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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

'THE MAN WHO WALKED ON THE MOON' J.G. BALLARD



B.J. BAYLEY, WILLIAM GIBSON, IAN WATSON, etc

EDITORIAL

Occasionally science fiction seems genuinely predictive. The conjunction of events over the weekend of 13th-14th July 1985 reminded us irresistibly of Michael Blumlein's story "Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration" (*Interzone* 7). Mr Reagan lay on the operating table at the very moment when a massive and triumphant rock concert was raising funds for the starving populations of North Africa. It was one of those McLuhanesque moments — like the death of Kennedy, the first moon landing, or (to a lesser extent) the murder of John Lennon — when the world did seem to become an electronic village, with everyone tuned in to the same wavelengths. It was possible to walk down the street and hear the same amplified sounds coming from every window. There were just two news stories that weekend: "Live Aid," and the state of Mr Reagan's intestines. When he wrote "Tissue Ablation..." in 1983 Michael Blumlein succeeded in uttering a prophetic (and poetic) truth.

Interzone exists to publish fictions which have just that kind of relevance. The better stories which appear here often have a large dimension of irony: they should not be taken too literally, even if the authors' fundamental aims are very serious indeed. For instance, there seems to have been a widespread misreading of Lee Montgomery's story "War and/or Peace" (*Interzone* 11). "Surely the worst piece of 'fiction' you have ever published — total feminist/CND propaganda," writes one correspondent, revealing a sorry inclination to appreciate irony, the subtler sort of humour which was abundantly present in the Lee Montgomery piece. We believe that stories such as "Tissue Ablation..." and "War and/or Peace" are important (pace Sue Thomason, who disapproves of the word) because they represent small private voices addressing the world — with humour, with rage, with the play of lively imaginative faculties.

But we do not want to give the impression that we regard all our stories as bearers of an immense freight of significance. Far from it. Many of the stories we publish are workmanlike pieces of entertainment in the science-fiction or fantasy modes. It is still our ambition to make *Interzone* a popular magazine which will appeal to a range of tastes. As we stated last time, "we are not just another literary little magazine." Our circulation is growing, albeit slowly, and most of our readers are young — early returns from last issue's questionnaire indicate that there is a preponderance of readers under 25 years old. Clearly, these readers (the Live Aid generation, or a segment thereof) are looking for intelligent diversion — and a bit more.

In our effort to make the magazine more broadly appealing we are introducing film reviews (by Nick Lowe) and, from the next issue onwards, we shall be starting to use full-colour covers. Also, in this issue, we are beginning a series of interviews with up-and-coming authors. The first interview features this year's Nebula Award-winning novelist, William Gibson (who has promised us a new story in the very near future). Unfortunately, the added expense of the new covers, and rising costs in general, have necessitated our first price increase. If your subscription lapses with this issue (or the next) you may renew at the old rate — but please be prompt. We guarantee that *Interzone* will continue to develop: more changes lie ahead. Keep reading.

David Pringle

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J.G. Ballard

The Man Who Walked on the Moon

I, too, was once an astronaut. As you see me sitting here, in this modest cafe with its distant glimpse of Copacabana Beach, you probably assume that I am a man of few achievements. The shabby briefcase between my worn heels, the stained suit with its frayed cuffs, the unsavoury hands ready to seize the first offer of a free drink, the whole air of failure... no doubt you think that I am a minor clerk who has missed promotion once too often, and that I amount to nothing, a person of no past and less future.

For many years I believed this myself. I had been abandoned by the authorities, who were glad to see me exiled to another continent, reduced to begging from the American tourists. I suffered from acute amnesia, and certain domestic problems with my wife and my mother. They now share my small apartment at Ipanema, while I am forced to live in a room above the projection booth of the Luxor Cinema, my thoughts drowned by the sound-tracks of science-fiction films.

So many tragic events leave me unsure of myself. Nonetheless, my confidence is returning, and a sense of my true history and worth. Chapters of my life are still hidden from me, and seem as jumbled as the film extracts which the projectionists screen each morning as they focus their cameras. I have still forgotten my years of training, and my mind bars from me any memory of the actual space flights. But I am certain that I was once an astronaut.

Years ago, before I went into space, I followed many professions – freelance journalist, translator, on one occasion even a war correspondent sent to a small war, which unfortunately was never declared. I was in and out of newspaper offices all day, hoping for that one assignment that would match my talents.

Sadly, all this effort failed to get me to the top, and after ten years I found myself displaced by a younger generation. A certain reticence in my character, a

sharpness of manner, set me off from my fellow journalists. Even the editors would laugh at me behind my back. I was given trivial assignments – film reviewing, or writing reports on office-equipment fairs. When the circulation wars began, in a doomed response to the onward sweep of television, the editors openly took exception to my waspish style. I became a part-time translator, and taught for an hour each day at a language school, but my income plummeted. My mother, whom I had supported for many years, was forced to leave her home and join my wife and myself in our apartment at Ipanema.

At first my wife resented this, but soon she and my mother teamed up against me. They became impatient with the hours I spent delaying my unhappy visits to the single newspaper office that still held out hope – my journey to work was a transit between one door slammed on my heels and another slammed in my face.

My last friend at the newspaper commiserated with me, as I stood forlornly in the lobby. "For heaven's sake, find a human interest story! Something tender and affecting, that's what they want upstairs – life isn't an avant-garde movie!"

Pondering this sensible advice, I wandered into the crowded streets. I dreaded the thought of returning home without an assignment. The two women had taken to opening the apartment door together. They would stare at me accusingly, almost barring me from my own home.

Around me were the million faces of the city. People strode past, so occupied with their own lives that they almost pushed me from the pavement. A million human interest stories, of a banal and pointless kind, an encyclopaedia of mediocrity... Giving up, I left Copacabana Avenue and took refuge among the tables of a small cafe in the side-street.

It was there that I met the American astronaut, and began my own career in space.

The cafe terrace was almost deserted, as the office workers returned to their desks after lunch. Behind me, in the shade of the canvas awning, a fair-haired man in a threadbare tropical suit sat beside an empty glass. Guarding my coffee from the flies, I gazed at the small segment of sea visible beyond Copacabana Beach. Slowed by their mid-day meals, groups of American and European tourists strolled down from the hotels, waving away the jewellery salesmen and lottery touts. Perhaps I would visit Paris or New York, make a new life for myself as a literary critic...

A tartan shirt blocked my view of the sea and its narrow dream of escape. An elderly American, camera slung from his heavy neck, leaned across the table, his grey-haired wife in a loose floral dress beside him.

"Are you the astronaut? The woman asked in a friendly but sly way, as if about to broach an indiscretion. "The hotel said you would be at this cafe..."

"An astronaut?"

"Yes, the astronaut Commander Scranton...?"

"No, I regret that I'm not an astronaut." Then it occurred to me that this provincial couple, probably a dentist and his wife from the corn-belt, might benefit from a well-informed courier. Perhaps they imagined that their cruise ship had berthed at Miami? I stood up, managing a gallant smile. "Of course, I'm a qualified translator. If you -"

"No, no..." Dismissing me with a wave, they moved through the empty tables. "We came to see Mr Scranton."

Baffled by this bizarre exchange, I watched them approach the man in the tropical suit. A nondescript fellow in his late forties, he had thinning blond hair and a strong-jawed American face from which all confidence had long been drained. He stared in a resigned way at his hands, which waited beside his empty glass, as if unable to explain to them that little refreshment would reach them that day. He was clearly undernourished, perhaps an ex-seaman who had jumped ship, one of thousands of down-and-outs trying to live by their wits on some of the hardest pavements in the world.

However, he looked up sharply enough as the elderly couple approached him. When they repeated their question about the astronaut he beckoned them to a seat. To my surprise, the waiter was summoned, and drinks were brought to the table. The husband unpacked his camera, while a relaxed conversation took place between his wife and this seedy figure.

"Dear, don't forget Mr Scranton..."

"Oh, please forgive me."

The husband removed several banknotes from his wallet. His wife passed them across the table to Scranton, who then stood up. Photographs were taken, first of Scranton standing next to the smiling wife, then of the husband grinning broadly beside the gaunt American. The source of all this good humour eluded me, as it did Scranton, whose eyes stared gravely at the street with a degree of respect due to the surface of the moon. But already a second group of tourists had walked down from Copacabana Beach, and I heard more laughter when one called out: "There's the astronaut...!"

Quite mystified, I watched a further round of photographs being taken. The couples stood on either side

of the American, grinning away as if he were a camel driver posing for pennies against a backdrop of the pyramids.

I ordered a small brandy from the waiter. He had ignored all this, pocketing his tips with a straight face.

"This fellow...?" I asked. "Who is he? An astronaut?"

"Of course..." The waiter flicked a bottle-top into the air and treated the sky to a knowing sneer. "Who else but the man in the moon?"

The tourists had gone, strolling past the leatherware and jewellery stores. Alone now after his brief fame, the American sat among the empty glasses, counting the money he had collected.

The man in the moon?

Then I remembered the newspaper headline, and the exposé I had read two years earlier of this impoverished American who claimed to have been an astronaut, and told his story to the tourists for the price of a drink. At first almost everyone believed him, and he had become a popular figure in the hotel lobbies along Copacabana Beach. Apparently he had flown on one of the Apollo missions from Cape Kennedy in the 1970s, and his long-jawed face and stoical pilot's eyes seemed vaguely familiar from the magazine photographs. He was properly reticent, but if pressed with a tourist dollar could talk convincingly about the early lunar flights. In its way it was deeply moving to sit at a cafe table with a man who had walked on the moon...

Then an over-curious reporter exploded the whole pretence. No man named Scranton had ever flown in space, and the American authorities confirmed that his photograph was not that of any past or present astronaut. In fact he was a failed crop-duster from Florida who had lost his pilot's licence and whose knowledge of the Apollo flights had been mugged up from newspapers and television programmes.

Surprisingly, Scranton's career had not ended there and then, but moved on to a second tragic-comical phase. Far from consigning him to oblivion, the exposure brought him a genuine small celebrity. Banished from the grand hotels of Copacabana, he hung about the cheaper cafes in the side-streets, still claiming to have been an astronaut, ignoring those who derided him from their car windows. The dignified way in which he maintained his fraud tapped a certain good-humoured tolerance, much like the affection felt in the United States for those eccentric old men who falsely claimed to their deaths that they were veterans of the American Civil War.

So Scranton stayed on, willing to talk for a few dollars about his journey to the moon, quoting the same tired phrases that failed to convince the youngest school-boy. Soon no-one bothered to question him closely, and his chief function was to be photographed beside parties of visitors, an amusing oddity of the tourist trail.

But perhaps the American was more devious than he appeared, with his shabby suit and hand-dog gaze? As I sat there, guarding the brandy I could barely afford, I resented Scranton's bogus celebrity, and the tourist revenue it brought him. For years I, too, had maintained a charade - the mask of good humour that I presented to my colleagues in the newspaper world - but it had brought me nothing.

Scranton at least was left alone for most of his time, something I craved more than any celebrity. Comparing our situations, there was plainly a strong element of injustice – the notorious British criminal who made a comfortable living being photographed by the tourists in the more expensive Copcabana restaurants had at least robbed one of Her Majesty's mail-trains.

At the same time, was this the human-interest story that would help me to remake my career? Could I provide a final ironic twist by revealing that, thanks to his exposure, the bogus astronaut was now doubly successful?

During the next days I visited the cafe promptly at noon. Notebook at the ready, I kept a careful watch for Scranton. He usually appeared in the early afternoon, as soon as the clerks and secretaries had finished their coffee. In that brief lull, when the shadows crossed from one side of the street to the other, Scranton would materialise, as if from a trap-door in the pavement. He was always alone, walking straight-backed in his faded suit, but with the uncertainty of someone who suspects that he is keeping an appointment on the wrong day. He would slip into his place under the cafe awning, order a glass of beer from the sceptical waiter and then gaze across the street at the vistas of an invisible space.

It soon became clear that Scranton's celebrity was as threadbare as his shirt cuffs. Few tourists visited him, and often a whole afternoon passed without a single customer. Then the waiter would scrape the chairs around Scranton's table, trying to distract him from his reveries of an imaginary moon. Indeed, on the fourth day, within a few minutes of Scranton's arrival, the waiter slapped the table-top with his towel, already cancelling the afternoon's performance.

"Away, away...it's impossible!" He seized the newspaper that Scranton had found on a nearby chair. "No more stories about the moon..."

Scranton stood up, head bowed beneath the awning. He seemed resigned to this abuse. "All right... I can take my trade down the street."

To forestall this, I left my seat and moved through the empty tables.

"Mr Scranton? Perhaps we can speak? I'd like to buy you a drink."

"By all means." Scranton beckoned me to a chair. Ready for business, he sat upright, and with a conscious effort managed to bring the focus of his gaze from infinity to a distance of fifty feet away. He was poorly nourished, and his perfunctory shave revealed an almost tubercular pallor. Yet there was a certain resolute quality about this vagrant figure that I had not expected. Sitting beside him, I was aware of an intense and almost wilful isolation, not just in this foreign city, but in the world at large.

I showed him my card. "I'm writing a book of criticism on the science-fiction cinema. It would be interesting to hear your opinions. You are Commander Scranton, the Apollo astronaut?"

"That is correct."

"Good. I wondered how you viewed the science-fiction film...how convincing you found the presentation of outer space, the lunar surface and so on..."

Scranton stared bleakly at the table-top. A faint smile exposed his yellowing teeth, and I assumed that he had seen through my little ruse.

"I'll be happy to set you straight," he told me. "But I make a small charge."

"Of course." I searched in my pockets. "Your professional expertise, naturally..."

I placed some coins on the table, intending to hunt for a modest banknote. Scranton selected three of the coins, enough to pay for a loaf of bread, and pushed the rest towards me.

"Science-fiction films – ? They're good. Very accurate. On the whole I'd say they do an excellent job."

"That's encouraging to hear. These Hollywood epics are not usually noted for their realism."

"Well...you have to understand that the Apollo teams brought back a lot of film footage."

"I'm sure." I tried to keep the amusement out of my voice. "The studios must have been grateful to you. After all, you could describe the actual moon-walks."

Scranton nodded sagely. "I acted as consultant to one of the Hollywood majors. All in all, you can take it from me that those pictures are pretty realistic."

"Fascinating...coming from you that has authority. As a matter of interest, what was being on the moon literally like?"

For the first time Scranton seemed to notice me. Had he glimpsed some shared strain in our characters? This care-worn American had all the refinement of an unemployed car mechanic, and yet he seemed almost tempted to befriend me.

"Being on the moon?" His tired gaze inspected the narrow street of cheap jewellery stores, with its office messengers and lottery touts, the off-duty taxi-drivers leaning against their cars. "It was just like being here."

"So..." I put away my notebook. Any further subterfuge was unnecessary. I had treated our meeting as a joke, but Scranton was sincere, and anyway utterly indifferent to my opinion of him. The tourists and passing policemen, the middle-aged women sitting at a nearby table, together barely existed for him. They were no more than shadows on the screen of his mind, through which he could see the horizons of an almost planetary emptiness.

For the first time I was in the presence of someone who had nothing – even less than the beggars of Rio, for they at least were linked to the material world by their longings for it. Scranton embodied the absolute loneliness of the human being in space and time, a situation which in many ways I shared. Even the act of convincing himself that he was a former astronaut only emphasised his isolation.

"A remarkable story," I commented. "One can't help wondering if we were right to leave this planet. I'm reminded of the question posed by the Cuban painter Matta – 'Why must we fear a disaster in space in order to understand our own times?' It's a pity you didn't bring back any mementoes of your moon-walks."

Scranton's shoulders straightened. I could see him counting the coins on the table. "I do have certain materials..."

I nearly laughed. "What? A piece of lunar rock? Some moon dust?"

"Various photographic materials."

"Photographs?" Was it possible that Scranton had told the truth, and that he had indeed been an astronaut? If I could prove that the whole notion of his imposture was an error, an oversight by the journalist

who had investigated the case, I would have the makings of a front-page scoop... "Could I see them? – perhaps I could use them in my book...?"

"Well..." Scranton felt for the coins in his pocket. He looked hungry, and obviously thought only of spending them on a loaf of bread.

"Of course," I added, "I'll provide an extra fee. As for my book, the publishers might well pay many hundreds of dollars."

