over by bus from a suburb the other side of Huddersfield which he called Lock Wood or Long Wood. "Nice to have a change," he repeated, "while the weather's still good." And before I could reply: "I've got a cold you see, really it's bronchial pneumonia, more like bronchial pneumonia. I've had it for a year. A year now or more: they can't help you at these Health Centres can they? My lungs seem inside out with it on a wet day —"

"Now get on," the woman interrupted him.

Though his voice was so low they could have heard nothing, she grinned and bobbed at the other customers as if to apologise for him.

"None of that," she said loudly to them.

She pushed him towards the door. "I'm not his wife you know," she said over her shoulder to me, "oh no, more his nurse-companion, I've managed him for two years. He's got money but I don't think I could marry him."

She was like a budgerigar bobbing and shrugging in front of the mirror in its cage.

I looked out of the window half an hour later and they were still standing at the bus stop. Nothing could ever come of them. The meaning of what they said to one another was carefully hidden in its own broken, insinuating rhythms. Their lives were so intricately repressed that every word was like a loose fibre woven back immediately into an old knot. Eventually a bus arrived. When it pulled away again he was in one of the front seats on the top deck, looking down vaguely into the florist's window; while she sat some rows back on the other side of the aisle, wincing if he lit a cigarette and trying to draw his attention to something on part of the pavement he couldn't possibly see from where he was.

When I told Mr Ambraynes about them he was

excited.

"That man, did he have a tiny scar? Beneath the hairline on the left side? Like a crescent, just visible beneath the hair?"

"How could I know that, Mr Ambraynes?"

"Never mind," he said. "That man's name is Doctor Petromax, and he once had tremendous power. He used it cleverly and soon stood the thickness of a mirror from what we all seek. But his nerve failed: what you see now is a ruin. He found an entrance to Viriconium in the lavatory of a restaurant in Huddersfield. There were imitation quarry tiles on the floor, and white porcelain tiles on the walls around the mirror. The mirror itself was so clean it seemed to show the way into another, more accurate version of the world. He knew by its cleanliness he was looking into one of the lavatories of Viriconium. He stared at himself staring out; and he has been staring at himself ever since. His courage would take him no further. What you see is a shell, we can learn nothing from him now."

He shook his head.

"Which café was that?" I asked him. "Do you know where it is?"

"It would not work for you, any more than it did for him, though for different reasons," Mr Ambraynes assured me. "Anyway, it is known only by the description I have given."

He said this as if it was remote; on no map. But a café is only a café.

"I think I recognise it. In the steam behind the counter is a photo of an old comedian. Two men with walking sticks and white hair smile feebly at a round-shouldered waitress —!"

"It would not work for you."

"That man's name is Dr Petromax."

Mr Ambraynes loved to preface his statements like this. It was a grammatical device which allowed him to penetrate appearances.

"That boy," he would say, "knows two incontrovertible facts about the world; he will reveal them to no-one."

Or:

"That woman, though she seems young, dreams at night of the wharfs of the Yser Canal. By day she wears beneath her clothes a garment of her own design to remind her of the people there, and their yellow lamps reflected with such distinctness in the surface of the water."

On a steep bank near my house was a domestic apple tree which had long ago peacefully reverted amid the oaks and elder. When I first drew his attention to it Mr Ambraynes said, "That tree has no name in botany. It has not flowered for ten years." The next autumn, when the warm light slanted down through the drifting willow-herb silk, hundreds of small hard reddish fruits fell from it into the bracken; in spring it bore so much blossom my neighbours called it "the white tree."

"It bears no flowers in Viriconium," said Mr Ambraynes. "There, it stands in a courtyard off the Plaza of Realised Time, like the perfect replica of a tree. If you look back through the archway you see clean wide pavements, little shops, white-painted tubs of geraniums in the sunlight."

“That man’s name is Dr Petromax.” Rilke describes a man for whom, “in a moment more, everything will have lost its meaning, and that table and the cup, and the chair to which he clings, all the near and commonplace things around him, will have become unintelligible, strange and burdensome,” and who nevertheless only sits and waits passively for the disaster to be complete. To an extent, I suppose, this happens to us all. But there was about Dr Petromax that vagueness which suggested not just injury but surrender, a psychic soreness about the eyes, a whiteness about the mouth, as if he was seeing the moment over and over again and could not forget it no matter how he webbed himself in with the aboriginal woman in the yellow coat. He did no work. He went constantly from café to café in Huddersfield, I had no means of knowing why, although I suspected — quite wrongly — at the time that he had forgotten which lavatory the mirror was in, and was patiently searching for it again.

I followed him when I could, despite Mr Ambrayres’ veto; and this is what he told me one afternoon in the Four Cousins Grill & Coffee Lounge:

“When I was a child my grandmother often took me about with her. I was a quiet boy already in poor health, and she found me at least as easy to manage as a small dog. Her habits were fixed: each Wednesday she visited the hairdresser and then went on to Manchester by train for a day’s shopping. She wore for this a hat made entirely out of pale pink, almost cream feathers, dotted among which were peacock eyes a startling brown-red. The feathers lay very dense and close, as if they were still on the breast of the bird.

“She loved cafés, I think because the life that goes on in them, though domestic and comfortable, can’t claim you in any way: there is nothing for you to join in. ‘I like my tea in peace,’ she told me every week. ‘Once in a while I like to have my tea in peace.’

“Whatever she ate she coughed and choked demurely over it, and for some time afterwards; and she always kept on her light green raincoat with its nacreous, gold-edged buttons.

“When I remember Piccadilly it isn’t so much by the flocks of starlings which invaded the gardens at the end of every short winter afternoon, filling the paths with their thick mouldy smell and sending up a loud mechanical shrieking which drowned out the traffic, as by the clatter of pots, the smell of marzipan or a match just struck, wet woollen coats hung over one another in a corner, voices reduced in the damp warm air to an intimate buzz out of which you could just pick a woman at another table saying, ‘Anyway, as long as you can get about,’ to which her friend answered immediately.

“‘Oh it’s something, isn’t it?’ Yes.”

“On a rainy afternoon in November it made you feel only half-awake. A waitress brought us the ash tray. She put it down in front of me. ‘It’s always the gentleman who smokes,’ she said. I looked at my grandmother sulkily, wondering where we would have to go next. At Boots she had found the top floor changed round again, suddenly full of oven-gloves, clocks, infra-red grills; and a strong smell of burning plastic had upset her in the arcades between Deansgate and Market Street.

“Along the whole length of the room we were in ran

a tinted window, through which you could see the gardens in the gathering twilight, paths glazed with drizzle giving back the last bit of light in the sky, the benches and empty flower beds grey and equivocal-looking, the sodium lamps coming on by the railings. Superimposed, on the inside of the glass, was the distinct reflection of the café: it was as if someone had dragged all the chairs and tables out into the gardens, where the serving women waited behind a stainless steel counter, wiping their faces with a characteristic gesture in the steam from the *bain marie*, unaware of the wet grass, the puddles, the blackened but energetic pigeons bobbing round their feet.

“As soon as I had made this discovery a kind of tranquillity came over me. My grandmother seemed to recede, speaking in charged hypnotic murmurs. The rattle of cutlery and metal trays reached me only from a great distance as I watched people come into the gardens laughing. They were able to pass without difficulty through the iron railings; the wind and rain had no effect on them. They rubbed their hands and sat down to eat squares of dry Battenberg cake and exclaim “Mm” how good it was. There they sat, out in the cold, smiling at one another: they certainly were a lot more cheerful out there. A man on his own had a letter which he opened and read.

“‘Dear Arthur,’ it began.

“He chuckled and nodded, tapping a line here and there with his finger as if he was showing the letter to someone else; while the waitresses went to and fro around him, for the most part girls with white legs and flat shoes, some of whom buttoned the top of their dark blue overalls lower than others. They carried trays with a thoughtless confidence, and spoke among themselves in a language I longed to understand, full of ellipses, hints and abrupt changes of subject, in which the concrete things were items and prices. I wanted to go and join them. Their lives, I imagined, like the lives of everyone in the gardens, were identical to their way of walking between the tables — a neat, safe, confident movement without a trace of uncertainty, through a medium less restrictive than the one I was forced to inhabit.

“‘Yes love?’ I would say to introduce myself. ‘Thank you love. Anything else love? Twenty pence then thank you love, eighty pence change, next please. Did Pam get those drop ear-rings in the end then? No love, only fried.’

“‘I think it’s just as well not to be,’ they might reply. Or with a wink and a shout of laughter, ‘Margaret’s been a long time in the you-know-where. She’ll be lucky!’

“At the centre or focal point of the gardens, from which the flower beds fell back modestly in arcs, a statue stood. Along its upraised arms drops of water gathered, trembled in the wind, fell. One of the girls walked up and put her tray on a bench next to it. She buried her arms brusquely in the plinth of the statue and brought out a cloth to wipe her hands. This done, she stared ahead absently, as if she had begun to suspect she was caught up in two worlds. Though she belonged to neither her image dominated both of them, a big plain patient girl of seventeen or eighteen with chipped nail varnish and a tired back from sorting cutlery all morning. Suddenly she gave a delighted laugh.



Illustration by Keith Mercer

"She looked directly out at me and waved. She beckoned. I could see her mouth open and close to make the words 'Here! Over here!'"

"She's alive, I thought. It was a shock. I felt that I was alive too. I got up and ran straight into the plate glass window and was concussed. Someone dropped a tray of knives. I heard a peculiar voice, going away from me very fast, say: 'What's he done? Oh, what's he done now?' Then those first ten or twelve years of my life were sealed away from me neatly like the bubble in a spirit level — clearly visible but strange and inaccessible, made of nothing. I knew immediately that though what I had seen was not Viriconium, Viriconium nevertheless awaited me. I knew, too, how to find it."

People are always pupating their own disillusion, decay, age. How is it they never suspect what they are going to become, when their faces already contain the faces they will have twenty years from now?

"You would learn nothing from Dr Petromax's mirror even if you could find it," Mr Ambrayse said dismissively. "First exhaust the traditional avenues of research." And as if in support of his point he brought me a cardboard box he had found among the rubbish on a building site in Halifax, the words *World Mosaic* printed boldly across its lid. But my face was down to the bone with ambition.

Old people sit more or less patiently in railway carriages imagining they have bought a new bathroom suite, lavender, with a circular bath they will plumb in themselves. April comes, the headlines read, BIBLE BOY MURDERED; KATIE IN NUDE SHOCK. The sun moves across the patterned bricks outside the bus station, where the buses are drawn up obliquely in a line: from the top deck of one you can watch in the next a girl blowing her nose. You don't think you can bear to hear one more woman in Sainsbury's saying to her son as she shifts the grip on her plastic shopping bag with its pink and grey Pierrot, "Alec, get your foot off the biscuits. I shan't tell you again. If you don't get your foot off the biscuits Alec I shall knock it straight on the floor."