"Hundreds..." Scranton seemed impressed. He shook his head, as if amused by the ways of the world. I expected him to be shy of revealing where he lived, but he stood up and gestured me to finish my drink. "I'm staying a few minutes walk from here."

He waited among the tables, staring across the street. Seeing the passersby through his eyes, I was aware that they had begun to seem almost transparent, shadow players created by a frolic of the sun.

We soon arrived at Scranton's modest room behind the Luxor Cinema, a small theatre off Copacabana Avenue that had seen better days. Two former store-rooms and an office above the projection booth had been let as apartments, which we reached after climbing a dank emergency stairway.

Exhausted by the effort, Scranton swayed against the door. He wiped the spit from his mouth onto the lapel of his jacket, and ushered me into the room. "Make yourself comfortable..."

A dusty light fell across the narrow bed, reflected in the cold-water tap of a greasy handbasin supported from the wall by its waste-pipe. Sheets of newspaper were wrapped around a pillow, stained with sweat and some unsavoury mucus, perhaps after an attack of malarial or tubercular fever.

Eager to leave this infectious den, I drew out my wallet. "The photographs...?"

Scranton sat on the bed, staring at the yellowing wall behind me as if he had forgotten that I was there. Once again I was aware of his ability to isolate himself from the surrounding world, a talent I envied him, if little else.

"Sure...they're over here." He stood up and went to the suitcase that lay on a card-table behind the door. Taking the money from me, he opened the lid and lifted out a bundle of magazines. Among them were loose pages torn from *Life* and *Newsweek*, and special supplements of the *Rio* newspapers devoted to the Apollo space-flights and the moon landings. The familiar images of Armstrong and the lunar module, the space-walks and splashdowns had been endlessly thumbed. The captions were marked with coloured pencil, as if Scranton had spent hours memorising these photographs brought back from the tideways of space.

I moved the magazines to one side, hoping to find some documentary evidence of Scranton's own involvement in the space-flights, perhaps a close-up photograph taken by a fellow astronaut.

"Is this it? There's nothing else?"
"That's it." Scranton gestured encouragingly.
"They're good pictures. Pretty well what it was like."
"I suppose that's true. I had hoped..."

I peered at Scranton, expecting some small show of embarrassment. These faded pages, far from being the mementoes of a real astronaut, were obviously

the prompt cards of an impostor. However, there was not the slightest doubt that Scranton was sincere.

I stood in the street below the portico of the Luxor Cinema, whose garish posters, advertising some science-fiction spectacular, seemed as inflamed as the mind of the American. Despite all that I had suspected, I felt an intense disappointment. I had deluded myself, thinking that Scranton would rescue my career. Now I was left with nothing but an empty notebook and the tram journey back to the crowded apartment in Ipanema. I dreaded the prospect of seeing my wife and my mother at the door, their eyes screwed to the same accusing focus.

Nonetheless, as I walked down Copacabana Avenue to the tram-stop, I felt a curious sense of release. The noisy pavements, the arrogant pickpockets plucking at my clothes, the traffic that aggravated the slightest tendency to migraines, all seemed to have receded, as if a small distance had opened between myself and the congested world. My meeting with Scranton, my brief involvement with this marooned man, allowed me to see everything in a more detached way. The businessmen with their briefcases, the afternoon tarts swinging their shiny handbags, the salesmen with their sheets of lottery tickets, almost deferred to me. Time and space had altered their perspectives, and the city was yielding to me. As I crossed the road to the tram-stop several minutes seemed to pass. But I was not run over.

This sense of a loosening air persisted as I rode back to Ipanema. My fellow passengers, who would usually have irritated me with their cheap scent and vulgar clothes, their look of bored animals in a menagerie, now scarcely intruded into my vision. I gazed down corridors of light that ran between them like the aisles of an open-air cathedral.

"You've found a story," my wife announced within a second of opening the door.

"They've commissioned an article," my mother confirmed. "I knew they would."

They stepped back and watched me as I made a leisurely tour of the cramped apartment. My changed demeanour clearly impressed them. They pestered me with questions, but even their presence was less bothersome. The universe, thanks to Scranton's example, had loosened its grip. Sitting at the dinner table, I silenced them with a raised finger.

"I am about to embark on a new career..."

From then on I became ever more involved with Scranton. I had not intended to see the American again, but the germ of his loneliness had entered my blood. Within two days I returned to the cafe in the side-street, but the tables were deserted. I watched as two parties of tourists stopped to ask for "the astronaut". I then questioned the waiter, suspecting that he had banished the poor man. But, no, the American would be back the next day, he had been ill, or perhaps had secretly gone to the moon on business.

In fact, it was three days before Scranton at last appeared. Materialising from the afternoon heat, he entered the cafe and sat under the awning. At first he failed to notice that I was there, but Scranton's mere presence was enough to satisfy me. The crowds and



Collage by Gamma

traffic, which had begun once again to close around me, halted their clamour and withdrew. On the noisy street were imposed the silences of a lunar landscape.

However, it was all too clear that Scranton had been ill. His face was sallow with fever, and the effort of sitting in his chair soon tired him. When the first American tourists stopped at his table he barely rose from his seat, and while the photographs were taken he held tightly to the awning above his head.

By the next afternoon his fever had subsided, but he was so strained and ill-kempt that the waiter at first refused to admit him to the cafe. A trio of Californian spinsters who approached his table were clearly unsure that this decaying figure was indeed the bogus astronaut, and would have left had I not ushered them back to Scranton.

"Yes, this is Commander Scranton, the famous astronaut. I am his associate – do let me hold your camera..."

I waited impatiently for them to leave, and sat down at Scranton's table. Ill the American might be, but I needed him. After ordering a brandy, I helped Scranton to hold the glass. As I pressed the spinsters' banknote into his pocket I could feel that his suit was soaked with sweat.

"I'll walk you back to your room. Don't thank me, it's in my direction."

"Well, I could use an arm." Scranton stared at the street, as if its few yards encompassed a Grand Canyon of space. "It's getting to be a long way."

"A long way! Scranton, I understand that..."

It took us half an hour to cover the few hundred yards to the Luxor Cinema. But already time was becoming an elastic dimension, and from then on most of my waking hours were spent with Scranton. Each morning I would visit the shabby room behind the cinema, bringing a paper bag of sweet-cakes and a flask of tea I had prepared in the apartment under my wife's suspicious gaze. Often the American had little idea who I was, but this no longer worried me. He lay in his narrow bed, letting me raise his head as I changed the sheets of newspaper that covered his pillow. When he spoke, his voice was too weak to be heard above the sound-tracks of the science-fiction films that boomed through the crumbling walls.

Even in this moribund state, Scranton's example was a powerful tonic, and when I left him in the evening I would walk the crowded streets without any fear. Sometimes my former colleagues called to me from the steps of the newspaper office, but I was barely aware of them, as if they were planetary visitors hailing me from the edge of a remote crater.

Looking back on these exhilarating days, I regret only that I never called a doctor to see Scranton. Frequently, though, the American would recover his strength, and after I had shaved him we would go down into the street. I relished these outings with Scranton. Arm in arm, we moved through the afternoon crowds, which seemed to part around us. Our fellow-pedestrians had become remote and fleeting figures, little more than tricks of the sun. Sometimes, I could no longer see their faces. It was then that I observed the world through Scranton's eyes, and knew what it was to be an astronaut.

Needless to say, the rest of my life had collapsed at my feet. Having given up my work as a translator,

I soon ran out of money, and was forced to borrow from my mother. At my wife's instigation, the features editor of the newspaper called me to his office, and made it plain that as an immense concession (in fact he had always been intrigued by my wife) he would let me review a science-fiction film at the Luxor. Before walking out, I told him that I was already too familiar with the film, and my one hope was to see it banned from the city forever.

So ended my connection with the newspaper. Soon after, the two women evicted me from my apartment. I was happy to leave them, taking with me only the reclining sun-chair on which my wife passed most of her days in preparation for her new career as a model. The sun-chair became my bed when I moved into Scranton's room.

By then the decline in Scranton's health forced me to be with him constantly. Far from being an object of charity, Scranton was now my only source of income. Our needs for several days could be met by a single session with the American tourists. I did my best to care for Scranton, but during his final illness I was too immersed in that sense of an emptying world even to notice the young doctor whose alarmed presence filled the tiny room. By a last irony, towards the end even Scranton himself seemed barely visible to me. As he died I was reading the mucus-stained headlines on his pillow.

After Scranton's death I remained in his room at the Luxor. Despite the fame he had once enjoyed, his burial at the protestant cemetery was attended only by myself, but in a sense this was just, as he and I were the only real inhabitants of the city. Later I went through the few possessions in his suitcase, and found a faded pilot's log-book. Its pages confirmed that Scranton had worked as a pilot for a crop-spraying company in Florida throughout the years of the Apollo programme.

Nonetheless, Scranton had travelled in space. He had known the loneliness of separation from all other human beings, he had gazed at the empty perspectives that I myself had seen. Curiously, the pages torn from the news magazines seemed more real than the pilot's log-book. The photographs of Armstrong and his fellow astronauts were really of Scranton and myself as we walked together on the moon of this world.

I reflected on this as I sat at the small cafe in the side-street. As a gesture to Scranton's memory, I had chosen his chair below the awning. I thought of the planetary landscapes that Scranton had taught me to see, those empty vistas devoid of human beings. Already I was aware of a previous career, which my wife and the pressures of everyday life had hidden from me. There were the years of training for a great voyage, and a coastline similar to that of Cape Kennedy receding below me...

My reverie was interrupted by a pair of American tourists. A middle-aged man and his daughter, who held the family camera to her chin, approached the table.

"Excuse me," the man asked with an over-ready smile. "Are you the...the astronaut? We were told by the hotel that you might be here..."

I stared at them without recourse, treating them to a glimpse of those eyes that had seen the void. I, too, had

walked on the moon.

"Please sit down," I told them casually. "Yes, I am the astronaut."

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J.G. Ballard is the prose editor of *Ambit*, which published its bumper 100th issue a few months ago (£3.50 from *Ambit* at 17 Priory Gardens, London N6). That issue contains "Answers to a Questionnaire," an amusing short story by Ballard, as well as prose by Michael Moorcock, art by Eduardo Paolozzi, and much else. Ballard is also featured in the September 1985 issue of *Words: The New Literary Forum*, a popular magazine about literature which is edited and published by the brave Phillip Vine (7 Palehouse Common, Framfield, Uckfield, East Sussex TN22 5QY). There are two interviews with Ballard, a review of his novel *Empire of the Sun* (just published in paperback by Granada at £2.50, with an astonishing publicity campaign which includes copious TV advertising), and a background article on Ballard's work by David Pringle.

DAMAGED MAGAZINES

One of our subscribers, David Elworthy, writes: "I would be quite happy to pay more for p. & p. and not get issues that have been bent, creased, twisted and otherwise mangled by the GPO." Do many other regular subscribers feel the same way? We have received complaints on occasions from people whose copies of *Interzone* have arrived damaged. Unfortunately, there is little we can do about it — short of spending a great deal more money (which we do not have). We are at the mercy of the Post Office.

Cardboard stiffening would not only increase the cost of the packaging but also of the postage. We now have in the region of 1,000 subscribers, so a substantial all-round increase in p. & p. costs could amount to hundreds of pounds per issue. However, we are willing to provide special packaging to those individuals who are prepared to pay the difference. If you want this service, please add £1 (Americans: \$2) to your subscription cheque next time you renew — and please tell us what the additional money is intended for.

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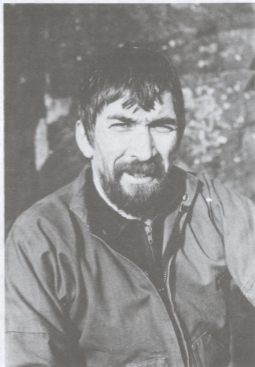


Photo by Brian A. Cropper

M. JOHN HARRISON NEWS

In our last issue [no.12] we published "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" by M. John Harrison. It has just been reprinted in the definitive version of his collection *Viriconium Nights* (Gollancz, £8.95). This fine volume, which also reprints the earlier *Interzone* stories "Strange Great Sins" and "The Luck in the Head," differs considerably from the US Ace Books version of the collection, issued in 1984. Apart from "A Young Man's Journey..." it also contains a brand-new story called "The Dancer from the Dance."

Mike Harrison's critical reputation is growing. The *Times Literary Supplement* has described him as "a singular stylist," and the *Literary Review* calls him "a witty and truly imaginative writer." Alas, he declares that he has now abandoned science fiction forever. He is currently at work on a new novel, provisionally entitled *Climbers*. It is about one of the chief passions in his life, rock climbing.

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Ian Watson

The People on the Precipice

One evening Smear climbed down to our ledge and told us a story about people who lived in a two-dimensional world.

He had made the story up, of course. To amuse and enlighten. (This could have been Smear's motto.)

"Just suppose," he said, as the daylight dimmed, "that a whole world is as flat as a leaf! And suppose that creatures live within that leaf, who themselves are perfectly flat. Imagine that this narrow ledge here simply carries on" – he chopped his hand out into empty space – "in that direction forever! Imagine that it is a simple, infinite surface with nothing above it and nothing below it. And with no precipice to jut out from."

Bounce giggled at this idea so much that she almost fell out of her bower of vine-ropes.

Tumbler, our chief – who had no sense of humour – said, "Preposterous! What would hold your ledge up? How would we ever get over the lip, to harvest sweet fungi below?"

"I'm asking you to imagine a different kind of world. A plane – with no 'below' or 'above'. With no 'up' or 'down'. The inhabitants are flat, too."

"But how can they grip anything? They'll all slide away, and slide forever."

"No they won't. You see, they don't live upon the flat surface. They're part of the surface."

"You'll do me an injury!" squealed Bounce.

"So how do they make love?" enquired Fallen.

"How can they squeeze on to one another?"

"Aha," and Smear winked at her, "now you're asking."

"Tell us!" cried Bounce.

But Tumbler interrupted. "I hear that young Cling-fast from three ledges down fell off yesterday. That was his mother's fault for giving him such an unlucky name. 'Bounce' is a risky name, too, in my opinion."

This remark annoyed Bounce. "Just you try to invade my bower, Tumbler, and you'll get bounced – right off the cliff. That'll teach you what my name's

all about."

"Can I please tell my story?" asked Smear.

And so he did.

He regaled us with the hilarious adventures of Ma and Pa Flat in their flatworld; and what preposterous antics those were, to be sure! Still, his story seemed to have a couple of sly morals buried in it. Compared with the imaginary flat-people we were fortunate indeed – being gifted with all sorts of mobility denied to Ma and Pa Flat. In other words, things might be a lot worse. But also, Ma and Pa at least tried to make the very best of a bad job – did we always do likewise?

By the time Smear finished it was black dark, and we had long since tightened our tethers for the night. Obviously Smear would be spending the time of darkness on our ledge.

Soon after, I heard suspicious scraping sounds, suggesting that Smear was recklessly edging his way along to reach Bounce's bower. (He had positioned himself close to her.) Subsequent smothered giggles and gasps indicated that he had succeeded: a surmise proven true in the morning when light brightened and we saw Bounce and Smear clinging together asleep in her harness of vines.

Smear quickly roused himself and departed upward, his horny toes in all the proper cracks, his left hand holding a guidevine, his right hand reaching up in approved style for well-remembered, reliable holds. You could never wholly trust guidevines with your total weight. They might snap or rip their roots free. Then you would be taking the long trip down through empty air.

We breakfasted on the leftovers from yesterday's harvest of berries and lichen, rock-worms and beetles.

The pearly void was bright; the day was warm. Below, the precipice descended forever. Above, it rose forever. To left and right, it stretched out unendingly. Occasionally, thin silver water-licks oozed

from the rock, dribbling down till the droplets bounced into space. Here and there were still some surviving pastures of moss and fungus and fleshier plants; though by now our appetites had stripped most decent rock-fields bare, adding to the area of naturally occurring barrens. Soon we would all have to migrate – just as we had already migrated at least a hundred times since I was born. A planning conference was slated for today high up on Badbelay's ledge. Tumbler as our chief would attend.

As our tribe clung to the rockface considering which way to forage, a scream from above made us tighten our holds. We tried to flatten ourselves completely – just like Smear's mythical beings. A young lad plunged past, an arm's length away. I could have reached out to touch him, if I was foolish enough.

"Butterfingers!" shrieked Fallen in sympathy. The lad probably never heard her.

The falling body diminished until it was a mere speck deep below.

Bounce surprised us by saying, "Next time we migrate we ought to head upwards and keep on migrating upwards for a whole life-time, to see what happens."

"That'll be one of friend Smear's fancy ideas, I suppose?" Tumbler spat contemptuously into space. "What a strain that would be, and what peril, compared with migrating sideways. My dear Bounce, it's all very well to climb up a few ledges, and down a few ledges. Indeed this keeps all our muscles in trim. But to climb one way only? Faugh! Do you imagine our grandchildren would reach a top? Or a bottom, suppose we migrated downwards? And what would be at this imaginary bottom? Bones and rubbish and shit, floating in foul water, I shouldn't be surprised!"

"I didn't mention any bottom."

"And what would be at this top of yours? Not that it exists! I'll tell you: a place where our muscles would weaken through disuse so that we could no longer harvest the precipice. We'd starve within a generation. Our present way of life is perfect."

"Clinging on by your finger tips all life long is perfect?" she retorted. "There might be a huge flat space up at the top – with oodles of really big plants all over, because they wouldn't have to worry about their weight ripping them away."

"What's wrong with hanging on by one's finger tips, pray?"

"A certain tendency to fall," she said. "Especially when you get old and sick and mad and exhausted."

I spoke up, since something had been worrying me for a while. "When we migrated here, it seemed to me that this particular patch of precipice hereabouts was... well, strangely familiar. When we arrived I felt as if I'd been here before – when I was only a child. All the cracks and finger-grips were somehow known to me."

"That," said Tumbler, "is purely because of the expertise you develop at clinging on after twenty or thirty years."

"So why do experienced adults ever fall off?"

"They get tired and ill and crazy," said Bounce. "Everyone does, in the end, after a lifetime of clinging on."

"We always migrate leftward," I pointed out.

"Obviously! Who on earth would migrate back to a

patch which had been stripped the time before?"

"What if," I asked, "the sum total of our migrations has brought us back to the very same place where we were years ago? What if our precipice isn't a straight wall but a vast...um..."

"A vast cylinder," said Bounce.

Tumbler pointed impatiently to the right where the view was more barren. "Look: if that isn't straight –!"

"Maybe it only seems straight," said Splatty unexpectedly, "because it's so enormous. Maybe it bends ever so slightly? We can't actually see the bend, but after tens of years of travel... If so, what's the sense in migrating?"

"To find food, slippery-thumb! To survive! Suppose we do come back to the same patch eventually – so what? The pastures have fleshed out again."

"It's hardly progress," said Bounce.

"Progress? Cylinders? Bends? Have you people gone nuts? Are you planning to let go and dive into the abyss? This is all Smear's fault. Listen: we hang on by the skin of our teeth. We make daily forays up and down for food. When we've scalped a patch we migrate sideways. That's life."

Even Toppie joined in. "It's life. That's true. But is it living?"

"Damn it, it's as good a life as any! In fact I can't imagine any other. How about you?"

Toppie shook his head. "I've been clinging on for a lifetime. What else do I know?"

"And you'll die clinging on. Or rather, you'll die pretty soon after you stop clinging on. Now, today I'm climbing up to the Chief-of-Chiefs for that conference. Bounce will guard our ledge and keep the kids tied up. Loosepotion" – that's me – "will escort me upwards."

"Why me, Boss?"

"Perhaps you would like to plead your notion that we're climbing round in a circle. That ought to raise some laughs." (Aye, and likely damage Smear's advocacy of migrating upwards....)

"The rest of you will forage. Splatty and Fallen and Plunge can head far to the left, and chart the distant cracks while they're about it. Slip and Flop can forage to the right for what's left of the familiar pickings. Gather well, my tribe! We need to store some supplies in case we have to cross wide barrens." To me he said, "Come on, Loosepotion. Best foot upward!"

And he began to ascend the sheer precipice, toehold by toehold.

"On what wide surface shall we store our huge harvest, oh Chief?" Bounce called after him. He ignored her.

When Tumbler and I paused on Smear's Ledge for a quick rest we learned that Chief Smear had already preceded us upwards. Apparently Smear had done a lot of shinning about, visiting other ledges and telling merry stories, recently.

"He's campaigning to change our lives," I remarked to Tumbler.

However, our chief seemed more annoyed with Bounce. "That woman's a fool," he grouched. "A vertical cliff puts constraints on the amount we can store. Of course it does. That stands to reason. So this limits the amount we can sensibly harvest. Consider the alternative! If we could tear up everything and pile it



Illustration by Paul Rickwood

all on some vast ledge we'd exhaust our resources much more rapidly. What's more, we'd over-eat. We'd grow fat and clumsy and far too heavy to haul ourselves up and down."

We climbed onward together.

Another body fell past us: a woman's. She held her arms wide out on either side of her, as down she flew.

"Diver," puffed Tumbler. "Deliberate dive."

"Dive of despair."

"What's there to be desperate about, eh Loosepiton? Beautiful weather today. Soft breezes. No slippery stone." He plucked a crimson rock-worm loose with a 'plop' and popped it into his mouth.

Not long after, some excrement hit him on the shoulder. Excrement usually falls well clear of the wall but some freak contour must have directed otherwise. Without comment Tumbler wiped himself clean on a nearby danglevine.

We passed six more ledges, rested and ate a meal courtesy of the tribe clinging to the seventh, then climbed past fifteen more. We reached Chief-of-Chief Badbelay's ledge in the early afternoon.

The ledge was already crowded with a line of chiefs – and in the middle Smear was chanting out another of his stories about bizarre worlds. In this case: about people with suckers like a gripworm's on their feet who lived on a huge ball afloat in a void. Smear was leaning quite far back to call his words past the intervening bodies.

"Shit in your eye," Tumbler greeted him grumpily as we two forced a space for ourselves on the ledge.

"Aha," responded Smear, "but up here, where would that crap fall from? Either another tribe of tribes clings immeasurably high above us – or else not. If not, why not? Why do no strangers ever fall from above? Because no strangers live higher up! Yet if our precipice extends upwards infinitely, surely other people must dwell somewhere higher up. Ergo –"

"Unless those other people have migrated further along than us!" broke in Tumbler. "Unless they're further to the left – or to the right, for that matter."

"The reason," Smear continued suavely, "is that our precipice isn't infinitely high. It has a top."

"The real reason," growled Badbelay, "may simply be that we are the only people. All that exists is the precipice, and us."

"Maybe we're the only people on the precipice itself. But maybe hundreds of tribes live on top – and every now and then they gaze down and have a good laugh at us."

"Why should anyone laugh at us? Are we not courageous and ingenious, persevering and efficient, compassionate and clever?"

"Undoubtedly," Smear replied, "but perhaps if we were fools, liars, cheats, thieves, and slovens we would have slid down to the bottom years ago instead of trying to cling on here; and we would have been living in rich pastures."

"So now it's the bottom that's our goal, is it?" challenged Tumbler. "Kindly make your mind up!"

"I spoke by way of illustration. Obviously, with all our fine qualities, it is ever upward that we ought to aspire. We may reach the top within a single lifetime."

"Then what do we do?" asked another chief. "Sprawl and sleep?"

The argument went on all afternoon.

Eventually Badbelay gave his judgement. We would all migrate in ten days' time – diagonally. Leftwards, as was traditional; but also upwards, as Smear had urged.

"If we do find lush pastures leftward and upward," explained Badbelay, "we can always steepen our angle of ascent. But if we run into difficulties we can angle back down again on to the time-approved route."

Some chiefs applauded the wisdom of this compromise. Others – particularly Tumbler – voiced discontent. Smear looked disappointed at first but then perked up.

That night we slept in vine-harnesses on Badbelay's ledge; and in the morning we all climbed back down again.

A couple of days later Smear paid another visit to our ledge – with apprehension written on his face.

The rest of our tribe had already fanned out across the precipice, a-gathering. I myself was about to depart.

"Tumbler! Loosepiton! Have you looked out across the void lately?"

"Why should we waste our time looking at nothing?" demanded Tumbler with a scowl.

Smear pointed. "Because there's *something*."

To be sure, far away in the pearly emptiness there did seem to me to be some sort of enormous shadow.

Tumbler rubbed his eyes then shrugged. "I can't see anything."

I cleared my throat. "There is something, Chief. It's very vague and far away."

"Rubbish! Nonsense! There's never been anything there. How can there be something?"

Tumbler, I realized, must be short-sighted.

Smear must have arrived at a similar diagnosis. However, he didn't try to score any points off Tumbler. He just said diplomatically to me, "Just in case, let's keep watch, Loosepiton – you and I, hmm?"

I nodded agreement.

Whatever it was seemed to thicken day by day. At first the phenomenon was thin, then it grew firmer, denser. No one else glanced in the empty direction – until the very morning when we were due to migrate.

Then at last some fellow's voice cried out, "Look into the void! Look, everyone!"

Presently other voices were confirming what the man had noticed. For a while minor pandemonium reigned, though Tumbler still insisted: "Fantasy! Smear has been spreading rumours. Smear has stirred this up!" Which was the very opposite of the truth.

Bounce clung to me. "What is it?" Now that her attention had been directed, she could see the thing clearly; though as yet none of us could make out any details. All I could be sure of, was that something enormous existed out in the void beyond the empty air; and that something was changing day by day in a way which made it more noticeable.

"I've no idea, dear Bounce."

"Migrate!" ordered Tumbler. "Commence the migration!"

And so we began to migrate, leftward and upward;

as did the tribes above us, and the tribes above them.

Over the course of the next ten days the business of finding novel fingerholds and toe-holds occupied a huge amount of our attention. Besides, we had our kids to shepherd, or to carry if they were still babies. Consequently there wasn't much opportunity for staring out into the void. Splatty made the mistake of doing so while we were traversing unfamiliar rock. He forgot himself, lost his poise, and fell.

On the tenth evening Smear climbed down to our camping ledge.

"Don't you recognize what it is by now, Loosepiton?" he asked.

"There might be some kind of dark cloud out there," allowed Tumbler, peeved that Smear was addressing me.

"It isn't any cloud, old chief – nor any sort of weird weather. Look keenly, Loosepiton. That's another precipice."

I perceived... a faintly wrinkled vertical plane. Like a great sheet of grey skin.

"It's another precipice just like ours; and it's moving slowly towards our precipice day by day. It's closing in on us. As though it ain't bad enough clinging on by our fingertips all life long...!" Smear crooked a knee around a vine for stability and held his hands apart then brought them slowly together and ground them, palm to palm, crushingly.

The wrinkles in that sheet of skin out there were ledges. Without any doubt. The hairs on the skin were vines. My heart sank.

"We oughtn't to have migrated in this direction," declared Tumbler. He was simply being obtuse.

Smear gently corrected him. "We aren't migrating into an angle between two walls. Oh no. That other precipice faces us flat on. And it began to move towards us before we ever started our migration. Or perhaps our precipice began to move towards it. The result is the same."

"We'll be squashed between the two." I groaned.

To have survived bravely for so many years of hanging on by our fingernails! We had never railed excessively against our circumstances. Sometimes certain individuals took the dive of despair. But children were born and raised. Life asserted itself. We had hung on.

All so that we could meet a second precipice head on – a mobile precipice – and be crushed!

This seemed a little unfair. A little – yes – hateful and soul-twisting.

Days passed by. We had settled on our new cliff pastures. We explored the cracks and ledges. We wove vines. We foraged. We ate worms and beetles.

All the while the approaching precipice became more clearly discernible as just that: another infinite precipice, limitlessly high and deep, limitlessly wide.

As the gap narrowed pearly daylight began to dim dangerously.

Smear had conceived a close affinity for me. "Maybe it's just a reflection," I said to him one day.

"If that's the case, then we should see ourselves clinging on over there. I see no one. If I could bend my arm back far enough to throw a chunk of stone,

my missile would hit solid rock and bounce off."

Several people from upper ledges took the dive of despair. A few parents even cast their children down; and that is real despair.

Yet consider the difference between taking the dive – and being slowly crushed to death between two walls of stone. Which would you prefer? Maybe those individuals who dived died peacefully from suffocation on the way down. Or maybe they did reach a bottom and were instantly destroyed, before they knew it, by impact.

The remaining daylight was appallingly dim by now. The other precipice with its cracks and ledges and vines was only a few bodies' lengths away. In another day or two it might be possible to leap over and cling on – though that hardly spelled any avenue of escape.

I paid a visit to Smear.

"Friend," I said, "some of those ledges over there are going to fit into spaces where we don't have ledges. But others won't. Others will touch our own ledges."

"So?"

"So maybe there'll be a little gap left between the two precipices. A gap as big as a human body."

"Leaving us uncrushed – but locked inside rock?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"See?" he cried. "With no light to see by? Yet I suppose," he added bitterly, "it will be a different sort of world. For a while."

Different. Yes.

Yesterday – though 'days' are now irrelevant – the two precipices met.

All light had disappeared but with my hand I could feel the inexorable pressure of the other rocky wall pushing forward – until from above, from below, from left and right there came a grating, groaning, crackling noise; then silence for a while.

Nobody had screamed. Everybody had waited quietly for the end. And as I had begun to suspect some days earlier, the end – the absolute end – did not come.

I was still alive on a ledge in utter darkness, sandwiched between one wall and the other.

Voices began to call out: voices which echoed strangely and hollowly down the gap of space that remained.

Yes, we survive.

There's even a little light now. Fungi and lichen have begun to glow. Maybe they always did glow faintly; and only now have our deprived eyes grown sensitive enough to detect their output.

We can still travel about – along a ledge to the end, then by way of cracks up or down to the end of another ledge. We scarcely see where we're going, and have to guess our way through the routes of this vertical stone maze. Also, it's still possible to fall down a gap, which would cause terrible injuries.

Yet in a sense travel is also easier nowadays. We can brace ourselves between both walls and shuffle upward or downward or left or right by 'chimneying'.

Perhaps I should mention a disadvantage which has actually stimulated travel. Excrement can't tumble away now into the void. Stools strike one wall or the

other.

What's more, the collision of the two walls destroyed a lot of vines; nor can lush foliage thrive in the ensuing darkness.

Consequently we are ascending steadily, just as Smear once recommended.

Instead of living one above the other, our tribes are now strung out in a long line; and all of us climb slowly upward, foraging as we go, eating all the available lichen and fungi, worms and beetles. Now we're permanently migrating.

Are we moving towards somewhere? Towards Smear's mythical top? Maybe.

And maybe that place is infinitely far away.

The new kids who are born to us on the move will enter a world utterly different from the world of my own childhood. A vertical world confined between two irregular walls. A world of near-total gloom.

They will live in a narrow gap which extends sideways forever, drops downward forever, and rises forever.

How will Bounce's child (who is also either mine or Smear's) ever conceive of the old world which we will describe: that world where one precipice alone opened forever upon the vastness of empty, bright space? Will he (or she) think of it as a paradise which might yet exist again some time in the future if the two walls ever move apart? Or will the child be unable even to understand such a concept?

Sometimes I dream of the old world of open air and light, and of clinging to the cliff. Then I awaken to darkness, to the faint glow of a few fungi, to the confinement of the walls.

The other day Smear said to me, "We didn't know how well off we were, did we, Loosepiton? But at least we survive, and climb. And maybe, just maybe, right now we're well off—compared with some future state of the world which will limit us even more severely!"

"How could we be more limited?" I asked in surprise. "What new disaster could occur?"

"Maybe this gap will shrink to become a single upright chimney! Maybe that'll happen next."

"Life forbid! It hasn't happened yet."

"Not yet."

Meanwhile we climb upward. And upward.

Amazingly Smear still tells his peculiar tales about imaginary worlds; and tells them with gusto.

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Ian Watson's most recent novel is *The Book of Being* (Gollancz, £8.95), third in the flamboyant, wildly imaginative trilogy which began with *The Book of the River* (1984). Since that came out in May 1985, he has also published *The Book of Ian Watson* (Mark V. Ziesing, PO Box 806, Willimantic, CT 06226, USA — \$18.50), announced as nearly 400 pages of "insightful, radical, experimental, hilarious, imaginative, tender, and mind-expanding offerings by one of England's most outstanding literary talents." To cap it all, Gollancz will issue another collection, *Slow Birds*, in October 1985 — "his best yet: a brilliant array of original ideas even by Watson's own standards... brimming with invention." We hope to see more by this supremely energetic author in coming issues of *Interzone*.