April again. When the sun goes in, a black wind tears the crocus petals off and flings them down the ring road.

"I can't wait," I told Mr Ambrayse.

I couldn't wait any longer. I followed Dr Petromax from The Blue Rooms ("Meals served all day") to The Alpine Coffee House, Merrie England, The Elite Café & Fish Restaurant. I let him tell me his story in each of them. Though details changed it remained much the same: but I was certain he was preparing himself to say more. One day I kept quiet until he had ended as usual, "Viriconium nevertheless awaited me," then I said openly to him,

"And yet you've never been there. You had the clue as a child. You found the doorway but you never went through it."

We were in the El Greco, at the pedestrian end of New Street. While he waited for the waitress he stared across the wide flagged walk, with its beech saplings and raised flower beds, at the window of C & A's, his sore brown eyes full of patience between their bruised-looking lids. When she came she brought him plai-

ce and chips. "Oh, hello!" she said. "We haven't seen you for a while! Feeling any better?" He ate the chips one by one with his fork, pouring vinegar on them between every mouthful; only afterwards scraping the white of the plaiice off its slippery fragile skin until he had the one in a little pile on the side of the plate and the other intact, glistening slightly, webbed with grey, in the middle. His dirty hands were as deft and delicate as a boy's at this. Once or twice he looked up at me and then down again.

"Who told you that?" he said quietly when he had finished eating. "Ambrayse?"

He put down his knife and fork.

"Three of us set out," he said. "I won't say who. Two got through easily, the third tried to go back halfway. On the right day you can still catch sight of him in the mirror, spewing up endlessly. He doesn't seem to know where he is, but he's aware of you."

"We lived there for three months, in some rooms on Salt Lip Road behind the rue Serpolet. The streets stank. At six in the morning a smell so corrupt came up from the Yser Canal it seemed to blacken the iron lamp posts; we would gag in our dreams, struggle for a moment to wake up, and then realise that the only escape was to sleep again. It was winter, and everything was filthy. Inside, the houses smelled of vegetable peel, sewage, perished rubber. Everyone in them was ill. If we wanted a bath we had to go to a public washhouse on Mosaic Lane. The air was cold, echoes flew about under the roof, the water was like lead. Sometimes it was hardly like water at all. There were some famous murals there, but they were so badly kept up you could make furrows in the grease. Scrape it off and you'd see the most beautiful stuff underneath, chalky reds, pure blues, children's faces!"

"We stuck it for three months. We knew there were other quarters of the city, where things must be better, but we couldn't find our way about. At first we were so tired; later we thought we were being followed by some sort of secret police. Towards the end the man I was with was ill all the time; he started to hear the bathhouse echoes even while he was in bed; he couldn't walk. It was a hard job getting him out. The night I did it you could see the lights of the High City, sweet, magical, like paper lanterns in a garden, filling up the emptiness. If only I'd gone towards them, walked straight towards them!"

I stared at him.

"Was that all?" I said.

"That was all."

His hands had begun to tremble, and he looked down at them. "Oh yes. I was there. What else could have left me like this?" He got up and went to the lavatory. When he came back he said, "Ambrayse has a lot to learn about me." He bent down, his eyes now looking very vague and sick, as if he was already forgetting who I was or what I wanted, and quickly whispered something in my ear; then he left.

As he walked across the street he must have disturbed the pigeons, because they all flew up at once and went wheeling violently about between the buildings. As they passed over her an Indian woman, who had been sitting in the sunshine examining a length of embroidered cloth, winced and folded it up hurriedly. Though they soon quietened down, coming to rest in a line along the top of the precast C & A facade, she

continued to look frightened and resentful — biting her lips, making a face, moving her shoulders repeatedly inside her tight leather coat, from the sleeves of which emerged thin wrists and hands, powdery brown, fingernails lacquered a plum colour.

The older Asian women fiddle constantly with their veils, plucking with wrinkled fingers at the lower part of their faces. In the bus station they lift their feet — automatically looking away from him — to let the cleaner run his brush along the base of the plastic banquette. They have features as coarse and wise as an elephant's but underneath they are in a continual nervous fidget.

The furniture in Mr Ambraysses front room, inert great drop-leaf tables and sideboards with stained, lifting veneers, was strewn with the evidence he had accumulated: curled-up grainy photographs, each a detail enlarged in black and white from some colour snap until, its outline fatally eroded and its context yawning, it reached monstrous or curious conclusions; articles cut from yellowed newspaper found lining the drawers of an empty house; cassettes furred with dust, which when you played them gave out only the pure electrical silence of the machine, punctuated once or twice by feral static; his notebooks, where in a clear hand he had written, "Each event, struck lightly against its own significance, can be excited into throwing off a spark; it is this energetic note which lies at the heart of metaphor — and of life;" or: "The lesson we learn too late is that we cannot have only by wanting." Then on another page, "Nothing impedes us, we need only learn to act."

He preserved the circulars, bills, Christmas cards, charity appeals and small parcels which came through his letterbox for the previous tenants of the house. Almost as if by accident a little of this lost or random communication was addressed to him, from Australia: he gave it pride of place. This was how I learned that his daughter had married and emigrated there several years before.

"She was ungrateful," he would say, avoiding my eyes and staring at the television. (A car drove slowly out of some factory gates, then faster through a housing estate and on to an empty road.) "She was an ungrateful girl."

Two chimney sweeps called to see him the Wednesday after I had talked to Dr Petromax in the El Greco. He was out.

"Is he expecting you?" I asked them.

They didn't seem to know. They waited patiently in the garden for me to let them in — a large awkward boy in Dr Marten's boots, and a man I took to be his father, much smaller and more agile in his movements, who said: "You've a fair view here anyhow. You can see a fair way from here." The boy didn't answer but stood as if marooned on the concrete path which, like a mirror in the rain, reflected one or two thick yellow crocus buds. Piles of red bricks, rusty brown conifers, the conservatory with its peeling paint, the shed door held closed by a spade, everything else that afternoon was dark; it was more like October than April. "We're used to working in town." The boy looked warily at the rain, rubbed some of it into the stubble on his bony, vulnerable skull. He seemed to cheer up.

"You'll have a few accidents in these lanes then," he

said. "With tractors and that."

Later he brought the brushes in, and, glancing away from me shyly, spread two old candlewick bedspreads on the lino to protect it. He knelt with a kind of dreamy conscientiousness in Mr Ambraysses' tiled hearth, like a child fascinated by everything to do with fire: arranged the canvas bag over the fireplace; fixed it there with strips of Sellotape which he bit carefully off the roll; pushed each extension of the brush up through the bag until the smell of soot came into the room, rich and bitter, and he was forced to stop suddenly.

"There's still three ex's here," said his father. "It'll go three more."

"No it won't," said the boy, stirring and pummeling away at the chimney.

"I'll go and look."

When he came back he said, "I can hear it rattling at the top."

"It might be rattling but it's not going up."

They stared at one another.

"I can hear it as plain as day, there's something at the top. I can fair hear it, plain as day, rattling against it."

At this the boy only pummelled harder.

"Has plenty come down?" his father asked.

"Aye."

"That's all we can do then."

The boy pulled the brush gently back into the room, disassembling the extensions one by one while the man stood looking down at him breathing heavily, hands on hips, watching in case he had fetched the obstruction out. They ripped the bag off, revealing the fireplace choked to threequarters of its height with soot: nothing else. The boy screwed the Sellotape up contemptuously into a glittering sticky ball. He invited me to look up the chimney, but all I saw was a large dark recess, much rougher than I had imagined it would be, blackened and streaked with salts, like a cave.

"The fact is," he said to me, "I don't know how your friend keeps a fire there at all."

When I told Mr Ambraysses this he said anxiously, "Was Petromax with them?"

I laughed.

"Of course he wasn't. Is he a sweep?"

"Never let anyone in here," he shouted. "Describe them! That boy: were his hands big? Clumsy, and the nails all broken?"

"How else would a chimney sweep's hands be?"

He ignored this and as if preoccupied by the answer to his first question whispered to himself, "It was only the sweeps." Suddenly he got down on his back among the hair-clippings and screwed-up bits of paper on the floor, pulled himself into the hearth, and tried as I had done to look up the chimney. Whatever he saw or failed to see there made him jump to his feet again. He went round the room pulling cupboards open and slamming them shut; he picked up one or two of the postcards his daughter had sent him from Australia, stared in a relieved way at the strange bright stamps and unreal views, then put them back on the mantelpiece. "Nothing touched," he said. "You didn't let them touch anything?" When I said that I hadn't he seemed to calm down. "Look at these!" he said.

He had used up an entire pack of Polaroid film, he

told me, photographing three pairs of women's shoes someone had thrown into a ditch at the top of Acres Lane where it bends right to join the Manchester Road. "I noticed them on Sunday. They were still there when I went back, but by this morning they had gone. Can you imagine," he asked me, "who would leave them there? Or why?" I couldn't. "Or, equally, who would come to collect them from a dry ditch among farm rubbish at the edge of the moor?" The pictures, which had that odd greenish cast Polaroids sometimes develop a day or two after they have been exposed, showing them to be flimsy and open-toed: one pair in black suede, an evening shoe with a brown fur piece; one made of transparent plastic bound at the edges in a kind of metallic blue leather; and a pair of light tan sandals with a criss-cross arrangement of straps to hold the upper part of the foot.

"They were all size four," said Mr Ambraynes. "The brand name inside them was 'Marquise': it was little worn and faded but otherwise they seemed well-kept."

All at once he dropped the photographs and went to look up the chimney again.

He whimpered.

"Never let anyone in here!" he repeated, staring helplessly up at me from where he lay. "You have a lot to learn about Petromax."

Two or three days later he locked up his house and went to Hull, to look, he said, for a rare book he had heard was there. The door of his garden shed banged open in the wind half an hour after he had gone, and has been banging since.

If Mr Ambraynes was, as I now believe, the other survivor of the experiment with the mirror — the one who, sickening in that slum behind the rue Serpolet, heard even in his sleep echoes of a voice in the deserted bathhouse; and who, dragged delirious and sweating with wrecked dreams through the freezing back lanes on their last night, never saw the ethereal lights of the High City — why was his memory of Viriconium the reverse of Petromax's?

It seems unlikely I will ever find out.

Petromax avoids me now he has set his poison in me. I see him around Huddersfield; but his wife keeps close to him. If they notice me they go up another street. They often have a child with them, a girl of about ten or eleven whose undeveloped legs stick out of the hem of a thick grey coat however warm the weather. She dawdles behind them, or darts away suddenly into a shop doorway; or she stops in front of the Civic Centre and refuses to walk with them, making a grunting noise as if she is suppressing a bowel movement. You can see that this is only another formalised gesture: they are a family, and her effort not to belong is already her contribution.

Petromax's mirror, if anyone wants to know, is in the lavatory of the Merrie England café, a little further down New Street than the El Greco, between the Ramsden Street junction and Imperial Arcade.

Go straight through the café itself, with all its cheap reproductions of Medieval saints and madonnas, "Mon Seul Desir," all those unicorns and monkeys, where the iron lamp-fittings and rough plaster bring you close to the Medieval soul in its night "untainted by any breath of the Renaissance," and you find on the left a doorway made to look like varnished oak.

The steps are painted Cardinal red; for a moment they appear wet. Go down them and the warm human buzz of traffic and conversation fades, distance dilutes the familiar scraping hiss of the espresso machine. There behind the pictogram on the neat grey door, above the sink with its flake of yellow soap and right next to the Seibel hand-dryer, is Petromax's mirror. It is smaller than you would think, perhaps eighteen inches on a side.

How did they force themselves through? The mere physical act must have been difficult. You can picture them teetering on the sink, as clumsy and fastidious as the elephant on the small circus chair. Their pockets are stuffed with whatever they think they might need: chocolate, Tekna knives, gold coins, none of which in the last analysis will prove to be any good. They have locked the door behind them (though Petromax, who goes through last, will open it again, so that things remain normal in the Merrie England up above), but every sound from the kitchen makes them pause and look at one another. They try an arm first, then a shoulder: they squirm about. At last Petromax's feet disappear, kicking and waving. The soap is stuck to the sole of his foot. The lavatory is vacant. "Well that's it, isn't it?" says a voice from the corridor. "It's for the kids really, isn't it?"

Mr Ambraynes was right, the mirror is of no use to me. I went down there, I stood in front of it. Except perhaps myself, I saw no-one trapped and despairing in it. When Petromax whispered me its location, did he already know I would never dare go through, in case I found Viriconium as he found it?

A couple with two children live on the other side of me to Mr Ambraynes. The day he went to Hull they came out and began to dig in their garden with a kind of excited, irritable energy. A gusty wind had got up from the head of the valley, rattling the open windows, blowing the net curtains into the room. They had to shout to make themselves heard against it: while the children screamed and fell over, or killed worms and insects.

"Do you really want this dug up?"

"Well it hasn't done very well."

"Well say if that's it. Do you want it dug up or not?"

"Well, yes."

It didn't seem like gardening at all. The harder the wind blew the faster they worked, as if they were in some race against time to dig a shelter for themselves. "A spider, a spider!" bellowed the two little boys, and the father humoured them with a kind of desperate calm, the way you might in the face of an air attack or a flood. He is a teacher, about thirty years old; bearded, with a blunt manner meant to conceal diffidence. "Is it going to break, this storm?" I heard him say to his wife. It was hard to see what else he could have said, unless it was "this stuff." Soon after that they all went back in again. The wind buzzed and rustled for a while in my newspaper-stuffed fireplace, but it was dying down all the time.

Viriconium!

Instructions for Exiting This Building in Case of Fire

Pamela Zoline

First and primarily the reader is asked to radically visualise a particular child. Employing extreme breathing, sensory looping and the usual bio-psyche techniques, please call up into vivid present a real boy or girl, one whom you know well, and preferably one with whom you enjoy a largely positive relationship.

(If given the partitioning of modern life you do not know any children, you will have to borrow one from literature or painting, or perhaps from the movies. One candidate, an archivist, recently utilised the younger Shirley Temple, and another fastened on the tiny blonde Infanta Margarita looking warily out from the Spanish court, at Velasquez the painter and past him into the middle distance.)

We have found it useful to provide some framework devices to assist visualisation. Initially, call up the brute dimensions of the child: mass, weight, reach, height. You will find that you can revive, through whole-body recall, the received pressure from those occasions when the child's body has rested against your own. The next array includes the colour and fragrance continuum. Fill in hair colour, eye hue, the pigmentation of the skin and particularly the shades of mouth, cheeks, the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, and the skin beneath the fingernails. Please be as exact as possible. Numbered swatches and colour chips are enclosed. Try next to specify the smells relating to mouth, hair, skin and gaseous emissions. What textures do you associate with this child's skin and hair? Characterise the teeth. We have found that the reconstruction of auditory sensa are especially difficult for some. It facilitates to summon up the image of the child in action, bending, turning, pausing to speak — insert here a typical utterance, coming from lips of such and such a shape, with the head tilted how many degrees from the perpendicular, and the brow set with just these curves and arcs, the nose at such and such an angle, the gesture, the gaze, the tone of voice.

Now quickly, at a grosser matrix, fill out the time-space context around the individual: specifying surroundings, time of day, presence of others, colour inventory, humidity and pressure, noises, smells, emotional tonus. There is your child now, squarely placed in an amply detailed continuum (I am reminded of the exercises in "particularisation" in the Creative Writing Syllabus at Chicago Tertiary College), and there we leave her (my resolutions for gender-neutral language break down — when I tell this story, I see a little girl).

She is sitting athwart her young brother whom she has tickled into hysterical submission, they are wrestling in our back garden, sending up gusts of yellow aspen leaves which litter the ground like coins of fairy money. She is wearing hand-me-down denim overalls and a red sweater on which the motif ducks and rabbits have gathered for a pre-Easter meeting though it is only October. And one's sense of her person is of a highly variegated surface so covered is she with her usual rents, tears, bruises, paint marks and other smudges and her fine brown hair escaping every which way from the double security of braids and barrettes. Her earnest and passionate researches into the nature of things leave her decorated with testamentary marks of contact, stones and worms in her pockets, twigs in her hair, blue and green daubs across her cheeks and chin. She has the aspect of a tribal citizen, very powerful and intact, with an extraordinarily direct and unabashed intelligence. In the broad sunlight it is warm, though there is an autumn chill in the plum-coloured shadows. Her eyebrows are drawn with a two-hair Chinese brush, her eyes are blue. Now her brother is bawling over some rough justice, and to soothe him she delivers a new rhyme, a choosing device which she has learned, she is shouting out, "My Mother and your Mother were hanging out the clothes/My Mother gave your Mother a punch on the nose/What colour was the blood? Shut your eyes and think/Green! G-R-E-E-N spells green and out

you go! With a jolly good clout upon your big nose!" Successful solace, and they are both laughing uproariously and will not stop.

And now, patient reader, without at this point questioning the mechanism, let the Goddess Hariti act as *dea ex machina*. She who began as a child-devourer but was converted by the Buddha into a cosmic nurse-maid will whisk that altogether palpable child to Moscow, to Gorky Park. It is spring and the ice is continually melting and freezing, and what is this child, my child, my luminous girl doing in Moscow, on a park bench, wrapped in foreign winter gear and licking a chocolate ice cream?

It was as the Middle East rended itself mortally, the crazed wolf in a trap biting his own flesh. And it was as the pendulous Siamese twins of Africa and South America, now separated, seemed still continuous in their joint misery and suffering and accelerating frenzy. There were so many wonderful and urgent reasons for dissent, and only the one overwhelming reason for accord which was both absurd and too vast, so that most of the *homo sapiens* population, up on our hind feet, sundered from biology, found it invisible. The little was flickered and acted as beacons to the larger interests; the global theatre was filled with acute excitement. The situation became daily more extreme. It was when the minute hand on the Domesday clock fluttered and hiccupped in those rare seconds before midnight that we finally acted on this set of premises, to change history.

Angleinlet, Minnesota

Anyone viewing the video of Dakota Saltz and Michael Benjamin, the newly-sunburned Saltz-Benjamin, making the beast with two backs in the 60s Nostalgia Room of the Hotel Sands Susie on election night would have concluded that her attention was only partly taken up with the bumpy union of their bodies. The camera, though expected, was tactfully secreted in an expensive lighting fixture which mimicked live candles. The décor featured hanging strands of beads and bells, souvenirs of Vietnam, political posters in four languages and voluminous folds of Paisley cloth. Spot-lit and bolted to the floor was a display case in which a bit of moonrock set in a lucite block was on show, and the theme was picked up by a "one small step for man" photo mural.

"My mother was a hippy," Dakota snorted, on top, lazing back and forth, she sneezed at a drift of smoke from the automatic, everlasting, self-igniting joss sticks. "She believed that a creative and spiritually evolving life-style would save the planet."

The television blatted out the terrible and expected results, the bright and dark forms of the victorious flickered across the lovers' substantial flesh, bad news, bad news. From all over the globe the media shepherds and shepherdesses rounded up and brought forward their unnatural flock, the members of the world's various governments, to react and reflect upon the American elections. Mesomorph, ectomorph or endomorph, bald or hirsute, rhetorical or confiding, pompous or humble, religious or secular, dressed in emblematic duds, they all bared their teeth at one another and uttered patriotic formulae and threats.

Moaning, Dakota willed herself to focus on transactions between her body and her husband's. She called on some partially understood tantric discipline to transmute the corporeal into the spirit, to map the personal body onto the cosmic body, she meditated on a terrible form of the Goddess Kali seated in intercourse on the male Corpse-Siva, resting upon severed heads. The fanged and bloody goddess is the same as the beautiful Mother and Lover. The images flickered and incremented, Michael's red mouth shaped an O, the pulses of orgasm married the opposites for a moment. Panting, grinning, tasting the sweet oxygen, the newsflash immobilised them as though it had been a bolt of ball lightning zapping through the room:

The young son of a top Russian General and the four-year-old daughter of a US Senate leader had both been kidnapped from their homes within the past twelve hours. BEGIN!

Dakota found herself standing in the middle of the room, holding some socks and underwear, starting to pack, standing still, tears flooding her vision. Michael side-stroked into view, looking preoccupied.

"Kismet Hardy, or Kiss me, Hardy, pie in the face," she babbled. "Here we go!"

The news bulletin is repeated on the screen. The relatives of the kidnapped girl are being interviewed, they seem hardly to be able to construe the reporters' questions, so deeply absorbed are they by the enormous event which has overtaken them. The father's brows leap and punctuate independent of his sentences. Dakota's mouth is a hot cave from crying.