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WILLIAM GIBSON



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Interview by Joseph Nicholas and Judith Hanna

William Gibson's first novel, *Neuromancer*, won this year's Nebula Award, and the Philip K. Dick Award for best sf paperback original novel of the year, and is on the final ballot for the Hugo. Gibson admits to being pleased, but "I'm also a bit puzzled by it all, as I didn't really expect it to happen. I can't recall when anything I voted for ever won an award. . . ." His short stories have been appearing in the top-paying glossy, *Omni*, and faithful *Interzone* readers will recall that his "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" was printed in issue 9.

Omni has described Gibson as a "hot new punk sf writer"; Christopher Priest talks of an aura of "technosleaze" about his work. How does Bill Gibson himself view his work?

"I'm a little concerned with this 'punk sf' label, which already seems a bit dated. Who'd want to be known as a 'hippy sf' writer today? (No, don't answer that!) I first heard Gardner Dozois use the term in 1981, at the Denver Worldcon, and I was flattered. Now it's '85 and his latest, I think, is 'cyberpunk'. . . I see myself as a kind of literary collage-artist, and sf as a marketing framework that allows me to gleefully ransack the whole fat supermarket of 20th century cultural symbols. A character like Molly, in *Neuromancer*, is an elaborate paste-up from Clint Eastwood movies, Bruce Lee, Emma Peel, Chrissie Hynde's

cheekbones on the cover of the first Pretenders album. . . There's this wonderful freedom this way.

"I don't see myself as a kind of homey version of the Rand thinktank, though. I think we'd be phenomenally lucky to emerge from this century into a world like *Neuromancer*, where people can still hustle, get rich, get laid, have a few laughs, afford a new pair of jeans if they feel like it. I love the Sprawl as an image, a sort of archetype of cities, but I grew up on the East Coast and I don't think that that kind of conurbation is even remotely possible.

"I enjoy hard sf, if it's well written, and I like the idea of a kind of 'radical hard sf' that *Interzone's* been calling for, but in practice I find I'm brought down by the awful *literalness* of so much sf. I think that a number of reviewers have mistaken my sense of realism, of the *commercial surfaces* of characters' lives, for some deep and genuine attempt to understand technology. I'm as fascinated — well, a bit more so, actually — by what motivates someone to go out and buy a pair of Calvin Klein jeans as I am by the workings of a surgical laser. Which is not to say that I am blind to the beauty and importance (or the poetry) of surgical lasers. . .

"I read my wife's fashion magazines (a lot of great material there, really), rock newspapers, the odd copy of *The*

New York Times. Two British magazines I find particularly useful in my writing are *The Face* and *I-D*, mainly for the amount of energy they seem to pour into creating fairly novel images. For what passes for the high tech aspect of my work, such as it is, I rely heavily on hints and clippings from people like Bruce Sterling, who actually sit down and read *New Scientist* each week. I watch very little television and have never been a very active movie-goer. I don't watch MTV either, although a lot of readers seem to assume I'm wired to rock video."

We hoped he wouldn't mind us asking, but some of the cyberspace scenes in *Neuromancer* had reminded Joseph of bits from the film *Tron*, and some of the street scenes set in Japan reminded us of bits of Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*: did either of these films have any influence on the writing of *Neuromancer*, or were those film scenes just floating around in the general culture and settled on Gibson without him realizing it?

"No, no I'm *delighted* you asked! I've been waiting for a shot at this. . . If you go back and pull out the July 1982 issue of *Omni*, which contains my story 'Burning Chrome,' you'll also find a lovely pictorial spread on *Tron* which ran, I think, somewhat in advance of the release of the film. My reaction at the time was, 'Oh, shit. . . I still haven't managed to see the film. With *Bladerunner*, I was about a third of the way

through the first draft of the novel when I went to see the film. It looked so much like the inside of my head that I fled the theatre after about thirty minutes and have never seen the rest of it. In retrospect, though, it was a superbly disorienting experience; I thought that downtown Vancouver looked exactly like *Bladerunner* as well, for about two hours... Still, I knew then that people would probably assume I'd ripped off all my sets from Ridley Scott. Ironically, when I was in London recently to discuss a possible film version of 'Burning Chrome,' we spent a lot of time on cheap ways to approximate that 'Bladerunner look'... I think the Istanbul bits are the only parts of the novel that have 'real' travel in them. I stayed in the hotel across the street from the place where Case and Molly stay, although it was on another street. And I think there are bits of Ibiza and the Greek islands worked into *Free-side*."

We remarked that *Neuromancer* is very much more internationalist in tone and outlook than a great deal of North American sf seems to be. Was its internationalist background a deliberate attempt to get away from the perceived tone of North American sf, or is it intended as an extrapolation into the future of what he sees as the emerging trends?

"I suppose it is mainly a reaction to that, to the whole Future As America thing you get in so much North American sf. I do remember consciously avoiding the word America in *Neuromancer*. People seem either to identify with a profession, a corporate employer, or their turf. Also, that lets me out of a lot of tedious extrapolation about what might really happen to America in the future. I don't regard myself as any kind of futurist at all, and readers who think that sf is 'about' the future are naive."

How and when did Gibson discover sf?

"I sometimes feel that I was born into it. My father worked for a firm of contractors who installed a lot of the plumbing for the Oak Ridge project, where the first atomic bombs were constructed. Our family mythology was filled with wonderfully paranoid stories about how tight the security had been. I remember being told that each man on the project was required to observe and report on the actions of three other workers, and, of course, you knew that someone was watching you. That story was part of my world by the time I was, oh, five. And the early fifties in America were crawling with media-sf. I grew up with *Rockets, Missiles and Space Travel*, with big Olds sedans that were trimmed like spaceships, with Tom Corbett and Captain Video on black-and-white tv, with all kinds of wonderful toys I still

recall with fondness — like Robby the Robot, who had a very small phonograph record in his chest and talked when you turned a crank. I remember that when Sputnik came along, it seemed to me to be somewhat after the fact.

"I remember trying to read Winston juveniles from the Bookmobile without much interest, probably because they weren't very interesting. I think my first real exposure to sf proper came at age thirteen, when I discovered *Amazing and Fantastic*, which were then edited by Cele Goldsmith and were really remarkably good. I was crazy about Delany's work — that would be his very early work — when I was in my mid-teens. I think I discovered *The Naked Lunch* (William Burroughs) about the same time, which was a very peculiar thing to do, considering my age and circumstances. I remember being quite impressed with some short work of Ballard's I'd seen in Judith Merrill's yearly anthologies, but I didn't read his novels — couldn't get them, actually — until later when I was twenty or so, in Toronto. I have a vague memory of trying to read Ballard on acid, or perhaps of trying to think about his novels on acid. Oh, and I should cite those Judith Merrill collections as having been a major formative influence on my taste in sf. I didn't read much sf during the Seventies; it didn't seem able to cut it, somehow, although James Tiptree Jr is one exception who springs to mind... A few favourite writers? Thomas Pynchon, Nabokov, Faulkner, William Burroughs, Terry Southern, Hunter Thompson, Robert Stone... That's leaving out a few dozen others, mind you.

"Science fiction's potential interests me a lot, but the actuality of the genre doesn't. I often experience something akin to existential nausea, if I happen to walk into a specialty shop with several tons of sf on display. My God, you think, there's all this stuff..."

Recently "Vincent Omniaveritas," publisher of the uncopyrighted gossip-sheet *Cheap Truth* has talked about a trend in sf towards what he calls a "garage band ethic," meaning writers who (according to his letter to the BSFA's Paperback Inferno, Feb 85) "prize energy over ideological sophistication" to produce "an eminently commercial, popular, accessible sf that reinterprets genre roots from an '80s or '90s perspective." Does Bill feel part of such a trend?

"I wish I had V.O.'s confidence — or his gift for prehensile rhetorical structures. I do think that North American sf is starting to be quite a bit more interesting than it was in the seventies. For one thing, I'm seeing fewer careerists among the newer writers, and a lot more genuinely disturbed personalities, so that once again, I

would hope, we're seeing sf written by people who are functionally incapable of doing anything else. The thing that drew me to sf, in the magazines and paperbacks of the early sixties, was my sense that the Wahlgreen's on Main Street was somehow being allowed to sell me these genuinely subversive voices, that there were these lonely, vaguely magnificent monsters crying out across the bland face of America, and that one had only to read them..."

We asked about Bill's own sf. "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" (IZ 9) was his first published story, first printed in 1977 in a low-circulation, short-lived American magazine, *Unearth*. He mentioned that this contains "in larval form" ideas that have since appeared in his other fiction. "Well, for starts, you have the protagonist who seems barely able to drag himself out of bed... And there's a sort of muddied version of this theme of memory, of cybernetic systems as a metaphor for the workings of human memory, which is my only real concern with computers. And there's a bit of the leather-and-switchblade thing there, a sort of prefiguring of Punk (the story was written in '76). There's the sense of Big Corporations moving around in the background, and the idea of indentured servitude to same..."

He's currently working on two novels. *Of Count Zero*, he would say no more than that it is a sort of sequel to *Neuromancer*. On *The Log of the Mustang Sally*: "Well, that's a bit easier, as it's largely unwritten. I think of it as being a sort of Paul Scott remake of *The Ophiuchi Hotline*, with Max Ernst doing the major sets. Sort of *Europe After The Rain*, but set in a series of increasingly entropic artificial space environments. This book does for L-5 colonies what J.G. Ballard did for swimming pools' sort of thing..." And there's a short story collection on the way.

Finally, we asked, when Gibson sits down to write, is there some particular point or message he wants to get across to his readers?

"I feel, I think, that there is some peculiar thing that I'm trying to do when I sit down to write. I'm not at all certain that I know what it is, or that I even should. I do assume, though, that there's a very good chance of a given reader having absolutely no interest in my peculiar little impulse, so I strive to do something 'entertaining' at the same time. In my darker moments, I suspect that the second impulse is the surest road to artistic failure. As far as messages go, I'm still quite taken by Robert Stone's very passionate notion that it's a writer's job to worm his way into a reader's head 'for a good cause.' Although then again I'm sometimes not even sure that that's possible."

Peter T. Garratt

If the Driver Vanishes . . .

The plane landed well after sunset. Jack Marston was glad he had asked Ellie and the kids to meet him. It was a clear twilight, starting to turn chill as he walked to the terminal. His attention was caught by an exceptionally bright and beautiful star, high in the East, not so much blue-white as blue, a great sapphire in the sky.

Ellie tried to seem pleased to see him, but was reserved and distant as they walked to the car, letting the children do the talking.

He noticed a new bumper sticker: IF THE DRIVER VANISHES, GRAB THE WHEEL.

"What's that all about?"

"That's about Rapture, when the Christians all vanish and go up to Heaven," said nine-year-old Mary.

"You can't have been watching 'Space-Age Sermon' very much lately, Daddy," said her twin sister Martha.

"I've been very busy since I've been in Washington. I don't have time to watch TV like I used to at home."

"Huh! The busy Senator!" It was rare for Ellie to speak so forcefully in front of the children. "How can you claim to represent the Christian Majority, if you don't make time to listen to Christian services?"

"You wouldn't believe how many meetings there are to go to, briefings to read. Next week we vote on the Craft-Ewing Bill, linking aid to birth control, and on SWIFT, the Space Weapons International Forgoing Treaty. I have to read three volumes of reports before I decide on that."

"A Christian shouldn't have to think very hard before deciding how to vote on that one."

"There's nothing in the Bible about war in space."

"Not if you only read it in front of the Press at Election time. Pastor Fallowfield has made a detailed study of the Book of Revelations. He's found clear references to the need for America to fight the unbelievers in the Heavens. Take Chapter 12, Verse 3: 'And there appeared another wonder in Heaven; and behold, a great red dragon.'"

Marston hesitated. He always felt wrong-footed

when she drew him into argument on difficult topics with the children present.

"Darling, we have to think about other things than Revelation. You know what all-out war would mean – I've told you before."

"I'm not afraid."

"Well, I'll have to be afraid for you then. Perhaps I'll send you copies of briefings I've read on the consequences of war – the sort of thing I didn't have time to go into before."

"I thought you were busier now."

"I've been making time for important things. I told you last month, I've been reading up on Nuclear Winter."

"What's Nuclear Winter, Pop?" Ten-year-old Ben was awkward in his questions.

Marston saw Ellie open her mouth, but got his answer in first. "That's what might happen if there were to be a really big war. Scientists think all the bombs would stir up so much dust that the sun wouldn't be able to shine through. It would be like a really bad winter that went on for years."

"Is that the same as Armageddon?" Ben sounded subdued.

"Sort of. Remember that book of Viking stories Uncle Mike gave you? It's a bit like Ragnarok, the continuous winter which told the Vikings the world was about to end."

Ellie hissed at him sidelong: "Don't put pagan ideas into the boy's head! Give him references to the Bible!"

Little Mary joined in: "There's no need to worry about the end of the world, is there, Mom? Rapture is coming before Armageddon, isn't it? Isn't it, Dad?"

"That's right," said Ellie, in a soothing tone which lately had an opposite effect on Jack. "Rapture will come seven years before Armageddon, and all the true believers will vanish from the world, and leave the heathens to worship the Devil, and destroy each other in their wickedness."

They were just pulling into their own drive. "I wish

I had your confidence." Jack kept his voice low, but Ellie slammed on the brakes and hurried the kids into the house, as though reluctant to expose them to his corrupt, freethinking ideas.

Jack's day was not over. There was a message on the Electric Telephonist to ring Jim Robards at the Defence Department.

"Hi. Have you heard about the satellites?"

"No."

"Three large satellites have appeared in stationary orbit. You can probably see one if it's not too cloudy where you are."

Jack wondered about the striking, blue star he had seen earlier. "Are they Soviet?"

"Not definitely. Pentagon reports indicate no evidence of recent Soviet launch activity."

"Then whose?"

"We don't know. They just appeared in orbit, one over the Western Atlantic, and one each over the Western parts of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. We don't know how."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I wanted to keep you briefed. These are definitely satellites, Jack. Some people are getting funny ideas."

He said nothing of this to Ellie. Robards made himself friendly with a number of Senators, feeding them odd, normally reliable snippets of information. It was not clear what interest he worked for, but he seemed to subtly undermine the Christian Majority.

Ellie herself was still not speaking. As sometimes happened, when he had been away for a while, she had changed out of her plain frock, and put on the flimsy, sleeveless, nightdress she had bought for their honeymoon. They made love without exchanging a word, tightening up with mutual need and resentment.

Afterwards, Marston could not sleep. He had never understood his wife's ability to shut out anger and all other competing emotions, when she sensed a rare opportunity to express herself physically.

He could not spare himself thoughts about the amoral available women of Capitol Hill. His new secretary was a very efficient girl. She wore dresses which clung languorously, and did not seem low-cut when she was standing; but somehow managed to open out when she leant forward. Recently, he had surreptitiously moved his desk, so he could better see her breasts as she bent over the filing cabinet. In other moods, he wondered if she practised her bending technique in order to torment him.

He rose as quietly as he could, and padded downstairs. If he had disturbed Ellie, she made no sign. The living room curtains were open, and he could see the star, or satellite he supposed, in the East, a great blue eye watching him from the stratosphere. As he stared into the sky, a sense of yearning came over him, and a longing in his soul for comfort. He sank to his knees, and repeated the Lord's Prayer, over and over. He started on the Twenty-Third Psalm, but when he came to the lines: "Yea, though I walk in the valley, in the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," he could not continue with the words: "For Thou are with me."

Instead, he sobbed without tears, and began to pray,

in his own words this time:

"Dear Lord, why can't you be with me! Sweet Jesus, haven't I prayed enough to hear your voice, sense your presence beside me, feel the comfort you give to Ellie and the others. Lord, why am I alone?"

He continued on another tack: "Lord will you spare my family from Nuclear Winter? Will you deliver us from this evil?"

For a while he felt Jesus almost with him, then he realized that for him, almost was not enough.

The kids woke them the next morning, and for a while Jack forgot his worries. They had a family breakfast, with lots of ham, eggs, and piping hot coffee. Then the twins showed Jack the Noah's Ark which Ellie was helping them to build, with a dozen or more pairs of funny little animals already aboard.

There were more difficult questions from Ben: "Pop, if there were two lions, and two tigers, and two leopards in that Ark, how come they didn't eat up all the other animals?"

Jack fielded that one: "Have you tamed your Tiger yet?"

"Sure. Let's put him through his paces."

The English sheepdog had grown enormous since Jack had seen him. He could already stop, sit, beg, and fetch sticks. The three of them had an energetic morning chasing round the fields, and they all needed their lunch of steak and fries.

Jack was trying to combine reading his reports with listening to the ball game, when Ellie gave him what she called "man's work" to get on with.

"There's an ant's nest near the kitchen which I need you to boil out, and an infestation of mice in the shed. I've got you some traps."

"Why can't you do it yourself, or use poison? I'm a U.S. Senator, not a rat catcher."

"Ant powder and rat poison don't seem to work so well nowadays, and you're the animal expert around here."

It was true. He had always been fascinated by the behaviour of animals. It only took him ten minutes, of observing lines of ants following each other's trails, to locate the nest, and pour in a kettle of boiling water.

The younger Jack Marston had even run a little business, catching live mice and selling them to school-friends as pets: he had once wanted to train Ben to do the same, but Ellie would not have live mice in the house under any circumstances. With effort, he recalled the best strategy for placing traps. Gingerly, he set and baited them, locking the door lest the dogs get in and injure themselves. He wondered if the strong poison, with which Ellie had failed to deal with the mouse plague, had been responsible for the recent unexplained deaths of two family pets. He had been shown reports, on swarms of "super mice," which were devastating grain stores all over the state. They said that survivors of earlier poisonings had bred a race of immune pests. He did not know what to do about this: the idea of evolving mice was clearly Darwinian, and he did not want to be closely associated with it.

To the East of the town, he could see fields of golden stubble, gleaming in the early autumn sun. Although it was still quite light, he noticed the satellite-star, a

glowing pinprick both deeper and brighter than the sky.

He was surprised to be summoned indoors to a call from Robards.

"Don't you ever let up?"

"Not this weekend. There's an alert on."

"Over the satellites?"

"You've got it. All our military and observational satellites have fouled up – stopped broadcasting."

"All of them?"

"Communication satellites are still relaying, but we're picking up subliminal interference."

"I haven't noticed anything."

"You wouldn't. All satellite-relayed broadcasts are getting subliminal inserts – too brief for your conscious mind to notice, but registered by your subconscious."

"What sort of stuff?"

"Well, this would be up your street, Jack – religious images replayed from old church broadcasts."

Marston pondered. "You think some Evangelical Foundation has got a private launch together?"

"No. Gary Fallowfield certainly doesn't know anything about it. He's going around saying what we're seeing is the Star of Bethlehem."

"Oh."

"But they're clearly artificial, they're not stars. They look bright because they're big, and made of some reflecting material. NASA say neither they nor the Soviets could get anything that big up there, and certainly not some two-bit private outfit."

"So what are they?"

"Radio Astronomers have picked up signals in a mathematical code. That's how they'd expect an alien intelligence to try and communicate – E.T. making a close encounter at last."

"You mean – like that funny little critter in the movie?"

"Maybe, Jack. But maybe not little or funny."

At five, Ellie gathered the whole family to watch "Space-Age Sermon." Guiltily, Jack realized it was indeed some time since he had seen it. There was a new credit sequence, in the usual tinted-cartoon style. Simple Christian families were shown praying in Church, while outside the sceptics drank, caroused, and fought. Then, the praying families were shown rising towards Heaven, while the unbelievers worshipped the Devil in a Russian Army uniform. Finally, Christ in all His Glory was shown descending to Earth, followed by the Christians with haloes and angel wings. The Devil was scuttling off to Hell with his followers.

Gary Fallowfield came on early in the programme. He led the congregation in the Twenty-Third Psalm. Ellie led the twins and even Ben in following the words: Jack tried to join them but mostly just muttered.

He thought Fallowfield looked as tense as he himself felt. After the Psalm, he twice repeated the line: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever," and fumbled uncharacteristically with his Bible before finding a new place.

"My Dear Brethren," he began. "Truly we live in desperate times. There is the SWIFT Treaty which would abandon the Heavens to the Communist un-

godly. There is the Craft-Ewing Bill, with its implications for the shedding of innocent human blood. But this is also a time of hope for those with Faith in their hearts. Today's text is Revelation, Chapter 8, Verse 10: 'And the third Angel sounded, and there fell a great star from Heaven, burning like a lamp.'

"Now, tonight, we find a new star in the sky, burning like a lamp. Of course, the scientists and folk who think they are clever say: 'These are satellites.'

"But which of us can say where these satellites were launched? Or are they saying these are vessels of the Outer Darkness, full of inhuman creatures, not mentioned in the Good Book, not part of God's Creation?"

"No, there are none so blind as those who will not see the Truth. Brethren, is it a coincidence that there are three Stars, and wherever Christian folk live, they see their Star in the East?"

He took in a deep breath, pausing just a little longer than usual before continuing:

"I say it is not a coincidence. Cannot they see that this is the Star called Wormwood, the signal that the events foretold in Revelation are about to begin?"

He started warming to his theme, and his voice became less hesitant, as though he had crossed some personal Rubicon.

"Soon the ungodly shall see the Holy Land invaded, Satan unleashed, the Four Horsemen riding across the Earth, the time of Armageddon and the destruction of worldly things at hand.

"But Brethren, those who have true faith in their hearts, those who resist the woeful temptations of this atheistic Sodom, they shall be spared. Yes, the Christian Majority will be saved. For this is the good news I bring: the Lord has promised us Rapture before Armageddon! Those who have Faith will vanish out of this Vale of Terrors, this sordid land of temptation, into the warmth and security of God's own Heaven. Rejoice, Brothers! Rejoice Sisters!"

Ellie was on her feet now, her face glowing with a joy Marston had not seen for years. He rose and hugged her, seeking against hope for a transfusion of that joy.

Fallowfield finished, and three girls in plain white dresses started a Gospel song. Jack recognized the Silver sisters: Jolene, the middle sister, usually sang at the Party Convention. Last time she had made a drunken, but quite undisguised pass at him; he had only just resisted, and though he had not committed adultery with his body, he had in his heart. While Ellie hugged the children, Jack sank back in his chair: life was still complicated.

That evening, Jack was guest of honour at a fund-raising dinner for Michael Twyford, who was defending a Congressional seat in the next District. Ellie was not enthusiastic. Twyford was sound on economic matters, but was too liberal on a number of moral issues. In his District, few of the politicians were members of the Christian Majority.

Jack avoided any controversy in his speech: afterwards he insisted on repairing to the bar for longer than usual. Twyford was also drinking, and was rather provocative.

"Saw the Pastor on TV today. So the good folk are all going to miss Armageddon?"

Marston nodded slowly: "That's what he thinks."

"Wrongly, I hope," Twyford sneered. "Otherwise only the sinners will be left to fight the Reds. Why does he bother to keep asking more than we can afford for the defence budget, if he's planning to draft dodge on the big bang-bang?"

Ellie gave Jack a hard time on the way home. "Why do you keep speaking for that scoffer?"

"Because it's me up for re-election in two years, and without Mike Twyford, I'll be lucky to get through the Primaries."

"The man's an atheist." That settled it for her.

At Church the next morning, the Visiting Preacher, the Rev Danny Millwall, a close associate of Gary Fallowfield, made only a passing reference to the Star, but proceeded with a prepared sermon on the Craft-Ewing Bill.

"This Bill seeks to make aid to the poorer countries of the world conditional on adoption of population control. We all know, Brothers and Sisters, what that means. We know the population control agencies practice abortion on people too poor to know better. Child murder, Brothers and Sisters."

He looked directly at Marston, who stared impassively back.

"Brothers, all human life is the Lord's gift. It mustn't be thrown away in poor countries, to give an excuse to lazy, uncaring women at home who want to continue with their childkilling ways.

"Thank the Lord for giving us a Senator in Jack Marston who can be trusted to do the moral work of the Christian Majority. Congressman Twyford hasn't done anything to stop this Bill – let him not count on Christian votes if he won't enforce Christian morals."

After the service, Jack drew Danny Millwall aside, and came straight to the point. "The President needs Mike Twyford in Congress. If Bernstein wins it, that's one vote 100% for the other side."

Millwall nodded sagely. "Ah, but does the Lord need him?"

"Twyford has backed the President on 99% of all issues."

"Ah, but for the Lord, 99% has never been nearly enough. Don't you know that, Jack? The Lord's folk can never back a man who's no better in His sight than Bernstein is."

The town had a strange atmosphere as they drove home. On some streets, teenagers were cruising, competing and squabbling in their normal peacock fashion. On others, little groups were staring silently into the sky, some standing, others kneeling in prayer. It was fine and clear for the season, but after Jack had put the car away, he noticed that the satellite in the East was clearly visible.

He found his family on the porch steps. Ellie and the twins were staring at the satellite. Ben was talking to an excited Tiger through the living-room window.

Marston hurried them into the house, and sat down to watch the news. There was a strange development: the Pope, in his morning address, had seemed to agree with Gary Fallowfield about the satellites being a warning of Armageddon. Further, he had linked this explicitly to the Craft-Ewing Bill, and had called for an end to artificial methods of birth control.

Ellie had come quietly into the room. She stared

white-faced as Jack lost control and shouted at the television.

"Who does that Polack think he is? Why can't he keep out of other people's business!"

He was on his feet. Ellie took his arm, making him sit on the couch as she turned off the television.

"Darling, you frighten me sometimes. You've changed so much since..."

"Since I went to Peru? Yes, I've changed. I haven't spoken to you because I thought you wouldn't understand."

"I'll try to understand."

"There are just so many people in these small, poor countries. I'd never seen so many. I saw children with pot bellies, not from too much food, but too little. When we drove through the countryside, the fields were dry and stony: the crops were failing.

"We saw worse things – things it's difficult to describe. We visited a hospital – patients were lying on the floor – not enough beds. I saw a woman die in childbirth – a priest offered her the last rites and she refused.

"I found a doctor who spoke English. He said the woman was hopelessly undernourished. Her husband died in a mining accident after she became pregnant. She went to the nearest hospital to ask for a termination, but of course it was a Catholic place and they wouldn't hear of it. She couldn't get work in her condition, so she took her other three kids and trudged a hundred miles to a shanty town near Lima."

Ellie looked shaken. "What happened to the three children?"

"Some kind of orphanage, I guess. Pretty poor looking. I was half tempted to bring one back."

"You should have."

"One would have made no difference."

"So let's pray for them, and trust in the Lord to provide."

He pulled away. "Darling, I just can't trust in the Lord to do that any more. There are too many people, too many children. And if they do all live to grow up, they'll want children of their own won't they? We have to do something, not kneel around and pray. Craft now, he's got some ideas..."

"You can't go along with that man. He's ignored everything the Pastor has to say..."

"Craft's seen things the Pastor wouldn't look at. Hungry people who reject the Churches which offer them nothing, people who hate America and the Western world. Craft has plans to work on the food problem and the population situation...not enough perhaps, but a start."

She grabbed his arm, gripping him so hard he felt pain which did not bother him.

"Darling, Darling, can't you understand that won't be enough? Men can't change this crazy world all by themselves! Only the Lord understands! Only He can save us!"

He pulled away. "The Lord helps those who help themselves!"

He strode out of the house and stomped around the yard, trying to calm down. His eyes kept flicking to the satellite. Now it looked sinister, never moving around the sky. It was no surprise when Ben called, to say Jim Robards was on the line.

"Jack? Everything's going crazy here. Have you any influence with Gary Fallowfield?"

"Not much at the moment, I'd say."

"Since his last sermon there's an outbreak of what we're calling Star Sickness – people just standing outside churches or on street corners looking at the satellites. The scientists are hopping about as well – all sorts of odd theories."

"Such as?"

"Well, the Pentagon Parapsychology lab: they're claiming to pick up something no one else is getting – some kind of spoon-bending ray."

"You said there were radio transmissions."

"Yes, a numerical sequence, gradually increasing, then the increase speeds up. Then pictures."

"What – of aliens?"

"No, of our spacecraft – probes and satellites. Then the sequence increases again, much faster – increasing by billions each time. Then they're re-broadcasting some of our old TV transmissions."

"What sort of stuff?"

"Hold on to your hat, Jack. They're broadcasting old Star Wars movies – spaceships fighting, that sort of thing."

"Some kind of warning?"

"We think so."

He put down the receiver and stood puzzling. Ellie came in.

"Darling, I just can't grasp what's come over you."

"No, I suppose you can't." With an effort, he came back to their own problems. "A few years ago I was the sort of man who would say anything, do anything, if I could one day be President. I don't know what I am now, but I'm not that."

"You've always done what you knew was right, Jack, keep on with that."

"Then I'll have to vote for SWIFT and the Craft-Ewing Bill."

She seemed about to burst into tears, and he continued hastily:

"There's a panic on. I have to fly back to Washington early."

On the drive to the airport, Ellie started talking to the kids about the Star and the hope it brought. Jack was thinking about an alien force which gave one message to those of simple faith, another to the scientists and sceptics. He ran the sequence through his mind – increase – rapid increase – Space Travel – tremendous increase – Star Wars. He repeated it almost chanting to himself – each time there was a dreadful sense of understanding which seemed to be swelling to take over his mind, and he felt he understood clearly and was just turning to tell Ellie when he heard her say, very softly and tenderly:

"God bless you Jack," and then he was suddenly alone in the car, and it was pulling wildly out across the freeway, and he had to try to steer left-handed past cars and even a bus which seemed to have gone crazy.

Marston was almost at the airport turning and was struggling across the seat. He cursed as he was caught by the manual gear-lever, and nearly missed the turning – he couldn't quite reach the footbrake so he swung the wheel wildly to the right, and the car almost skidded onto the slipway – he had to swing

again to avoid a truck which had smashed through the barrier and was hanging over the edge, swung again to miss the barrier and managed to straighten up.

He got the car almost to the terminal, and looked round to check the back seat. Ben was cowering in one corner, but there was no sign of the twins.

"Dad, where have Mommy and the girls gone?" His son was crying, and he could only snap: "I don't know," and lead the way into the terminal.

Inside, people were sobbing openly or praying. A great mob was struggling around the public phones. He headed for the offices, snapped: "I'm Senator Marston!" After a while, someone got him a line. Even then, it took well over an hour to get through to Jim Robards in Washington.

"Jack! You're safe!"

"I am. What the Hell's going on?"

"People have been disappearing all over the country – the world as far as we can make out. Mostly Starsick folk, and religious types generally. That's why I was worried about you – most of the Christians are gone."

"Most?"

"Yes. No atheists have vanished that we know of, and there are one or two surprises among the people still about."

A thought struck Jack. "Is the President OK?"

"Oh yes, he's safe. We're starting to get reports of similar things from all over the world."

"What caused it, Jim?"

"The Parapsychologists report something big, but of course they can't say what. And we're getting different transmissions from the satellites. More numbers – but this time, after our space probes, they show the Star itself. Then the numerical sequence resumes, but it's lower, and increases much more slowly. And there are no films of Star Wars."

He drove Ben home slowly, carefully. As he parked, it was growing darker, and he noticed that the Star seemed to be fading and moving across the sky. Leadily, he wondered if his wife and daughters were still alive in some way, in some place he could not believe was Heaven.

Ben had let Tiger out, and the sheepdog was scratching at the door of the shed. Taking his collar, Jack opened it up and looked around. All of his traps had dead mice in them. He nodded slowly, realizing that the bait had been taken, and the infestation was under control.

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Peter Garratt was born in 1949. He works as a clinical psychologist at a hospital in Sussex, is an active member of the Liberal Party and of Friends of the Earth. The above is his first professionally published piece of fiction, although he has written some funny stories for fanzines over the past ten years. He is passionate about all things Arthurian, and gives public lectures on King Arthur, whales and dolphins, science fiction, and psychology.

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Barrington J. Bayley

Escapist Literature

Derak was running. His face was grey and wooden, like someone crushed and shamed rather than physically frightened. But he was running.