"Crossing the Rubicon, I can't remember the Latin for the die is cast," and she wept and roared for a few moments, into the labelled hotel pillows, and then she was calm again. They had their instructions with them, a microdot mole on her right shoulder-blade. *Eat this note.*

The shaman reconstruction ritual was an eclectic and corrupt piecing together. About fifty women were bussed from St Paul, through the vast acres of sleeping suburbs, through the farmland, into the northern woods, and then deeper and deeper until they stopped at a place that looked to the untutored eye as leafy and indefinite as all the surrounding landscape. Dakota wondered afterwards whether the hot drinks passed around in polystyrene cups had been drugged. Certainly the colours in the nimbus around the fire began to vibrate brilliantly in distinct bands. They took off their clothes, undressing in the bus, joking and talking in the instant equity of bare flesh. Outside their breaths formed steamy clouds but the big fire heated them at least one side at a time. Silhouetted against the tall flames the organisers read out bits of potted prophecy from Hopi and Kiowa texts, from the Bible and the Koran, and also from Nostradamus and other dubious sources. Then all were encouraged to run around the fire circle springing and roaring, leaping, barking like a dog, sniffing, lowing like an ox, bellowing, crying, bleating like a lamb, grunting like a pig, whinnying, cooing, imitating the songs of birds, and so on. It is said that the descent of the spirits often takes place in this fashion.

And so, the preconditions having been satisfied she

was now an "activated agent." Outside the snow had begun again. Carrying messages too secret to entrust to technology, Dakota was on her way to Florida.

None invented this, everyone did, all at once, like a miracle. No one is the leader, we all are, and it just happened that way. That's right. And if that all seems odd, unlikely, too much the paradigm of what used to be called new age organisation, then you will have to find out for yourself, if there's time, if it seems important. The stories we tell ourselves are whatever is necessary for going on. Personally, I've never really thought of myself as a group player.

In the crisis room in Kansas the red crisis lights are on, and the sirens blast at frequent but random intervals rendering all thought impossible for that period and leaving an auditory after-image suspended in time for a little like the ghost flash bulb that hung over the head of the importunate school photographer. I am explaining this to you just as I find I am explaining it to myself, over and over, since I made the initial, irreversible commitment; since we began.

The very notion of approaching a family situation, and invading that family and violently removing a young child from that family and taking that child away so fast and so far and promoting so many changes that any future connection between child and family is uncertain; even the idea of that action is disgusting and abhorrent.

And so I come to you with unclean hands. And also, in the midst of so much distress and tragedy, I speak with authority of my own, of our family's tragedy.

It was during the early months of the exercises, I had returned from Florida, we were aping normality and even the pretence was precious. Judith, our middle child, second daughter, first-grader, our blue-eyed indomitable, always joking darling, is late home from school. It's Halloween and we're going to carve the pumpkins and then go out trick-or-treating, so she wouldn't be late. The costumed figures of the smaller children stumble from doorstep to doorstep, the bigger children are readying themselves, and yelps and calls escape from the upper windows. Where is she?

Checking the bus-stop, which is on our side of the street, a two-minute walk. Pacing up and down the street, making the phone calls to friends' houses to see if she has, please God, broken the rules and gone over to play without permission; walking around the empty school, the deserted playground, the town park full of children but not that one special bright face, green jacket, fast runner, good climber. Talking to her teacher, to the bus driver, the school head, to the police, the FBI, and for those few hours, until it grew dark, sustaining a hope that some reasonable logic was still operating and that she would be home for supper, our radiant girl! But the dusk gathered and the clouds grew bright, never have I dreaded more the sunset's gorgeous rose and cadmium sacrifice, so quick.

We had known, of course, that in order to remain covert, and also to maintain a basic justice, the members of the organisation would have to be part of the big

computer's horrid lottery, along with everyone else. And now I think of Judith always, every hour, every time I look up at a peripheral flicker which isn't here. My dilettante's essays into non-attachment have been worthless, of no value whatsoever.

What could justify this offence to Person, Family and Natural Law? Only this. The extreme and growing likelihood that we are finally about to do it, blow ourselves to kingdom come, extinguish our species along with the multitudes of others that journey along with us, and perhaps the planet itself as a life-sustaining venue. That, coupled with the dreadful, finally unavoidable conclusion that sane, liberal, powerful, even very evolved persuasion cannot any longer save the day — simply because we've run out of time!

At the ultimatum meeting in the buried solar motel at the Kansas headquarters a fat Polish woman stuttered through the pandemonium to the heart of things.

"Suppose yourself in a burning building, full of confused adults and children, a trickle of blue smoke, the intoxicating scent of roasting hydrocarbons, soon it will turn into an inferno but the inhabitants seem not to notice. The only way, the only way to set off the alarm which will alert the crowd is to lower a child, yours or another's, out of a window and drop it to the ground to its probable destruction. Would you do it? 'Yes'."

Key West, Florida

The "living diorama" Seminole village, which was said to be on the site of the actual Seminole village, was made up of two rows of structures that looked like giant, stripped-down four-poster beds minus the organdie. These Seminole dwellings were open on the sides and covered on top, some with a kind of rough thatch, others were roofed with sheets of galvanized metal. On the platform, families in antique dress were assembled, playing Canasta, cooking fry bread, singing to babies who were slung in hammock-like devices fixed to the corner uprights. In short, going about all their domestic business before the eyes of the delighted tourists. These Indians were, on close inspection, a savvy blend of warm humans and androids, the mix favoured by the most successful modern theme parks.

Pearled, striped and blotched with sweat, Dakota followed behind a group of heavily swathed Jordanians, and was herself followed by a cadre of handsomely equipped Japanese. She limped along on her sore ankle, viewing this odd, highly artificial and decadent interface between cultures, of which there are no others. Peering along with the others into the faces of the native Americans, first to make the rough division between humans and subs, then to enter behind the opaque gazes of even the living Indians. "How can I find my 'contact' if no one will look back at me?" Just a trill of panic, had she spoken aloud? Their eyes were obsidian. And so, not paying attention to what lay immediately underfoot, and limping on her left, the ankle was swollen and still swelling, progressively, a chronic sprain, damn! and so she was next a victim of the instantiated national characteristics of the tour packs who surrounded her. The Jordanians, intrigued and amused by the quaintness of the exotic infidel, dallied. They hung back to point and

discuss, they stopped to open picnic baskets and napkin sacks. They planted themselves just so to clean the face of one of their spotless children, they retraced their steps to catch another look at some special sight; they gossiped, they lingered. The Japanese, hung about with all manner of mid-tech recording devices, pressed forward with determined enthusiasm. They photographed, videoed, filmed, taped, they pushed. And so Dakota is caught up between the aggressive Orientals and the dilatory Arabs, the light dazzles her eyes and her leg is hurting and she is getting too much sun and how would she ever connect with her contact.

Thump! she is knocked flat into the pink dust, coughing; a large pyramidal shape looming above her resolves itself into a heavily draped Arab woman. Bending over the topsy turvy "agent," she lifts gauzy purdah and speaks directly into Dakota's large-lobed left ear "Follow the squaw who overcomes the dragon-reptile." She then shows the sign which marks her as an indubitably part of the exercises, the sisterhood, the Mothers of Invention dubbed by some old lady who did or did not remember the 1960s. Spitting out dust, Dakota picks herself up and moves forward. "Not a particularly glamorous bit of espionage." Had she spoken aloud?

And there at the end of the street which is formed by the two rows of houses, a dusty widening, trampled clay pricked out with weeds, a primitive gas station with one pump, closed, and a café-type highway restaurant which had fallen away from its chipper franchise crispness and exhibited curl all along its perimeters. The multi-cultural crowd thronged and surged, according to their deep natures, towards a deep, flat-bottomed pit fortified by adobe walls, Dakota was bundled along with the crowd, pushed forward on a wave; she could see at the bottom of the pit, crouched on the fissured red mud, the green, segmented, long-jawed, quizzical alligator, ticking its tail in display to impress the young Indian woman who crouched opposite. The woman looks both tough and oddly casual. Her blue-black hair is cut very short, her face, in concentration, contains but does not reveal. A fat Indian man in a Hawaiian shirt printed with orchids and parrots gives the signal for the 'gator wrestling to begin.

The woman enters within the attack range of the animal and then must immediately, avoiding both the switching tail and snapping jaws, move to hold the jaws shut with one hand. Then with a sudden twist she flips the animal onto its back and manoeuvres to sit astride the beast, and then, most amazingly, she proceeds to rub its belly in a clockwise fashion. And thus did the reptile fall into a hypnotic sleep which continued until the young Seminole woman cease in the stroking of its stomach's pale, shining skin. And then its eyes unbuckled and its body kinked and jerked and its tail began to pendulum again and the woman leaped off and out of reach and scrambled up from the pit to much applause and electronic whirr. It was only at the last that Dakota remembered she was to follow this woman, and she dodged through the crowd after her, into the café.

Having attracted the attention of her quarry by pouring Bourbon on the rocks into her lap, the lap that is of Laverne BitterWing who, as a radical feminist 'gator-wrestling Seminole had seen more politicking

than Dakota had had hot dinners, Dakota apologised and bumbled out the password, which was "authenticity," and felt herself blushing head to toe as Laverne looked on with a kind of irritated tolerance. Drinking the replacements, seated in a red naugahide booth, Dakota gave Laverne the message, whispering about an exercise that involved Manila and Peru with Florida as the third critical point. She hissed the names of the children who had "won" the lottery; she outlined the network for each child's retrieval. Laverne's perfume rose up into her nose, she was thirsty from the dust and the heat and the whispering, "another Scotch, or rather Bourbon, that's what we're drinking." And Laverne tells Dakota the scary stories about the "hot" submarines nosing in close to the Florida coast, playing games of chicken. Recently military chemistry has covered the beaches with stinking, phosphorescent fish. Obsidian.

Sometimes it seems to us that there are signs that the exercises are beginning to take effect. In the boardrooms, the factories, the bedrooms, in the chambers where governments grind out their extraordinary decisions, everywhere human creatures act and move, there is now this enormous consideration. With the kidnapping and the "specified" resettlement of all these many little children, increasingly, the we and the they have become irrevocably, irretrievably confused, all mixed. This mixing, this sense of shared consequences, is not of our making. The exchange of the innocents simply points out what is in fact already the case, that finally, at this extraordinary juncture of history we are members one of another, not in some abstract rhetorical sense but at the most practical level of survival. "The bottom line." Who spoke?

We remind ourselves that some small initial success is not sufficient for us to do what we all long to do, to stop this terrible work. The danger of absolute conflagration is immense. We must not weaken. We must be resolute.

Yes of course there are casualties. The child who fails to respond adequately to surgery, the anaesthetised child who aspirates vomits and suffocates, the families ruined beyond repair, the child who goes mad. Please refer here to your own illustrated file on the after-effects of nuclear war.