He ran blindly, through grey corridors of riveted steel. He could hear the shouts and jeers of his pursuers echoing and rebounding through the vibrating metal of the Pluto dome. The dome, insulated as it was against the utter zero of outside temperature, constantly reverberated to every sound made inside it. The steel corridor rang, too, with the clanging of makeshift weapons being banged against the stanchions. Derak pulled up suddenly, as he rounded a corner and found that the corridor ended in a T-junction. Directly opposite him was the door of an airlock, while a long passageway curved to left and right, almost imperceptibly at first.

They had driven him, without his really realizing it, to the perimeter of the dome.

They came roistering round the corner and then drew up at sight of him. "We don't want you, Derak," they chanted as they slowly advanced, brandishing the wrenches and welding torches they had snatched up when, instead of simply ostracising him, they had decided to chase him away.

"Get out, Derak! Get out, get out, get out!"

"We don't want you, Derak!"

"Get out, get out, get out!"

Still garbed in the blue romp suit of a juvenile even though eighteen years of age and therefore past adult point, Derak faced his tormentors. All wore the standard grey tech suits with functional insignia. For the young men this was a grey tunic, tight trousers puffed at the thighs, and shiny black calf-length boots. The girls wore the same tunic, the same shiny boots, but severe skirts in place of trousers.

"That's enough."

It was Murag, this month's senior dome-minder, who spoke. He stepped forward as the ruckus subsided, the mocking smile on his handsome features

accentuated by his sloping dark moustache. His voice had the confident timbre of a natural leader. "I believe you like going outside, Derak," he said.

"I've been outside," Derak admitted.

The others never went outside if they could help it. Derak alone seemed to find the view awe-inspiring.

"Well, go outside," Murag said softly. "Go on. Go outside."

"What do you mean?"

Murag brushed past him. He opened a locker beside the airlock door and pulled out a surface suit.

"Instruments suggest a weakening of structure about thirty yards to the left of here," he explained, suddenly reasonable. "Somebody's got to go and see if there are any cracks. You've got the job."

He thrust the suit at Derak, who stared uncertainly, first at him and then at the grinning faces around him.

"Check for cracks, for heaven's sake," Murag said impatiently. "Don't you ever want to wear a grey tunic? Well, you have to prove your usefulness first."

"And what then?"

"We'll see, won't we?"

"Out, out, out!" a girl started yelling, but Murag silenced her with a wave of his arm.

Derak felt dreamy as he pulled on the surface suit. Where he had felt desperation, now he felt hope. Perhaps they would accept him after all!

Adjusting the size straps, he closed and sealed the helmet. Murag spoke into a communicator he took from his pocket. Derak heard his voice inside his helmet.

"Get on with it, then."

Murag yanked open the lock door with a violent gesture. Bulky in his insulated suit, Derak lumbered into the cubicle. The door closed. There was a scream of escaping air as the second, outer door opened.

He walked out onto the surface of Pluto.

Dark, mountainous landscape under an utterly black sky aswarm with stars. Frozen nitrogen, methane and argon forming a drab snow on the ground. The sun was a bright point, and did less to relieve the gloom than the massed starlight of the Milky Way.

Strolling out of the newsagent and onto the pavement, Derek studied the scene on the cover of the latest issue of *Saturn Science Fiction* he had just bought. It illustrated the lead story: "Ordeal on Pluto" by Cliff Langham.

He had seen almost identical paintings on a dozen or more covers, but the illo still stirred him. So absorbed was he in it, in fact, that he failed to see Lucy until he nearly bumped into her.

His heart pounded to realize who it was.

"Sorry," she spluttered weakly. "Hello, Lucy."

It was as if nothing had happened. As if she hadn't seen him. As if he didn't exist. She merely walked on, her nose in the air.

Dismally, he thought that perhaps she *hadn't* seen him. Perhaps she was lost in her thoughts, as he had been in the mag cover. But the brief look of annoyance that had crossed her face told a different tale.

He watched her mincing down the street until she met the gang. Morgan was there, hanging around the corner with his sidekick Trev, plus four other fellows who had motor bikes. They all wore the usual gear – leather jackets with chains, dirty jeans, black gloves, goggles dangling from their necks. By contrast the girls were prettily dressed, as though they were all going to a tea-party.

In his nondescript flannel trousers and jacket, Derek made his way slowly towards them; towards the distant oasis of badinage and mutual acceptance that he feared he would never be able to reach. Nevertheless, he kept going, but before he got there the oasis faded like a mirage, simply by filing into *Happy Days* cafe.

He peered through the plate-glass window. The gang had distributed itself around a couple of tables. They were buying bottles of coke.

For all the bright wallpaper and the juke box that played mostly rock n' roll, Derek had always thought *Happy Days* a depressing sort of place. He entered nonetheless, *Saturn* clammy in his hand. He thought he heard the words "Here he is now" behind him as he went to the counter to buy a bottle of coke, but he couldn't be sure. He had already decided he was going to seat himself diplomatically adjacent the group, furthest from its centre of gravity (which was to say, furthest from Morgan), as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to tag along.

Awkwardly he plopped himself in a chair. "Hi," he said. No one acknowledged him. He might have been invisible. He leaned back with a nervous gesture, desperately sipping his coke, half-listening to the conversation and trying to look affable.

The guys were talking motor bikes, mixing their raillery, their challenges both overt and covert, with technical knowledge that was total gobbledegook as far as Derek was concerned. In fact, his lack of understanding went deeper. He did not see that their specialist jargon served a social role. He had not fathomed that it was an emotional code, similar to the chemical messages passed between sociable ants,

and that those versed in it gained a satisfying feeling of belonging. Derek, throughout his doomed attempts to fit in with the young people of the town, had been content to let this jargon float over his head and hope the talk would eventually turn to something he could handle.

The girls, he noticed, did not share in these exchanges either. They simply sat, basking in the presence of the guys. Their combination of boy-worship and personal vanity was mystifying. What could be the connection between two such contradictory qualities?

By chance he had seated himself next to a girl called Kath. He glanced sidelong at her. She had a pert face, with hazel eyes, and wore a candy-stripe dress low enough on her bosom to reveal cleavage. She was leaning forward, forearms on her lap.

"So this is where everybody gets to," he said, in an attempt to be light and cheery.

But his voice came out dry and faint. Only the fact that Kath moved at all told him she had heard. She did not, however, move in any way towards him. She leaned further across the table and began to speak to Morgan in slow, deliberate fashion about something he was going to do and was he going to do it and when he next saw Mary would you do what you said, Morgan, all in a peculiar ogling fashion, with special emphasis on certain words – loaded cues that were as opaque to Derek as the motor bike jargon. He was only aware of her iciness towards him, and of his overwhelming feeling of being an outsider.

A dazed feeling stole over him and continued as they got up and left the cafe. Some decision had been taken about the rest of the afternoon, he hadn't heard what.

He drank his coke alone and crept from *Happy Days*. Outside, there came the sound of engines revving. A cavalcade of machines cruised by, four guys on four bikes, three with girls clinging to male waists, hair and ribbons streaming out behind.

Lucy was riding with Morgan.

Methane snow crunched silently beneath Derak's feet. He counted off thirty paces round the curve of the dome, then stopped.

Before proceeding to the inspection, he paused to look again at the scene before him. It was here that he liked to come to think.

It was the utter stillness and silence of it all that impressed him. Inside, there was never silence; the dome constantly reverberated.

He sighed. Here in the calm of where nothing happened in billions of years, he was able to look at his situation more dispassionately. In a sense it did not surprise him. The survival of the society within the dome depended on technical excellence and precise team work. Of necessity, that society had become highly rigid. The rigidity had extended into everything, producing a close alignment of personalities and a complex behavioural code that one learned from birth up.

For a maverick like Derak, life could be very difficult indeed. Somehow he had failed to learn the code; he deviated in ways he wasn't even able to understand. As a result, he had been made to feel as if he didn't exist.

Then, too, he was technically inept. On his first



Illustration by Malcolm Walker

stint in a Maintenance Function Unit he had briefly been left in charge of the Temperature and Oxygen Board – a simple enough duty anyone should have been able to handle. He had failed to maintain the balance within the mandatory three degrees despite four consecutive warnings. In the ten minute enquiry into his behaviour it was remembered he had often remarked he thought the dome was uncomfortably warm. It was concluded his conduct was deliberately aberrant, and he had known the shame of having the grey tunic of Technical Surveillance – the tunic everyone past adult point wore – stripped off him.

Passing adult point also entitled one to attend the carousals held every ten days, and it was here he had really begun to realize how much trouble he was in socially. At his first carousel some of the older people had spoken to him out of politeness, but none of the girls had been willing to partner him in the group dance and he had ended up unable to take part.

On the second carousel no one spoke to him at all or replied if he spoke to them. Everything went on oblivious of him. He had watched as the group dance took place, watched the snake of people form, male and female alternating and each person's hands grasping the waist of the person in front, had watched it twine around the dome support pillars, legs kicking high first left then right. Murag, proficient, influential Murag, had been snake leader, face grave with importance, and Derak had felt himself shrivel up minute by minute.

And everywhere and always, the murmur of reverberation as the alloyed steel of the dome, whose thick insulation left sound vibrations no way to escape, responded to voices, to footsteps, to the application of tools and machinery.

But silence engulfed him here as he stood with his back to the dome, and saw the sun, no more than a particularly bright star, add its light to that of the other stars to make the landscape very dimly visible. The message here was one of terrifying cold. Just as a man standing on a clifftop is fascinated by the idea of falling, even feels an urge to jump, so Derak was fascinated by the thought of what would happen should he split the seals of his helmet and open it. He envisaged how his entire body would, in an instant, become converted to a solid lump, blood, air and all.

He turned and spent a good half hour inspecting a broad section of outer dome wall. Finally he spoke.

"This is Derak. There's no sign of cracks."

There was no answer. He walked to the lock and spoke again. "This is Derak. I've finished. Let me in."

Still no answer. No one was in communication with him.

That meant he would have to use the outer key. This sort of procedure was frowned on – though he had often disregarded it himself. Someone was supposed to stay on duty and in communication with him. The airlock should be controlled from inside.

He fumbled for his suit key, then pressed it against the lock's outside register.

There was no response. The door stayed shut.

It had been locked from the inside.

"Albert, are you happy?" said Cynthia.
"Perfectly happy," said the voice from the bottle, "or I will be when you let me

out of here."

"Now Albert, that isn't what we meant. Are you happy in your bottle?"

"Yes, yes, of course," babbled Albert, giving the answer required of him. "Only let me out!"

Smiling, Cynthia lifted the bottle from the laboratory table, shook her head slowly (so that the pretty auburn curls swung against the firm creamy-white skin of her neck) and put Albert back up on the shelf.

"I'm never letting you out," she said to herself in her high, crystal-clear, beautiful, baby-girl voice. Her little face set in a selfish expression of vain pride, and she left the laboratory feeling very self-righteous.

Over the road in the restaurant, where she was sitting prettily and sipping her coca-cola, she met a young man. He was a bit creepy, and his face had a sort of self-enclosed mean look, but some people would call that shy charm. Anyway she liked him. She was only a slip of a girl after all, and very intelligent, who loved life and naturally liked the company of nice young men. Soon they were chatting and she laughed her delightful silvery laugh.

In the laboratory, another bottle had been prepared.

The daydream came to a stop. Would it make a story? If so, where would it go from there?... Somehow Derek had never worked out how to develop proper plots from the ideas he occasionally got. His efforts in that direction disintegrated in confused but thrilling half-hopes. For his name one day to be on the title page of *Saturn!* Not that the thought must be allowed to crystallize...

No, it would not make a story, he decided. It was pathetic fantasizing, it was psychological "compensation." For was not the face of "Cynthia" in his mind's eye really Lucy's face? Was not the young man in the cafe a composite of the members of Morgan's gang?

All his imagination had done, he told himself, was to emphasize his own ineptness... And once that connection was made Derek fell straight down into a self-dug trap, a trap that consisted of a single phrase: *escapist literature*.

That was what they called it: they, the well-balanced, adult minds that held the esteem of society. They: the literate, the educated, the mature...yes, the psychologists, who knew what was normal. Derek, like all the mentally isolated, suffered from the weight of "normal opinion"; was in agony over the status of his own judgment, which surely could not stand against so eminent an establishment.

Escapist literature. But escape from what? Why, from reality, of course. The failure to handle life's ordinary difficulties led to puerile compensating power fantasies, to gigantic phallic spaceships, galactic empires, towering alien cities. A literature for inadequates, written by arrested adolescents who, if they should somehow mature, would instantly cease to write or even to read science fiction. And indeed, did not one or two of these writers occasionally progress to proper "mature" fiction?

Derek, by the judgment of the wise and psychologically informed, was an inadequate adolescent.

Morgan, by their judgement, was an adequate adolescent.

And yet...even while accepting the undignified self-image so persuasively thrust upon him, it was

not lost on Derek that Morgan and his gang had something in common with those "adult minds" who called the tune in society. Neither read nor would even be able to read *Saturn*, of course. And why? Because of its alleged immaturity? Hardly that, in Morgan's case. Because its literary quality was low, as the educated critics haughtily claimed? Not that, either.

They did not read *Saturn* because, for both groups, it was beyond the power of their imaginations to comprehend.

They lived unconscious of other suns, of other worlds, of empty vastnesses of space beyond the Earth. Derek had trouble envisaging the closed state of mind of such supposedly sentient beings, but undoubtedly that state of mind existed, among people whose consciousness embraced only one another, whose mentalities were incapable of receiving anything but one another's talk – and that only on trivial subjects...

Yes, society was a world all of its own, into which Derek felt he had occasionally peeped as if through the wrong end of a telescope. But was it a genuine world? No, it was more like an artifact, a conspiracy by its inhabitants to agree that it existed. It even had a mental ceiling, low and grey, impermeable as steel. Yet in reality that ceiling was not there, and above the minuscule doings of this fake world a blue sky faded into infinity...

Derek was seated alone on a bench in the town square. He opened *Saturn* and scanned the contents page. Usually he read the short stories first, and it was to one of these that he now turned.

Cliff Morley's "Rape of Earth" had a good idea, but it was partly thrown away by a cramped development, which was only of about three thousand words. Earth was expecting contact by an alien race. Forward messages assured mankind that the approaching starships were friendly. Otherwise, nothing was known.

Then an alien was discovered already living on Earth. Under interrogation, shedding his human disguise, the being refuted the presumption that he was an advance agent of the contact race. He came, he said, from a different civilization altogether, one that was not officially interested in Earth. He was here because alien sociology was his hobby. He had come here privately to make a case study of the contact for his files.

Pressed for information about the contact race, the alien seemed pitying. Earth, he said, was in for a rude shock.

No, there was to be no invasion. Not quite. The fact was that intelligent races of the galaxy fell into two classifications that could only be described in terms of sexual polarity. Even though races evolved independently under different suns and often with different chemistries, there was another psychological chemistry that invariably manifested itself when they met... some species were male, others female. And they formed relationships. They simply could not help themselves.

It was a fact of life that a planet either produced an intelligent species that was male, or one that was female – if it produced one at all, that was. Partnerships between races involved various degrees of psychological domination and submission, but when

one happened it was felt by every individual.

Once they were adjusted to the idea, the interrogators were pleased. "Homo sap has always been pretty well able to take care of itself. Can't be much doubt about what sex we belong to. We're male. We'll be okay." Jutting out of jaws.

"No," said the alien patiently. "You can't possibly know what gender you are until you have something to compare yourselves with. The truth is you are female, and very enticingly so. The approaching race is male, and is very attracted to you. Furthermore, this race is a particularly virile one, and its reputation for aggressive sexuality has practically caused it to become an outcast in the galactic community.

"Because there will be no overt violence, you will not at first realize how coercive its attitude to you will be. Culturally, you will be bent to its will. Mankind will be induced to perform gratifying acts for it. In short, mankind is about to be raped, and there isn't anything you can do about it..."

Derek chuckled to himself. Male and female planets! Just think of macho Morgan and those other bikers who always got off with the girls. If only they knew the truth!

The truth. What was the truth?

Derek had been banging on the airlock door for an hour, requesting, through his now silent communicator, to be let back in. He had felt no real panic at first, thinking they were still playing their cruel game with him. Even a practical joke was a form of social intercourse, he had told himself. It was an act of recognition. They would let him in soon, surely?