Lubec, Maine

Flying to Lubec, Maine, the Saltz-Benjamins, diminished with Judith missing, no longer fill the five-seat middle bank of the airline's economy class, and Dakota finds herself between four-year-old Max who, naturally exuberant, has been numbed and practically muted since the kidnapping of his sister, and an extremely elderly man. This gnarled and transparent gentleman introduced himself in heavily accented English as the proven and established oldest man in the world, a claim he substantiated by drawing out of his wallet various laminated newspaper clippings which pictured him and explained that, as a political prisoner in the Soviet Union during the 40s and 50s, not a young man even then, he had undergone repeated hunger strikes which had provided just that periodic shock to the genetic material which was required, as science has

since demonstrated, to extend the human life span dramatically. The old man chattered on about his history, stories of doves and hawks and the species' ultimate games. He entertained Dakota with the recitation of a menu from a great diplomatic dinner in Geneva — oysters in truffle sauce, smoked swan, beef Wellington, eight vegetables, world-wide cheeses, six wines, black bread, baked Alaska, pumpkin pie, and a whole living peach tree wheeled in so that the guests, all now deceased save for her interlocutor, could pick the fruits with their own hands. Dakota yawned until her jaws creaked, she was desperately tired and, of course, it should be Judith sitting there.

Jenny, their eldest, turned pale and Max grabbed at his ears as the plane banked and made for Ape Island, the tear-drop-shaped artificial bauble of land which had become famous as an exclusive resort and tax refuge, it winked up at them out of the foaming, Guinness-coloured Atlantic.

Fragmentation of directions is necessary to confound our pursuers. Dakota walks, with family in tow, through the Theme Park of the Evolution of Culture, "just pretend to be ordinary," on the lookout for a sign. Displays, rides, exhibition halls, museum complex, *son et lumière*, the mother and father point out the items of interest to their children, see the walls, the cities, the gardens, the modes of transport, the sophisticated techniques of warfare, all the works of art and culture which make up the inspiring models of *homo sapiens* achievement. Jenny was paler still at the Rembrandt Arcade, and finally threw up just outside the Lincoln Compound, observed only by a group of robot darkies. *And on this hand is the special activated genuinely scientific demonstration and statistical display.* They walk under an arch lettered in Revival Nouveau vegetable cursive MONKEYS TYPEWRITERS SHAKESPEARE. A "living exhibit" organised according to the premise contained in the "archaic humorous saying" *Put enough monkeys with enough typewriters for enough time and they will produce the complete works of William Shakespeare* (which see).

No doubt the recent cataclysmic events have interrupted the day-to-day running of organisations even so far from the epicentre as this bit of hypostasised pastorate. Notwithstanding the fascinating character of the display, the monkeys and apes disporting in a charming conjunction of nature and culture, there was on every hand the evidence of neglect and order distressed. Citizens goggled at the primates interacting with all manner of typewriters, word processors and computers. They applauded the drama of these hairy cousins reinventing culture in picturesque vignettes, "the taming of fire," "clothing our nakedness," "invention of the fishing hook," "the commencement of poetic diction," and so on. But, as father commented to mother, despite the lavishness of this rhetorical Darwinism, there were, to the observant eye, many signs of "making do." Since the cancellation of Malaysia the severe interruptions in supplies and personnel have resulted in a certain amount of barely adequate habitat and noticeable psychological dislocation among some of the animals.

They come upon a group of gorillas dressed in rough tags of Elizabethan costume, labouring away at

the construction of a replica of the Globe Theatre. Max and Jenny press forward in a gang of children up to the barrier to watch the action. They have taken up with a charming, peach-skinned, French-speaking blonde child, smaller than Max, and Jenny struggles to lift her to the top of the barrier so that she can see. The apes move gracefully about the building site, there is a sense of mock decorum about many of their movements. Dakota noticed that they seem to build and unbuild with almost equal assiduousness, and they frequently stopped in the midst of some effort to act out a line or two from one of the plays, or to quote a mangled couplet from a sonnet. Their language was vastly imperfect but it was language. They glimpsed Hamlet and Ophelia in conversation under a willow tree. Ophelia seems upset, and Hamlet grunts and plucks at her, then turns away. And then a massive young silverback male catches Dakota's attention. He is standing on a precarious cantilevered joist which swings, barely pinned, from the top of the north wall. He is mouthing a speech: "*Lie with her! — We say lie on her, when they belie her. — Lie with her! 'Zounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief — confessions — handkerchief!*" — he gabbled. "*Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is't possible? — Confess? — Handkerchief? — O devil!*"

"Act IV, Scene 1," says a voice at her side. She jumps sideways, startled; it is the certified most ancient man. "His name is called Otello, in the Italian manner." Dakota watches as though in slow motion the gorilla Otello moves down through the construction and over the grass and the rocks to the barrier, and, at more frames per second, clambers over the moat and simply bounds to the top of the barrier. Voices cried out "Otello, Otello!" And then, as Dakota realises that she has known that this would happen, with grotesque but inescapable logic, Otello reaches down and lifts the little blonde from Jenny's arms. "Daphne!" An ear-splitting shriek from two throats, French, the armaments magnate and his spouse who are ravening bootlessly at the edge of the crowd. "Daphne!, Otello, Otello!" These two musical names curl out over the scene as the gorgeous Otello mounts the heaped elements of the theatre, the wailing baby in his arms. Perched on top we can all see that she is in grave danger as he dandles and dangles her and teases her with the unsecured space. There is nothing anyone can do without spooking the ape and endangering the child further. "*Otello, Otello!*"

What are these words in her mouth? Dakota is calling to Otello, he listens, he replies. This woman who has always disliked and avoided heights is climbing the structure, scaling the walls, she has gained the top, she is facing the gorilla and flailing child. "*I'm terrified of heights.*" Had she spoken? "*Otello,*" she said through dry lips, and he made a dignified nod and handed over the little girl who was rigid and purple with continued screaming. Dakota held her tightly and climbed, bit by bit, shakily, carefully down. As she touched the ground she heard the crowd sigh collectively, the parents were coming towards them. But Dakota felt with her hurt foot for the trigger to the trap door in the burned knoll. *How had she known it was there?* and it swung open to let them in, then snapped shut, decisively. The hammering continued against the massive door which fitted seamlessly into the bank, it held steady. Dakota exited,

down and out. She injected the wretched child and watched her twitch into unconsciousness. As they transited, Dakota was apologising to the ashy, crumpled baby in her arms.

Cape Alava, Washington

We delivered Daphne to Cape Alava, Washington. She was to undergo further training, briefing and "conditioning" which is a dump word for surgically and drug-induced consciousness alteration. Drop-off was a veterinary clinic in a shopping mall. Anaesthetic music accompanied their progress through the bland reflective corridors constructed at a giant's scale. Daphne held tightly to the collar of the bumptious Newfoundland puppy, her decoy. He terrorised hamsters and kittens in the waiting room, a distraction, until they went through to the examining room where the agents stood with sad, drawn, severe faces that Dakota recognised from the mirror. Then the child was screaming again, and trying to hold on to her, and the huge puppy was barking and leaping, and people were falling on the slippery blue linoleum, and Max yells out in a rusty voice, "Daphne, Judith! Daphne!"

Now, gentle reader, please call up into your mind's eye your selected child as already visualised. Go through the reification processing and mass out significant traits as indicated earlier. (Refer to instructions.) Remember, having filled in the broad descriptive categories, it is often the subtle level of detail which strongly evokes an individual child's presence.

What is this child like in silhouette? The typical thrust of shoulders, the gait. What kind of temper does the child display? Describe the child's appetite, singing voice, mood spectrum. It is of utmost importance that you carry out this programme of recollection with maximum thoroughness, as recent evidence indicates that the psychic numbing of which we have heard so much cannot withstand this kind of focused attention to vital, loving detail.

How does the child look when asleep? What is the sound of your child crying? And now, place the child here, right here at this place in the text. PLACE CHILD HERE. It is your chosen child being viewed, stalked, snatched, taken.

As I write there are sounds of hideous wailing coming from the isolation ward above. And it is your child, your little Nan or Ted or Mary, your Miguel, Saleem, Makmuda, Ku, your Jonathan, Joseph, Mario, Zephyr, Chen, Boris, your Alice, your Sam who will be "adjusted" to the fabric of another nation and culture.

And please let Judith play along with it, like a game, and not turn magnificently stubborn, our radiant girl!

And please let the big computer remember so that when we may find her, we can.

Some of the operatives have killed themselves.

Osborne County, Kansas

Good times, bad times. And now here we are, autumn on the Great Plains and the wind bowls down through the high grasses, judder-

ing and wailing over Canada, all the way from the North Pole. In the grounds of the Best Western Motel which we have taken over as headquarters the gardens are being organised as a didactic and formal mechanism. To walk through its lanes and avenues, and to look upon its sculptures, ruins, topiaries and fountains is to move through the powerful arguments, logical, aesthetic, political and metaphysical embodied in the artefacts made by angry, grieving, grimly optimistic women.

Was Clío, the Muse of History, a mother? Did she grieve while the necessities of process destroyed her young? Now so many children have been shuffled and transported: Israeli children have been taken into all the Arab countries, and there are defiant Jordanians, Syrians, Iranians, Libyans and so forth now living in Israel and in the West. As for the super-powers, Russian, American and Chinese children have been scattered all over the planet like grains of rice; in Northern Ireland such is the nature of the horrid conflict that Catholic and Protestant babies have been exchanged and re-worked so that they are often living down the street from their biological parents. And so throughout the world, every barrier of nation, race, class and religion has been crossed and recrossed with our tender future citizens. And all over the globe, along with the massive grieving and anger, there is a kind of stirring consciousness, a kind of glimpsed recognition of this pattern, the strategy and its point. Can humans, we sapient ones, come to take care of our offspring with the same concern and good sense shown by the other beasts? If a nuclear missile aimed at my "enemy" is now, also, by definition, aimed at my children, will it stay my hand?

We strolled through the white garden, the red garden, the scented garden, the garden of physics. We picnicked quietly by a vast turf maze. Max seems calmer, here in the open. He and Jenny are braiding weedy flowers together into a chain which they put around my neck. A bent figure bundled against the blustery wind approaches us, and as he unwraps several layers we recognise the "oldest man." We offer to share our lunch with him, and he sets to with gusto, launching with a full mouth into one of his rambling stories about past days and the adventures of his prime, about the cold wars and the biological wars — As he talks we finish our meal and decide to wander together through the maze. The path winds round the reproductions of the Sphinx and Camel Rock, then through the water garden. Max is tired and I pick him up. Carrying one heavy, silent baby, longing for the lost one, we push on until we come to a life-size statue of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva Mahasattva of compassion, eleven-headed, and there our ancient companion regales us with a tragi-comic tale of another elaborate conference on disarmament which had once again finished in histrionics. He told of a subsequent feast of fools in the Embassy and ended, "I was at that feast and drank beer and wine, it ran down my moustache but did not go into my mouth."

Michael laughs *haha* at the ironic and habitual Russian ending to fairy tales and fables. Max is snoring softly. And here we are at the centre of the maze, a niche, a minor cave carved into the side of a hill, an

invented hill in the flatness of Kansas. And in the cave there is a grotto, lined with seashells and fossils, and inside the grotto is a robot facing a bank of TVs which are showing the 24 hour news from all around the world, burning buildings and etc. Jenny says amazed, "the robot is weeping."

Mothers, forgive us.

Mothers, join us!

Pamela Zoline was born in Chicago in 1941, and she describes herself as "neither a writer who paints nor a painter who writes." In the sf field she is best known for her first story, "The Heat Death of the Universe" (reprinted a couple of years ago in Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds: An Anthology*). She now lives occasionally in England, more often in Telluride, Colorado — where she is working with her husband on designing "a radical mountain community." She is also at work on "a real-time, interactive Computer Opera, *The Life and Death of Harry Houdini*."

"Instructions for Exiting This Building..." is due to appear this September in the Women's Press sf anthology *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind*. We are grateful to Sarah Lefanu and Jen Green of the Women's Press for permission to use the piece here. We are also pleased to report that they plan to issue a long-overdue first collection of Pamela Zoline's stories in 1986.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Two pieces of "space fiction" — "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" by J.G. BALLARD, and "Escapist Literature" by BARRINGTON J. BAYLEY. Also, a new story from Neil Ferguson (author of "The Monroe Doctrine", *IZ* 6) — all about the adventures of a semiotic detective. And more. And more. . . Please renew your subscription promptly to ensure that you receive the Autumn 1985 *Interzone*.

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
- IZ 4 — John Sladek, Alex Stewart, David Redd, Malcolm Edwards, Andy Soutter, Barrington J. Bayley
- 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
- IZ 11 — Lee Montgomerie, David Langford, Christopher Burns, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Keith Roberts

THE OUTER ZONE

ENTERPRISE ALLOWANCE SCHEME

Seeking work, claiming benefit and hoping to become a writer? Put away the typewriter, stay out of the library and hope that nothing you wrote in the past is still selling. The state could assist you in establishing your career, but only so long as you have not helped yourself. Don't try your luck first. Take the money and run.

The Enterprise Allowance Scheme exists to help adventurous unemployed claimants to go into business on their own. Applicants must have been out of work for more than 13 weeks and must be able to borrow £1000 for one day. Recipients are paid £40 per week for a year to supplement their earnings while their venture is getting off the ground.

Writers of non-pornographic works which do not promote any political party or religious sect are eligible for this scheme, but only if they have not completed research, have not had anything published in the past year and are not in receipt of royalties from earlier work. This effectively eliminates everybody who has the minimum credentials for contemplating a literary career.

Doesn't the Government's Manpower Services Commission know that writers traditionally develop their skills, confidence and contacts over many years of contributing to amateur and professional publications? Don't they know that the failure rate of new writers is in excess of 98%? Nobody in their right mind would embark on a professional writing career without a sound research base, evidence of recent ability to produce publishable work and/or a record of past success, all of which are disqualifications for entry to the scheme.

According to the Department of Health and Social Security, full-time writers without dependents are not entitled to any benefits whatsoever, regardless of income. So much for helping "those unemployed people who might be deterred from setting up in business because they would lose their benefit." And what happens to writers whose Enterprise Allowances run out before their books are finished?

Surely it would be possible to administer the scheme in such a way as to exclude established authors without disqualifying potential successes at precisely the point where they stand any chance at all of being self-supporting within a year. As it stands, the scheme is wide open to dilettantes, dabblers and dreamers while being completely inaccessible to anyone who has given more attention to their writing than to their rights.

Lee Montgomerie

ON THE EDGE

Mary Gentle

Just as I was beginning to think "original fantasy" a contradiction in terms (as indeed, strictly speaking, it is), along came four tales about tales; all of which have their roots in source-myths as diverse as the Orient, Christianity, and TV sci-fi; and all of which soar above them...who said there ain't no good Fantasy no more?

Gene Wolfe's *Peace* (Chatto, £3.95) is, more than most, a book that will benefit from a second reading; a panorama of shifting landscapes that only settle into patterns after the last page — after which one should re-read, and re-interpret; by which time, of course, patterns have shifted again. Alden

Dennis Wear, dead or dying or purgatorial (as may be) wanders the rooms of a house infinite: rooms in which he finds his pasts. Convinced he has had a stroke, he consults doctors long dead, asking what he needs — or is it, asking Judges what he can do to be saved? More levels of the novel are accessible, I think, if one is familiar with Christian theology. *Peace* is a living scrapbook, and also a tale about the nature of tales; with something of the flavour of R.A. Lafferty's fiction.

The book is quiet, episodic; a theme that appears to link will fade, only for the link to be taken up by something else: the search for a boy's scout-knife, a porcelain Chinese egg covered with Biblical scenes, a carnival of freaks, a man turning to stone, the taste of oranges. *Peace* is also a comprehensive history of a small Mid-Western town

— "There is properly no history, Alden, only biography." Aunts, grandparents, suitors, other children: all tell their tales. The child Alden sees memorials that take his past back into America's past: Civil War, settlers, Indians, pre-Indian aborigines. Mythical lands, Hi Brasil and the Isles of the Tethys Sea, are as real as America; but America itself is mythic. The pace is leisurely. Peaceful, you might say.

And yet, how is Alden judged? By the end of the book one can piece together a pattern: that Alden Dennis Wear, businessman, has changed out of recognition — one wants to say, ruined — all that he touches, including his home town. *Peace* is ambiguous. For a sensual book, it's restrained; for a tale of a dying man, curiously un-sensational. If none of the tales ends quite the way one expects, maybe that's something to do with the nature of tales.

Or should I say, the nature of good tales? There's plenty of the same old predictable stuff coming out between new covers. Fortunately, there are also exceptions. Jane Palmer's first novel is a real find — definitely a specimen of higher lunacy. *The Planet Dweller* (Women's Press, £1.95) appropriates all the furniture of TV sci-fi and duly stands it on its head, with a wonderfully pragmatic absurdity — that's been done before, of course (Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams), but not quite this way. How characters quite as insane as these — menopausal Diana and the radio-astronomer Eva, 11-year-old Julia, and the drunken Russian eccentric, Yuri — turn out to be as plausible as anyone you'd find in the average bus-queue, I do not know; but at one time or another I've met all these people. Real people are always more incredible than fiction likes to think...

Diana and her associates face the impossible, here, with imperturbable (okay, occasionally perturbable) common sense. It's no more odd to keep a museum of ancient architecture (Diana) or a radio-telescope (Eva) than discern the end of the world (Yuri). Fairy rings and travels to dying galaxies are all in the line of business, as are the Mott — empire-builders who took over evolution's plans for their species, with less than satisfactory results:

"They have the most incredible anatomy... Designed themselves an

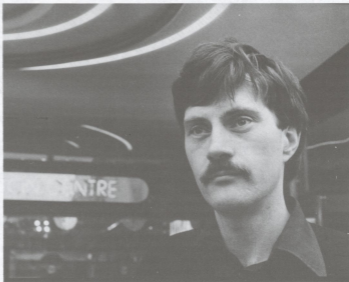
extra pair of legs and protruding teeth because they thought it would put the fear of demons into whoever they took it into their minds to invade. Did that all right, but now they have to eat through a straw and have trouble finding where it comes out the other end."

There's Dax and Reniola, who've borrowed bodies (not human) and have, while attempting to save the world, some difficulty in coping with being merely mortal. The world in question is Moosevan, intimately connected with Earth. Moosevan is being surrounded by a space-warping field by Kulp — Kulp being toad-like and green, or rather, toad-like and pink (courtesy of Dax — the original Dax, that is) which is currently pissing him off no end. Yuri is on Moosevan and in love with something female and ninety thousand million years old. Do you follow all that? No? Good. Then you'll have to read the book, and find out what the thoroughly satisfying conclusion is.

In a rather different way, Geoff Ryman's *The Warrior Who Carried Life* (Allen & Unwin, £7.95) is also an original (but readers of "The Unconquered Country" will have been expecting that). Cal Cara Kerig, Dear Daughter of the Important House, her family and herself mutilated, is desperate for revenge; desperate enough to transform herself into a male warrior, and go searching for Galu go Galo among his cadres of trained warriors — the Men who have been Baked, the Men who advance like Spiders, the Warrior Angels. Her world, anchored in dirt and poverty, contains miracles (of a very odd nature) and true strangeness — different because culturally different and not, like so many fantasy worlds, the 20th century Western mind in fancy dress. *Warrior's* is the kind of fantasy world that reminds you why civilisation is a good idea. Being a book of opposites, this is also a magical, ritual, theocratic earth, over which flies The Beast that Talks to God, behind which is the Land of the Dead and the Secret Rose. Yet it is also a world in which the Secret Rose is a spurious cult in a tiny village, palliating women's oppressed lives. "Spells were only words, rhythms, that unlock the powers of the mind," Cal Cara Kerig says, turning a fake spell into true magic.

In this patriarchal world, women and servants cannot perform male roles; except, like Cal Cara, by becoming male; or like Stefile, by becoming his/her companion. Yet Cal Cara has no different spirit, or soul, when male or female. And Stefile is no dependent liability.

Warrior, to get the nitpicks out of the way, seems either too long or too short. Occasional unfortunate phrasings and moments of bathos occur — but sub-



GEOFF RYMAN

merged in wonder: a sense that there is something real here, real hurt and violence, real resurrection. What would be metaphor in our world has a habit of being physical reality here: everything in this world is *alive*. Against this hostile, dangerous, dirty world, filled with "malice, human and inexplicable," Cal Cara's quest for revenge becomes something quite other. *The Warrior Who Carried Life* is, like Blake's "The Sick Rose," a symbol capable of many interpretations: the worm in the flower, male and female sexuality, death in life; what else you please. And it is Cal's story, and Stef's, and is transformed amazingly in the last few pages. *Warrior* is all transformations — "the Secret Rose refers to the secret that everything contains. Every word is really another word that is being used in a different sense."

Of a different kind, but also from oriental sources, is Barry Hughart's *Bridge of Birds* (Century Publishing, £8.95), subtitled "A Novel of an Ancient China That Never Was," which is certainly true, though it fails to add that, if China never was like this, it damn well should have been. The tale is set in AD 639, Year of the Tiger 3,337, and narrated by one Lu Yu ("not to be confused with the eminent author of *The Classic of Tea*"), a young peasant also known as Number Ten Ox. When all the children between the ages of eight and thirteen in his village fall mortally ill, Ox sets out to find a sage wise enough to discover a cure. He finds the incredibly ancient (and dead-drunk) Li Kao, a Venerable Sage who was once first scholar of China, before he sold the Emperor shares in a mustard mine.