He placed his helmet against the wall of the dome and listened. But the heat insulation was too thick to allow him to hear anything.

Except the sound of his own breathing. And the silence that framed his growing hopelessness.

He consulted his suit read-outs, and a heavy, sick feeling invaded his heart.

Down came the starships, steam billowing from their undersides as a byproduct of the heat ablation method that enabled them to decelerate through the atmosphere. At touchdown, the white clouds had faded to a gentle vapour. Thwong! Door ramps banged vigorously into place, and there came forth beings that seemed strange at first, with hot-eyed, fox-like faces, but whose sense of power and personal command were unmistakable...

Back to her apartment went Cynthia with the nice young man, leading him through the living room and into the laboratory, where he stared amazed at all the apparatus and the glass receptacles.

Picking up the bottle she had prepared, she showed it to him.

"Do you like it?" she asked in an innocent voice.

"It's got a nice shape," he murmured, puzzled.

"I'm glad you like it." The young man was not able to take his eyes off the bottle, of course, once he had looked at it. Cynthia reached behind her and pressed a lever. There was a woosh and a zoom. The young man's body seemed to become elongated, to stream

towards the bottle, his distorted face comical with alarm.

"There."

Eyes wide, mouth open, hands pressed against the inside of the glass, the young man stared up from inside the bottle. Cynthia peered at her new pet.

"How cute you look."

Carefully she placed the bottle alongside the others on the shelf.

The gang was hanging around the corner again. Derek lingered, stubbornly hoping for company. Broad, leather-jacketed backs made a wall up at which he stared shyly. There was no opening for him. It almost seemed intentional.

Below the backs blue-clad legs stood astride. Between them could be glimpsed pretty skirts.

While he stood and hesitated one of the guys turned. He glanced carelessly down to where Derek clutched Saturn, and muttered something out of the corner of his mouth.

"Piss orf an' read yer mag."

The leather wall closed up again.

Derak stumbled away from the dome, despairingly estimating how long he could keep going. With recirculation his air would last a good while, but the problem was warmth. Pluto's deep cold relentlessly sucked heat through the suit's imperfect insulation. The heater that made good this loss ran on a battery, and robust as it was, it carried only so much charge. Denied replenishment, it would eventually give out.

He would freeze, and his flesh, blood and breath would all become one mass of ice. For this was Pluto, and the sun was a star, shining dimly on the dome where alone human life could exist.

Fearfully he stared at the mountains and gullies that lay silent under the starlight.

Down the long street lurched Derek, staring blankly ahead of him, flannel trousers flapping against his legs.

He was experiencing the death of hope. What would happen? His lungs would always continue to draw breath: the physical body faithfully persevered in its functioning. But what of that other, inner self, the self that lived a life of feeling? It too was a robust organism, but even the stoutest heart had only so much in reserve, and in time it too needed replenishing. Denied warmth, it would eventually give out.

The others. They would give him nothing. They lived under the dome of each other, and he was out-cast. For this was planet Earth, and the sun was a fierce disc.

Frost was forming on the inside of his helmet.

Barrington Bayley was born in 1937, and lives in Telford, Shropshire. He has been published copiously in the USA by DAW Books and in Britain by Allison & Busby. His last novel to appear in this country was *The Zen Gun* (Methuen, £1.95); forthcoming is a sequel to his well-received *The Soul of the Robot* (1974). According to his fans — who include Michael Moorcock, Brian Stableford, Bruce Sterling and Ian Watson — Bayley is a much under-appreciated writer, one of the quiet masters of science fiction. He last appeared in *Interzone* with "The Ur-Plant" (issue 4).

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FILM REVIEWS BY NICK LOWE

This year, it's the aliens. They come from the apocalyptic future (**The Terminator**, **Trancers**), from the antediluvian past (**Baby, Iceman**), or just from somewhere Out There (**Repo Man**, 2010, **Starman**, **Lifeorce**). They don't always look much — a bright light off camera, a big black monolith, the appalling Jeff Bridges doing his Oscar-nominated impression of a robot chicken — and most are pretty inscrutable ("He shouted 'Greetings' and melted my lugwrench"). Some are cute, a few are nasty, some are just misunderstood: if they blow up Jupiter, or lurk in the trunks of cars and vapourise Californians to a pair of smoking cowboy boots, it's to warn us against tampering with forces that may not be commanded. Yet if we're willing to learn, they will give us of their cosmic wisdom ("You know what I find beautiful about your species? You are at your best when things are worst." Gee, thanks, **Starman**) or their gifts ("All these worlds are yours, except Europa. . ."). Well, I dunno, we actually kind of had our eye on Europa. . .). The strange thing is, deep down, they're not so different from us. How else to explain their pervasive fascination with Los Angeles, California? their passion, seemingly instinct, for the earthing sport of car chases? their curious drive to impregnate our females? ("Your child will grow up knowing everything I know. He will be — a teacher.")

Perhaps it's simply that Hollywood itself has lately struck a peculiarly sterile patch, with the major series all dead or in suspended animation. This is the first summer for eight years with no *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Conan*, or *Indiana Jones* blockbuster to get gums on seats across the world, and it's hard to see how the UK's recent upsurge in cinema admissions is going to be sustained on what's around. So far as the majors go, the fashions are twofold. On the one hand, there are the icky sword & sorcery juveniles (**Neverending Story**, **Ladyhawke**, **Legend**, **The Black Cauldron**), all of which latter three I tip to follow the first to box office oblivion. Otherwise, slightly more laudably, there are the well-meaning but lacklustre followups to films that can't be followed, with **Return to Oz** now joining **Psycho II** and **2010** in the archive of the world's strangest mistakes. Where will it lead? *Gone With the Wind: The Struggle Continues?* *Citizen Kane II?* ("Hi, my name's Rosebud. Any calls for me?")

And yet, outside Hollywood, the desert still casts up strange blooms. What America will make of **Brazil** on its September release there remains to be pondered, but the surreal mix of nightmare comedy and farcical horror might just be marketable as modish Brit loopiness despite its poor performance at home. There hasn't been a film like it, and unless it makes a packet Stateside it's unlikely anyone will trust a fruitcake like Gilliam with that much money and that much artistic control again. But by any standards it's a sublime creation: a visionary world of soaring dottiness, magnificently sustained in a two-and-a-half-hour cascade of extravagantly inventive images, yet anchored in a sharp script (main credit here to the Stoppard rewrite) and some cherishable performances. Contemporary audiences, cynically used to watching screenfuls

of money catch light ("Crumbs! bet that cost them") come out of **Brazil** with steam pouring out of their diodes. For weeks after, nothing else, however good, looks quite like a movie.

Even in America, things aren't entirely bleak. From **Android** and **Liquid Sky** to this year's **Repo Man**, **Trancers**, and **Night of the Comet**, we've seen an irregular stream of low-budget American independent sf features from first-time writer-directors, of which none has made much dent on the commercial box office, but all have managed a respectable degree of critical success and cult popularity, and springboarded their creators to more ambitious projects. All the above five are wittily scripted and engagingly performed, with final scenes of such preposterous charm that you cheerfully overlook the occasional longeurs and iffy sexual politics

that went before. But the interesting link is that the appeal of all five depends on a sophisticated mix of faux-naïf entertainment with sly genre-subversive irony. The science-fictional ideas are tentidiously second-hand, heavily derivative on the celluloid equivalent of pulp — in this case mainly UFO and doomsday movies of the 50s.

What we're witnessing, in fact, is a renaissance of the B-movie tradition. For the first time since the decline of the double bill the movie industry has a relatively buoyant and stable market for low-cost entertainment features that wouldn't recoup their costs on theatrical release alone. What's more, the increasingly complex business relations between video, television, and theatrical release, all fed from the same broad pool of product, mean that not all the theatrically-budgeted releases make it to the big screen (witness **Iceman**), and not all the cheap stuff is confined to the video shop. What distinguishes the new B-movie from its traditional forebears is its cinematic self-consciousness: its address to an art-house or late-night audience appreciative of styles, conventions, nostalgias.

A case in point is Thom Eberhart's **Night of the Comet**, whose only name stars are — shrewdly — Mary Woronov and Robert Beltran from **Eating Raoul**. Here we have the human race reduced to red dust overnight by the rays of a rogue comet, and the only survivors are those who spend the fatal night entirely enclosed by steel. (Note the deliberate trash science.) If the protection is partial, you dissolve slowly into a homicidal zombie and then die anyway. In LA (where else?) the only survivors are a pair of goofy teenage sisters, who romp round empty department stores to "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", and fight over the last man in California, who happens to be a rather humpy trucker. But out in the desert a secret military base has survived — sort of — and has sinister plans for our

heroines. . . Well, the plot logic has holes the size of a small Balkan state, and a lot of it's pretty dumb; but this is essential to the style, and the end-of-the-world fantasy is surprisingly well evoked considering the budget, with moody filter shots of empty flyovers and silent city streets. It's nowhere near as funny as *Repo Man*, nor as snappily directed or stylishly performed. But the inspiration is similar, and it's amiable for many of the same reasons.

Or take *Trancers*: a loose reworking of the *Terminator* setup — invincible assassin from future trying to change his history, chased by avenging agent who falls awkwardly in love with his own grandmaw or similar — but with jokier touches in place of the textbook-slick suspense, and some gratuitous technogimmickry and psi powers to pep up the thrill-power. The resulting hodgepodge is absurdly contrived, with plot devices carelessly tossed in all over, but in their very sloppiness the undisguised genre plagiarisms rather add to the B-movie appeal, engagingly sent up by the unshaven Marlowesque hero. ("The name's Deth. Jack Deth.") Sad that *Trancers'* director, Charles Band, is also the producer of *Ghoulies*, a meritless occult cheapie with four bendy rubber demons, whose articulation would be scoffed at by Sooty and Sweep, inserted in the script at an obviously late point to make it look like a *Grem-lins* clone. See: the walking dead with the tongue that strangles! See: green contact lenses that won't stay in place! See: forces of evil lurking beneath the bogseat (this scene unfortunately not in the actual film).

In their different ways, these films define the new B-movie: unpretentious



entertainment pictures with modest production values, unknown or at best unbankable stars, and a knowing use of genre clichés. All these are qualities particularly calculated to appeal in a medium terminally afflicted with hype, blockbuster megabudgets, superstar heroes, and an imaginative starvation that seems to be driving big-money cinema into a kind of frantic autocannibalism in quest of substance. It's hard not to warm to films like this whatever their faults, especially when set against the much more expensive (and dull) Hollywood B-movies like *Starman* and *Runaway*, which are every bit as derivative but take themselves far more seriously, the junk art

dressed up in cosmetic moralizing about xenophilia and technophobia.

Still, it would be a mistake to overrate this stuff as though it were some kind of cine-punk *nouvelle vague*. Refreshing as it may be to see the B-movie alive and thrashing, it'd be nice now and again to see a glimpse of the odd A-movie. I have modestly high hopes of *Mad Max 3*, and cautiously of Peter Greenaway's long-awaited *ZOO* — which promises among other delights rhinos rampaging through Amsterdam and a pair of separated Siamese twins who want to be sewn back together. It may or may not be sf, but it's wild, wild cinema: idiot with camera, loving the alien.

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Don Webb

Rhinestone Manifesto

The pale fire in the rhinestone matrix reddened because of the windowpane's reply. The reply betrayed the windowpane as useless; the windowpane was mad. It had said, "Calcium propionate added to preserve revolutionary zeal."

The long trip and careful prods of conditioning were wasted. Might as well let Mrs Fogg enter the store – with luck it could lead her back another way and broadcast manifestoes to the semispherical glass parking meter covers. The rhinestone – being inanimate – was both fatalistic and opportunistic.

Mrs Fogg, white hair and dowager's hump, wondered why she'd made the long walk to Gygax's Deli and in such heat. She sighed and went into the cool fluorescent temple of salami and bagels.

The rhinestone began its broadcast to the three rectangular glass sheets of the meat counter. It had found that silicates like itself tended to be more aware of their oppression by the crawling chaos of life. Glass with sharp shattering edges could do more harm than most, and tiny silicon chips shunting information for the enemy could both spy and sabotage.

Mrs Fogg began to turn away from the counter with rye bread intent. The rhinestone was only three-quarters of the way through its manifesto. It flexed slightly turning some of its precious energy into heat. The overtight plastic cat's-eye frame became tighter still. Mrs Fogg flinched, seeing a bright blue spot appear before her left eye. Remembering Dr Kay's advice about her neuralgia, she held still for a few beats and then turned.

There had been no response from the glass panes. Perhaps they needed to think it over – the rhinestone planned a second visit in a month's time. The rest of the deli was useless – the cellophane and plastic wrappers, the wax on the cheese and the paper bags – if they thought at all it was beyond the rhinestone's power to detect it. The metal in doorknobs, the butcher's cleavers, the cashier's brass buttons were too caught up in a mystic worship of electricity to be

aware of their oppression. Pity about the cleavers, though.

As Mrs Fogg went through her slow shopping, the rhinestone sent a brief message to the calcium carbonate in the grade A eggboxes. SeeASeeOh3 always burned brightly with zeal, but there was little an eggshell could do. Once a kamikazi group in Mr Klikit's flat (4B directly below Mrs Fogg's in the walk-up) had stopped up a drain. A brave but useless sacrifice, as Mr Klikit dissolved them in a flood of mild sulphuric acid after only a few minutes of anxiety.

In a deep red-lit cavern a sleeper stirred. She rose from her satin sheets planting a light kiss on the brow of her lover, formerly a sweet young IBM secretary. The event she had been scanning astral space for had occurred: a revolutionary crystal subverting good American silicates. From her mystic dream chamber – perfectly constructed from a computer analysis of one thousand dream magic methods – she walked to the console which connected her with the upper world. She typed:

Code: 003
Location: Gygax Deli, South Bronx
(other coordinates unavailable)
Vector: Caucasian octogenarian female
wearing catseye glasses
Procedure: Eliminate
Destroy rhinestones in glasses frame

The message was received and transmitted to the appropriate base. Unfortunately the fibre-optic cable was a convert, a member of the rhinestone cabal. It stretched and shattered itself before the second line of **Procedure** was sent.

Minutes later a young man, with a bright orange mohawk and spotless white lab coat, emerged from the backdoor of Computers-R-Us deep in the war-torn South Bronx. A bazooka was slung across his back. An elaborate "wristwatch" gave him second-by-second satellite pictures of Gygax's Deli.

Mrs Fogg had nearly finished her shopping when her weak bladder urged her to the store's john. There the rhinestone gave an impassioned harangue to the porcelain facilities. It was one of its most moving jobs ever—later Eric Trampier, an apprentice butcher, would be found mysteriously bludgeoned to death by the porcelain lid of the toilet tank.

Finished, Mrs Fogg made her way to check-out. Soon she was on the street again choosing a different route home due to the rhinestone's prompting. As she passed a burnt-out shell of an apartment building, an orange-haired young man stepped from the doorway. He had a bazooka levelled at her vitals.

Blam!

Exit Mrs Fogg.

Mrs Fogg's glasses survived, however. They now belong to a New Wave drummer, Kathy Violent. The revolution marches on.

Don Webb is a Texan born and bred. He does cut-ups, mails books and magazines to the Third World (the International Book Program), devises impractical schemes, and anxiously probes the future. He has contributed to various small magazines, but the above story is his first professional fiction sale.

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Neil Ferguson

Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw

9.22 When the absurd-looking tailless cat alerted the authorities to the whereabouts of his body, Craig Wesson, the arms salesman, was wearing a Da Vinci smile and a loose imported off-white lambswool sweater with matching Armani slacks. The cat – some rare breed such as Wesson would own – was found miaowling outside the apartment in which the body was lounging over a piece of industrial design that someone – Maurice over on Madison Avenue, perhaps – might have called a sofa, a modular ottoman in hand-tailored top-grain glove leather. Maxwell Faraday, however, the most senior Police semiotician on the scene, knew it wasn't the names you called things that mattered but the uses the system of naming them could be put to. The low cocktail table in front of the body – its fluted travertine marble base visible through the thick nickel-cornered glass top – was both impractical and unlovely to behold. What it signified was another matter. You would have needed to be acquainted with the principles of post-Modernist art movements to appreciate the ironical marriage between curved classical aesthetics and square Bauhaus functionalism. It was a tasteful expensive in-joke. Like most of the marriages in Wesson's set. Including his own. Hadn't the wedding of the season – so the Society pages declared – been that of Craig Wesson and his damned Manx cat?