They go on a quest for the healing Great Root of Power, but it isn't the quest they think it is. As Li Kao says, "Ox, we have an evil duke who reads minds and laughs at axes, treasure troves that are hidden in labyrinths that are supposedly guarded by monsters, flutes that tell fairy tales, an incomprehensible ghost who might have come from one, an ancient children's game, and a ghostly message from Dragon's Pillow. If you're wondering about the wicked stepmother, just wait, because she's bound to turn up.... You and I are wandering blindfold through a myth devised by a maniac."

Along the way are horror and wonder: magical and moving. The puzzle fits ingeniously together. There is Miser Shen; and the villainous Pawnbroker Fang and Ma the Grub ("men stood frozen in awe and wonder, and... Pawnbroker Fang and Ma the Grub were taking the opportunity to pick the pockets of their own lynch mob"). There is the evil Duke Ch'in, the Key Rabbit, Lotus Cloud, and the Ancestress; had to mention ghost shadows, the Hand That No One Sees, and especially the Bamboo Dragonfly. There is more. *Bridge of Birds* is told in a wonderfully deadpan style, in which impossibilities are presented as the most reasonable and sensible things in the world. How Hughart manages to combine "ancient Chinese" and American English without a horrendous cacophony is equally wonderful. Still, it works. Like the book says, "anything is possible in China!" And the end lives up to the rest of the novel's promise... Never mind the law — beg, buy, borrow, or steal this one.

THE OUTER ZONE

REVIEWS

Daybreak on a Different Mountain
by Colin Greenland
(Allen & Unwin, £8.95)

In Colin Greenland's first novel, we begin clearly in that "alternative" stream of fantasy, the hero-as-failure. Best exemplified by the Elric stories of Moorcock, and by M. John Harrison's tegeus-Cromis (*The Pastel City*) and John Truck (*The Centauri Device*), this strand is as dangerously seductive to an immature readership in an age of youth unemployment as is the "mainstream" of Conan-type power fantasies. However, where others have gone (and now departed), Colin Greenland follows. Neither is the debt to Harrison limited to basic character: for more than a third of this novel we find ourselves in a decaying, entropic city on the edge of the world if not at the end of time (cf. Viriconium) and then a desolate, misty marsh (cf. "The Lamia and Lord Cromis").

Superficially, this novel is a heroic quest — two doubtful companions set out from their walled-in city in search of a god who will redeem their people. They journey to the Magic Mountain (Hisper Einou — presumably Hope of something) where one of them, Dubilier, has a transcendent experience. Along the way they have a few mundane generic experiences (the most routine being the killing of a Very Big Lizard), but we are obviously to see this as a journey of the spirit related in fantasy terms. When they return to the city, it is to find it in the throes of chaos and revolution. A certain amount of fairly average action transpires, resulting in Dubilier, by now transformed into a sort of wise man/earth father, defeating the forces of chaos. The city is duly rebuilt. The future is secure, symbolised by the chirpy child of Dubilier's union with an outland woman.

Colin Greenland's nobler aspirations — and he certainly has them — are continually defeated by the fantasy mould which he has chosen for them. In containing, this mould cripples them. Greenland has very considerable talents, including a good command of dialogue, fine stylistic moments and striking images.

The faults of *Daybreak on a Different Mountain* are largely those of a first novel. Despite them, Greenland writes very well — the book is probably better written than 99% of current fantasy fiction. Whether the readership can or will appreciate this is another matter. Greenland should capitalise on his obvious talents, learn from the examples of other writers who have escaped the generic trap and use his stylistic abilities to write real fiction for mature adults. He will find this extremely difficult within the genre.

Christopher Fowler

The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica and The Further Adventures of Halley's Comet
by John Calvin Batchelor
(Granada, £3.50 and £2.95)

Batchelor's *The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica* tells a starkly simple story that cuts like a sword, yet is worked, as intricately as any interweaving of the ribbon beasts the Vikings used to carve, with Grim Fiddle's reflections on the forces that jettisoned him and his companion horde of "beasties," refugees discarded by the civilised states they were born under, onto the encircling ocean to wash up at the frozen end of the earth — that possible Age of Exile is throughout counterpointed with the archaic Age of Migration from which arose the Norse sagas, as is Grim with the mythical Skallagrím Strider. The Old Norse called it "Wyrd," that destiny which tossed heroes up to a brief triumph then dropped them into the trap of their own weaknesses: these days we refer to "the forces of history," to "socio-economic trends" by which individuals are reduced to statistical casualties. Batchelor forges the two views to a single supple balance. This novel grips you by the throat and shakes you, as merciless a tragedy as any ancient saga.

By comparison, *The Further Adventures of Halley's Comet* is frivolous light reading; the Comet Incarnate visits Earth every 76 years seeking answers to three questions — a comet rendered "philosophical, like a Greek island."

This book too is structured around reflections on destiny and history; it too borrows a literary mode from the past to decorate its commentary on the diseases of the present — in this case chivalric romance counterpoints his erosion of the invincible glitter of money that is power. In both books Batchelor is a voice of the generation that found itself dropped into the nightmare of Vietnam, and woke up to find the world insane, comprehensible only in terms of fantastic, parodic fiction.

Judith Hanna

The Anubis Gates by Tim Powers
(Chatto, £9.95)

Almost a good book — the ideas are ingenious, the plot intricate yet coherent, the possibilities immense. It could have been a very good book (or indeed a very bad one) but by playing safe Powers keeps it a middle of the road entertaining yarn.

The ideas around which Powers builds his story are mindblowing: the relationship between real magic (which may be dangerously uncontrollable) and fake magic (which is nothing more than what the performer himself does); power and corruption; 19th century London and ancient Egypt — the underworlds of both, one criminal, the other mythological; what the visionary poets Coleridge and Byron and a second rate modern literary critic make of these themes — all these are touched upon then left lying undeveloped as Powers pursues his story.

Fair enough, if the action were gripping, the pace too pell-mell to explore intellectual side-alleys and cellars. But the pace is plodding, the next plot twist signalled so far in advance you spend fifty pages of old London scenery just waiting for it to be sprung on you. All the plot twists you've been waiting for do eventually arrive — plus a few more you weren't expecting. Powers does tell a clever story, but he doesn't tell it cleverly.

Judith Hanna

Jitterbug Perfume by Tom Robbins
(Corgi, £ 4.95)

Robbins writes like Robbins — you either enjoy his laidback narrative hopscotch, or it irritates hell out of you. I kinda enjoy it, but as you get to know and expect his same old tricks — hymns to sexual juices, homespun digressions into mythology — the patter loses its power to divert, and you find yourself wondering about the point of the game Robbins is playing with the reader. Is there a point to this fabulatory bouillabaisse? The ingredients of this one include: perfume, beetroots, immortality, the great god Pan, the bandaloop which is more than just another dance fad, evolution, bees, and of course, sex. They're cleverly juggled, kept shifting into new configurations. But the final impression is legerdemain — a conjuring trick, not real magic.

Judith Hanna

ALSO RECEIVED

The Abyss by Marguerite Yourcenar (Black Swan, £3.95)

Like James Blish's *Doctor Mirabilis* this fine book will be of interest to sf readers because it is a historical novel about science, and a tale of "conceptual breakthrough." Concerning the life of a (fictional) 16th century philosopher — part alchemist, part prophet of marvels to come — it is a densely written, prodigiously erudite work of imagination.

The Peace Machine by Bob Shaw (Gollancz, £7.95)

This is an updated edition of Shaw's 1971 novel *Ground Zero Man*, now published in hardcover for the first time. About a man who threatens to detonate all the world's nuclear weapons, it is an excellent sf thriller, one of the author's best — and more timely than ever.

The Artificial Kid by Bruce Sterling (Penguin, £2.50)

Adventures in the Decriminalized Zone... Sterling's second novel (first published in the USA in 1980) is a hip piece of colourful interplanetary sf. It is worth your time and money. Penguin are also due to publish Sterling's major new novel, *Schismatrix*: that one should be a delight.

The Transcendent Adventure: Studies of Religion in Science Fiction/Fantasy edited by Robert Reilly (Greenwood Press, £39.50)

This fearfully expensive tome consists for the most part of turgid essays which continually restate the obvious. Patricia Warrick's contribution on "Philip K. Dick's Answers to the Eternal Riddles" is not bad, though. Readers of Herbert Farmer and Zelazny may also find a few things to interest them.

Ghastly Beyond Belief: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Book of Quotations by Neil Gaiman and Kim Newman

(Arrow, £2.50)

Played strictly for laughs (the compilers say they wanted to do a serious book of sf quotations until the publishers pointed out that it would have the sales appeal of a volume on "Yak-herding for Bank Managers"), this is a selection of the worst moments from the vilest novels and most abominable movies. Hilarious and depressing.

Fantastic Cinema by Peter Nicholls (Ebury Press, £5.95)

Nicholls whisks through Méliès and *Metropolis*, points out the tourist sights of 1950-67, and then settles down in "1968: The Breakthrough Year"—2001, *Planet of the Apes*, *Rosemary's Baby*. The rest is modernity, omnivorously consumed, subjectively appraised. On one page, *The Dark Crystal*; on the next, *The Last Wave*. An unindexed filmography of 700 titles, galloping plot summaries and wayward observations, and stacks of lovely piccies. Nicholls discourses most comfortably with one foot up on the reference shelf, the other down on the coffee table.

LETTERS

Dear Editors:

Charles Platt's letter in issue 10 confirms a growing suspicion of my own — that "intelligent" or "radical" science fiction (vague terms, I know, but bear with me) is of little interest or importance to young people nowadays. Since coming across sf some five years ago I've always had a feeling of having just arrived at the party when everyone else is leaving.

Although I can't be sure in all cases, I get the distinct impression that the writers and critics involved in such worthy publications as *Interzone* and *Foundation* are somewhat older than myself (22). A bit of name-dropping follows here, but I hope it illustrates my point: Platt himself must be about 40 years old, Ballard about 55 (though he writes "younger" than that), Ian Watson 40-ish, M. John Harrison ditto, Benford, Clute and Moorcock a little more, Brian Stableford a little less but still a good 15 to 20 years further up (down?) the road than me.

Those other young rebels of the sixties, Zelazny, Ellison and Delany, have all had their fortieth birthdays too, yet I still have an image of them in my mind as "young" writers. Yet we don't think of Bob Dylan, Van Morrison and Mick Jagger as young rockers any more, because the cutting edge of rock music has passed on (several times now) to successively newer waves of artists.

Inspired by their predecessors, but not necessarily imitative or inferior, the best of these artists re-interpret what has come before in a style and form which has some relevance or meaning to the generation they belong to.

As far as I can discern (from the relatively isolated viewpoint of New Zealand, admittedly) there is no such wave of young sf writers. (Continuing the rock music analogy, one could ask "whatever happened to punk sf?") Or if there is why are they not being published/publicised? Are they being unintentionally suppressed by the sheer erudition and intelligence exhibited by the older writers listed above? I suspect that what happened in French cinema has happened in sf too — the former "new wave" radicals have become a new establishment.

I don't know. I do know that in New Zealand too, the vast majority of sf being read is the pulpy, lowest-common-denominator stuff. I know of no-one else who reads Ballard, Disch, Watson, Batchelor et al, let alone *Interzone*. Van Ikin in *Science Fiction* no. 16 attempts to argue that "sf is only just beginning to discover its direction and potential." I couldn't disagree more. I believe it's been ailing for some time and is probably best pronounced dead (at least brain-dead). Like Platt, I think perhaps the future lies, not in a change of style, but in a radical change of form or media. What this new form might be, I wouldn't have a clue (could anyone predict the shape of rock music from the 1940s?).

Shane Wood
Auckland

Editorial reply:

You sound awfully lonely out there, Shane, but please don't despair. Kim Newman and Alex Stewart are about 26; Richard Kadrey 28; Scott Bradford and Paul J. McAuley 29; Colin Greenland and Bruce Sterling 31; John Shirley 32; and Geoff Ryman is a grand old man of 34 — to name just a few of the people we have published. (Most of *Interzone*'s editors are in their early-to-mid thirties.) But of course we need more young writers — and indeed scores of the manuscripts we receive are by people in their late teens or early twenties. If there is a "missing generation" of good sf writers perhaps the reason — in Britain, at least — is precisely that there has not been a regular magazine to sustain them? *Interzone* has been on the go for three years now, but it takes time, it takes time...

Dear Editors:

While I am 32 myself and therefore a bit long in the tooth to answer the Aged Mr Platt's letter in *Interzone* 10 properly, I would like to refer everyone to the *New Worlds* reader poll taken by John Carnell, the results of which may

be found in issue 141, April 1964. Also included are Carnell's 1958 figures.

We find that the average age of the *New Worlds* reader was 26.1 years in 1964 (down from 30.8 in 1958), that 31% were under 30 years and the great majority of the rest were between 30 and 40.

Around 1949, John Campbell took a poll of *Astounding* readers and discovered that most of them were scientists, technicians, etc. That is, presumably, adults. Now if the audience were really aging with the magazines the way Platt suggests, most *Analog* readers would be at retirement age by now. This is manifestly untrue.

I know it is untrue because when I was involved with *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* I saw some readership figures which put the great bulk of the readers in the familiar age bracket, 20 to 40. About 15% were under 21. Both the mean and median ages, if I recall correctly, were around 28. *Analog's* readership at this time (about 1980) broke down in a similar fashion. Recently *Amazing* has taken such a poll and published the results in the September 1984 issue: mean age 40.3, median 36. Now *Analog's* subscriber lists have been allowed to dwindle away to the hardest of the hard core, which would push the age figure up, but I still think the message is clear:

Sf magazines are not kids' stuff, nor have they been for at least 40 years. During World War II, the letter-columns seemed to indicate that most of the readers were juvenile servicemen, i.e. 18 and up. The lettercolumns of the *Gernsback* magazines suggest a juvenile audience, but that was a long time ago.

So Charles Platt is getting himself all worked up over facts which have remained pretty much the same since the time our Aged Savant was born. The *Vast Audience Of Fourteen-Year-Olds* editors and publishers have made so much about it a myth, the product of faulty reasoning. The first adult-level books I read were *Dracula* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, both at around 12. Does this mean that the majority of horror and historical readers are 12, or that such books should be slanted toward them? Of course not. That's just the age at which children become capable of understanding adult books on some level. But, if we assume a roughly constant birth rate, there must always be far more people between 20 and 40 than there are between 12 and 19. So teenagers are always a small percentage of the readership.

As for stories in *Interzone* being publishable 20 years ago, this is, again, much ado about nothing. Editors and publishers may deny this at their peril: a story must present characters, events,

and ideas presented in a coherent way, so that the content of the story presents enlightenment and/or an emotional experience to the reader. This is what readers want. Anything else is of interest only to theoreticians. Happily, most of the pieces you print in *IZ* are indeed stories in this sense, which is why *IZ* hasn't gone the way of *New Worlds*.

Paradoxical as it may seem, we need to get over the extreme provincialism of the avant-gardists. Go read *Apuleius' The Golden Ass*, either in Latin or English. Lest you suspect 20th century contamination, read the Elizabethan translation (by Aldington) in some edition which has modern spelling and punctuation. (I recommend the Loeb edition.) It's an amazingly lively, modern book. The only conclusion one can come to is that the basic techniques of prose storytelling were worked out almost two thousand years ago. This does not mean the novel or the short story (*The Golden Ass* is arguably a specimen of both) is exhausted. As long as society changes, and people think new thoughts about themselves and the world, we'll never run out of subject matter. But the basics: characters, scenes, plot, dialogue, pacing, don't seem to change very much. It is only if we truly arrive at a post-technological, post-literate barbarism, when the act of reading itself becomes "quaint," that the story is going to go out of style.

Darrell Schweitzer
Strafford, PA

Simon Ounsley comments:

This year's IZ questionnaire includes a polite request for you to indicate the age group to which you belong. Please help us estimate the time of arrival of post-literate barbarism by completing the form and returning it to us.

Dear Editors:

After re-reading "Head in the Clouds?" (*Interzone* 10) I finally realised it's just another apologia for sexism; Colin Greenland trying (in his inimitably obscure way) to defuse the expected objections to the Ian Sanderson photograph by claiming it represents not only art but the unconscious "shadow self" of humanity.

Do men dream of themselves as faceless women? Do women dream of themselves as the faceless objects men wish/fear they were? I think a lot of women would find that photograph as alienating as I did — once again, the female body is presented as a vulnerable landscape, an object for the male gaze. But I think I'd rather see the photograph, as a purely male fantasy, than be subjected to Colin's little sermon suggesting that all us humans will find important resonances in the image. There's no similar tradition of a nude

male body served up without a face, despite Colin's attempt to imply this is a universal image. (Jehovah did not hide his face and flash his tits at Moses.)

Perhaps you can't politicise the unconscious, but you can certainly politicise a magazine, and I wish you'd try.

Lisa Tuttle
Harrow

Dear Editors:

It is bad enough to open *Interzone* and find a tacky pin-up photo masquerading as art (Sanderson, *IZ* 10), but even worse to read Colin Greenland's shoddy justification of its inclusion. In many ways his argument, with its crass attempt to install Sanderson within a respectable artistic and literary tradition, is more offensive than the photograph itself. Greenland tells us that if we (women, that is) object to such a photograph then it's because we're philistines (listen, you silly girls, a headless woman inspired Ben Jonson, and he's literature). The argument flails around in all directions. Greenland then tries to persuade us that what we are talking about is a faceless "person"; is this because his own unconscious is so determinedly unpoliticised that he refuses to admit that the object of his debate is the body of a woman? Well, no, not quite. He feels uneasy and so it's back to the attack, with an example of yet another (male) artist who uses the headless woman to show...what? That women are dumb animals. Thank you, Colin. But that isn't all. Humanity (is that us, sisters?) dreams of headless ghosts and any objection (but who would object?) Well, we might, mightn't we, sisters?) is a crime against the imagination.

Chat about wolves and railway engines cannot disguise what really walks the corridors of Greenland's imagination, that is, hordes of philistine feminists intent on suppression and censorship. Come off it, Colin, the photograph in question is just another of those stock images of women we are so familiar with, sanitised, like all the rest of them, even to the lack of unsightly underarm hair. It has nothing to do with Isis, Jehovah or anyone else you care to dredge up. What was it doing in *Interzone*, a magazine that has described itself as, among other things, serious and innovative? Away with tired old images and tired old woman-blaming justifications. Please keep your male anxieties to yourselves in future.

Sarah Lefanu
London

Colin Greenland reflects:
If you stick your neck out...

Dear Editors:

Normally when I see the expression



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"life-affirming" I reach for my revolver, but I think G.C. Burrows has brought out the howitzer instead. Sue's pastoral expressions may not be to everyone's taste (though what the hell's wrong with recurrent bushes anyway?) but the argument surely is not whether fiction today should represent "a dehumanized, decaying, disintegrating culture" but whether and how far particular authors should demonstrate their own stances on this image. Do you wallow in it, celebrate it, protest against it, or what? "Poor pitiable human creatures" the contributors to *Interzone* may be, but is it really true that "all they're capable of doing is reflecting the world around them?" Depends on the mirror they're using, doesn't it? Mirrors may distort, make ugly; they may also show us an oblique beauty.

So where I don't altogether go along with Sue Thomason's protests I can't wholeheartedly accept G.C. Burrows' reproof. While it's not the job of a writer of fiction to do our thinking for us and present us with ready-made moral responses, it is not always the case that when a writer does offer more than a knee-jerk "isn't life terrible" picture that this is enchanted gardens, fluffy bunnies, and escapism. Do I have to point out the obvious and say that a story can be bleak, disturbing, harrowing, and yet "life-affirming" because it points to areas and possibilities beyond those presented in the text itself?

Perhaps we do, occasionally, want something more obvious. Interestingly enough, *Interzone* 10 gives it, in Gene Wolfe's "Love, Among The Corridors" — a poignant and melancholy tale for cynical idealists like me — and in Alex Stewart's "Soulmates" — like his previous offering, "Seasons Out of Time" a conventional tale which offers the pleasure of a well-crafted story in which narrative and image are finely balanced. Perhaps that last comment reads a little like damning with faint praise, but whereas Lee Montgomerie's "Green Hearts" and Scott Bradford's "The Dream of the Wolf" offered more challenging scenarios, the stories themselves didn't seem to me to live up to the potential of the single, startling images with which we are presented. The pleasure of a story which hits the bullseye (almost: I felt the Jack the Ripper connection was a bit forced) of being "good traditional sf" without being hearty and sub-literate is not to be sneezed at. Yes, the ambitious pieces which don't quite work are in a sense what it's all about, but it's good to have the unmistakable sense of being able to sit back and think "I really enjoyed that."

On the negative side, though, you had Christopher Burns' "John's Return to Liverpool." All very topical, no

doubt, but like the Marilyn Monroe stuff a couple of issues back, a fictional technique which is pretty old hat by now and offers little as a story or a critique of the Lennon myth. I found parts of it pretty affecting, but the whole seemed affected if you get my meaning. You have to work pretty hard to get over the "Oh god, the Lennon bandwagon" barrier, unfortunately.

Andy Sawyer
Liverpool

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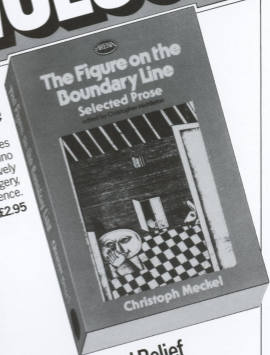
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