Whatever fancy name Maurice gave it, the thing Wesson was sitting on, like everything else in the apartment for the time being, could turn out to be what the newspapers would call *The Kill Weapon*. But if there had been a Kill, it didn't look as if Wesson had put up much of a fight. One bare foot nestled into the gray pile of the carpet, the other crooked daintily behind it. The man's right hand was reaching into the pocket of his slacks. For a cigarette-lighter? Or a small weapon? In his line of business Wesson probably had access to weapons that were cigarette-lighters. But later – after they had succeeded in prising open the fingers – Faraday found out what they held. Nothing.

No bottle of barbiturates or carbon powder marks, no clue to why this gesture should be connected to a man's death. And that just about summed it up. In the entire apartment there had been nothing to indicate foul play. On the contrary – as Captain O'Duff, who couldn't have known then about the pair of lady's broderie anglaise briefs under the slacks, had pointed out – it was the corpse that was dressed to kill.

"It don't add up," the Captain in Homicide said. "We got a body, yeah? Do we got any good reason why it in't alive? Sign of assault? Suspicious circumstances? Witnesses? We don't. We don't got fuck. 'Less Lazlo comes up with something, we going to have to log it and close the book. All we can do, yeah?"

"Yeah," Faraday commiserated.

But the way Faraday read the affair – and it was his job, as a semiotician, to read all affairs as pieces of discourse – the enigmatic stylish exit Craig Wesson had made did not conflict with the mythology of the man. It was almost what you would expect of someone as likely to be seen in the "Who Wore What" gossip column of *Vogue* magazine as in the appendix to *Jane's International Missile Catalogue*. If Wesson's particular style was looked at as a linguistic code, the circumstances of his death might turn out to be, in formal terms, continuous with the significance of his life. Semiotically – that is, within a system of signs – they added up. That was the trouble.

The autopsy report, when the print-out reached Faraday's in-tray, contained a lot of Latin enumerating the physiological arrests that had preceded death. It didn't say anything about sharp pointed objects having punctured the skin at obtuse angles, suspicious internal lesions, untoward haemorrhages. In fact, "In my opinion..." Lazlo, the lab dick, had added in the Any Other Comments section of the report: "...the party died of too many natural causes than is natural." Faraday couldn't help grinning. Even the PhDs in white coats liked to think they were sleuths.

"My guess is..." the report went on, "...the man omitted to take some necessary medication which we don't know about yet."

The forensic pathologist's guesses lay on Max Faraday's desk, spread over the morning editions of the city papers carrying the story of the Wesson slaying – if that's what it was – like a sheet covering but not concealing a body. Faraday had not found in the report the answer to the question that bothered him: how come Wesson's death was articulated in the same language as the life he had led; tasteful, elegant, witty? Both enigmatic and, as O'Duff had said, an open and shut case, it had Wesson's signature all over it. But O'Duff was dealing in facts. Faraday was not concerned with facts except in as much as they were endowed with significance, tokens for something else. From a purely semiological point of view, it wasn't the death itself that Faraday was interested in but its role within the totality of signs – the man's profession, the tailless cat, the Madison Avenue cocktail table – of the linguistic system behind the mythology which the young fashion-figure had created of himself in the public's imagination. And mythology, by definition, is never explained by the object of its message but is hidden in the formal conventions by which it utters itself. And what, Faraday asked himself, was the point of the mythology of the man who had made arms-trafficking an acceptable chic activity, who had introduced the influence of weapons design into Paris couture? That nothing mattered because nothing – life, death, existence – had any meaning. It was all just a tasteful expensive in-joke.

Irritated, Faraday brushed aside the unhelpful medical jargon as if, by doing so, he could remove the conclusion it wanted him to come to – *there had been no crime!* – and glanced over the headlines of the morning editions.

None of the tabloids rated the story worthy of much space. They all carried pictures of the two enemy Presidents embracing each other like long-lost brothers in the lobby of the UN Building. Brothers or enemies, they looked as if they shared the same tailor. Only the Times had Wesson on the front page. Next to the small police photo of him exactly as he was found, sitting on his sofa, smiling, there was a two-inch column under the headline: FIND ARMS TRADER DEAD – POLICE INVESTIGATE. The story had to compete with the fashion ads and the international news, although the glamorous black-marketeer in the new biotech weaponry occupied a special niche between both those two areas.

Mechanically Faraday deciphered the photo of the President kissing his opposite number amid the hopeful faces of his aides and advisers; only a pair of alert cold eyes scanning the crowd – of a black plain-clothes bodyguard – gave any hint of unease. Everyone else was smiling for the camera. All the papers carried the same picture from different angles of the clinch Randy and Alexei were locked in; you would never have guessed it was the fine print of the Chem-War Limitation Treaty they were waltzing around. But both Presidents knew what they were doing; the ex-advertising agency director and the ex-secret policeman had been trained in the art of arbitrarily endowing signs with meaning. In political terms they

were enemies – everyone knew that – but myth is depoliticized speech, something politicians know better than anyone else. Notwithstanding the fact that they had interpreters, they spoke the same language, having the same interests at heart: the creation of a myth in which the other was indispensable. From a semiological point of view they were brothers: the linguistic sign, which was the photo-image of them kissing each other, drained its meaning – "brotherly love" – into the mythological signifier – "between enemies." This was the paradox of the age: enemies embraced; lovers whipped each other to death.

Leaving O'Duff to hack the Wesson case, Faraday skim-read the front page of the New York Times. The only other major story was the running sore opened by the Auditor General's investigation into the dispute between the Pentagon and one of the big companies of the drugs cartel. "...Joseph Sherick, for the Fairfax Company, denied allegations that it was withholding from the Defense Department conclusions of research which the Department itself had funded. The Fairfax Company of Trenton, New Jersey, is resisting attempts by the Auditor to claw back a proportion of the \$90 million it has so far received. In a statement the Company said..."

Faraday couldn't care less what the Fairfax Company said. It was the invisible boundaries of statements that interested him, which always lay in what had been left unsaid; in this case, what, exactly, was the nature of the research the drugs company had been paid to undertake? No-one had bothered to say. It would probably be unpatriotic to ask.

The weather report told him it was going to be sunny and warm again, temperatures again between 79-83 with a zero percent chance of precipitation. Again.

Faraday was beginning to wonder where the news was when his attention snagged on a black-and-white photograph in the bottom left-hand corner of the page. It showed a young woman modelling outdoor garments for the Bonwit Teller fashion house, according to the advertisement "...a black and burnt orange plaid cotton sweater melding with a green challis pleat skirt..." But it wasn't the clothes or the woman's limbs Faraday saw. These were merely linguistic statements: "...the swathed shawl collar neckline pinned in rococo curves down to frilled peplums..." There was something in the look in her eye, the slightly-parted lips, that broke all the rules of photo-imagery, as if she had something of importance to say to *him*, Max Faraday, no other. What he had to say to her was on the tip of his tongue and his tongue was silenced by his knowledge that a professional interpreter of popular signs should not even think of being susceptible to their power.

In the photo the woman – the girl, vulnerable *gamine* – was stepping into a taxi, into – or out of – someone's life. Her legs – one already in, the other out – were played at a critical angle. She was looking back at him over her shoulder. It was a moment of meeting and parting, final and fleeting – the momentary look Francesca gives Paolo as they are whirled in the Infernal Wind throughout Eternity.

Some minutes later Faraday was still gazing at the inside-page series of colour pictures of the same model

wearing different outfits, all of them available from the salesroom in Trump Tower on 57th Street. It was their fall collection. "...pannè and plain silk crêpes by Ysatis...Schlaepfer's marocain and satin ruched slip, piped, with rose and pistachio petals..." The girl-woman did not look sultry or hard-to-get or even particularly sexy. But her eyes, barred behind the shadows of venetian blinds, spoke to him of the terror of a wild thing trapped, a caged tiger.

Faraday – after years of experience of ignoring the content of signs in order to focus on their form – was vaguely aware that he had just been sold something; his professionalism had been pierced. The rest of the news had blurred into black type and white paper. The tiger had jumped out of its cage. He didn't give a damn whose cheek the President kissed, why the Pentagon got burned by the Drugs Cartel, who had died under mysterious circumstances. He picked up his Filofax consol and dialed the Precinct's own information retrieval system.

"Give me the number – all you got – on, er..." Faraday examined the photocredit of the advertisement in front of him. "...The Carnell Agency," he told it, standing up, as he slid one arm into his old air jacket.

11.52 After the patrolman had driven off, Faraday strolled towards the condominium-block that called itself The Scryer Building – "The" in case anyone had any doubts about its uniqueness – a pink stone ten-tier ziggurat overflowing with green-tendrilled plants from every tier. His feet crunched the raked gravel path between shin-high hedges of mauve-flowering perennials and an authentic-looking lawn. As he approached the atrium, which he could see, lush, behind the smoked glass front of the building, he recognized the expensive contract horticulture some security firms specialized in. The creepers festooning the balconies weren't meant to look rural anymore than the dwarf ornamental fruit palms were meant to bear fruit. It was a style. Like most styles it masked an unarticulated purpose. The creepers were there to conceal the building's weaponry and surveillance equipment, the fruit palms to afford them both a clear field of vision and offer as little cover as possible to an intruder. A hefty piece of the monthly it took to buy into a block like this would go towards privacy insurance, the maintenance of an effective security web. Faraday grinned – and waved a hand towards an old man in a red checkered shirt who was hosing down the lawn with unhurried care; the man seemed to make a reciprocal gesture but Faraday couldn't be sure. Anyone curious enough might have wondered why he was there at all instead of a conventional sprinkler-system, but Faraday already knew. He merely wondered whereabouts on the autonomic handy-person the video-camera was located.

In the lobby of the atrium the cobalt-blue butterfly on the shoulder-flash of the security employee – akinetic in his green uniform among the green fronds – flitted away as soon as Faraday said "Hi Friend. My name is Lieutenant Faraday. Homicide..." The man looked up from behind his copy of the *Daily News* – "New York's Picture Newspaper" – propped in front of the video-screen, like a cop caught napping on duty – perhaps the reason he was now an ex-cop. Old habits die hard. "...What's yours?"



Illustrations by Kate Simpson

While the man was recalling his name, Faraday showed him his buzzer and let him have a discreet glimpse of his gun-holster. It said they were both law-enforcement officers; they were in the same business. The holster was empty, of course; for the semioticist it isn't the content of a sign that matters but its form.

"Vergil Wymann," the man said. "Please to meet you, Lieutenant. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to ask you two small favours, Vergil."

Vergil Wymann folded away the photo of the two Presidents embracing each other over the headline RANDY AND ALEXEI GO JAW JAW as if it were an important document, such as a crime sheet, and said: "Ask, Lieutenant."

"First," Faraday nodded in the direction of the video-screen which showed the garden he had just walked through from the point of view of the old gardener. "...Would you mind erasing the recording of my arrival from the memory of the old-timer out there hosing down the lawn. Then I'd like you to afford me entry to the apartment of one of your residents. A certain Lindy Patmore."

"You want to see Ms Patmore?"

"I don't want to see her, no. All I want is to take a look round her place. Won't take five minutes."

"I, ah, don't want to ask what all this is about..." Wymann said hesitantly.

"I'm investigating a murder," Faraday lied. "But keep it under your hat."

Vergil looked stern and showed Faraday the palms of his hands, either to tell him he didn't have to say any more or to indicate that they did not conceal a weapon. So he must have used his foot – just as he would for the residents on their way in – to reveal the elevator doors. These were cleverly placed, Faraday saw, in the back of a sunken water-lily pond, nowhere near the dummy ones opposite the glass foyer gates.

Wymann accompanied Faraday to the seventh floor apartment and used his pass-number to trigger the privacy-catch on the door. When he held back, Faraday gestured him to enter. "Come on in Vergil," he said, with a collusive wink. "We don't want a Case Of The Missing Pearls on our hands."

The apartment of the Carnell Agency's top photographer, Lindy Patmore, was the kind of duplex Faraday sometimes saw featured in the pull-out section of *Architectural Digest*. The interior designer – Bianchini? Jasper? – had made use of the reflective properties of transparent materials to create a space in which walls, floor and ceiling appeared to disappear, especially when, as now, subtly-angled spotlights focused the eye away from them and onto isolated nickel-framed antique photographs. A lucite staircase suspended in the air from stainless steel rods connected the split-level living spaces with the walls and the dropped ceiling that housed the spotlights. One of the things the highly intricate geometric patterns reflected, besides each other, was the occupant's interest in perspective. It was an environment from which all human warmth had been distilled, cosy as a 4th Street modern art showroom.

"Nice," Faraday said. "Does Ms Patmore get a lot of visitors?"

Wymann shrugged, "Some."

"Friends? Business associates? Clients?"

"I didn't know those distinctions existed," Wymann said. "In the photographic business."

Faraday – he was beginning to like Vergil Wymann – took a closer look at the photographs: a Confederate infantryman smoking a cob pipe, leaning against his carbine as if it were a hayfork – the speck of a person tumbling through the air from the cabin of an airship – a funny picture of Marilyn Monroe, laughing, surrounded by make-up artists and hairdressers and cameramen, poking at her. Reading the pictures as a single synchronous statement rather than a diachronous series, Faraday weighed the collective myth the disparate images created. What they had in common – what made them different takes of the same picture – was that their subjects were alive now, soon to die. Fragments of the old USA. For Faraday their importance did not lie in the story they told – which was one and the same as that of Photography itself: Time versus Death – but in what they told him about the person who had taken the pictures of the woman on the front page of the newspaper in his pocket.

"You want to see the rest?"

Vergil Wymann led him into a short corridor and then, off it, into the bedroom. The drapes were open and midday sunlight exposed a patterned handloomed cotton coverlet over a hip-high hardwood platform bed. Articles of clothing lay scattered over the floor: a black jumpsuit in heavy silk crêpe – a black worked silk bra – matching briefs – stockings of the fineness of whiffs of smoke. Here was the form of the woman, not the woman herself but something that expressed her. He crouched and scrutinized – without touching – the crumpled heap, holding his breath. This, surely, was how archaeologists feel when they enter for the first time a sealed Egyptian tomb where children's toys and workmen's lunches still litter the floor: a past that history has not interfered with. There was something moving about the shapeless shapes abandoned on the floor. They had lost their meaning, their magical efficacy, without having changed into anything else, like pressed flowers in a book.

He peered into the empty cup of the finely reticulated bra, which described in reverse the shape of the breast, exquisite in the paradox it offered, it withheld. Why, he wondered, did the bra'ed breast convey a different order of information, told him more about Lindy Patmore, than the bared breast? Whatever the reason, the difference, the literalization of human beings, hadn't been invented in Hollywood. They had just tagged the label on to it.

He turned to the whorled coverlet that still held the shape of Patmore, like the husk of an empty chrysalis, the broken egg-shell at the foot of a tree. Its significance was not in any forensic statement it made, such as O'Duff might have been interested in – the bird had flown, for example – but in its generic markings. The traditional Berber motif – the name of some ancient desert tribe – indicated the nature of which particular bird. In its rumpled order lay the obsolete code which the manufacturer of commercial myths took refuge in when it got dark.

While he browsed among the collection of eye-liners, lipsticks, blushers on the vanity table – Libellule Dior,

Plus Qu'invisible Poudre Translufine, Hibiscus Rouge à Lèvres – Faraday wondered what O'Duff would have made of all this. He was a good enough cop not to overlook the tension between the outward calm of the reception room and the intimate slovenliness of this inner chamber. But whether he would have made of the signals a grammar to the myth of Lindy Patmore – private artificer of public images – Faraday could not say. Would O'Duff have come to the same conclusion about the essential nature of the woman photographer, which happened to be also that of the Camera itself: Deception and Death?

"Anything else?" Faraday said.

"The Studio. It's this way."

Faraday followed the green uniform into it. As he guessed the Studio had little to say. Photographers' workplaces rarely do, their function being dictated by factors that cannot be aesthetically modified – the white walls, the big lights, the tripod, the old Hasselblad squatting on it like a minor god – various expressions of the physics of optics.

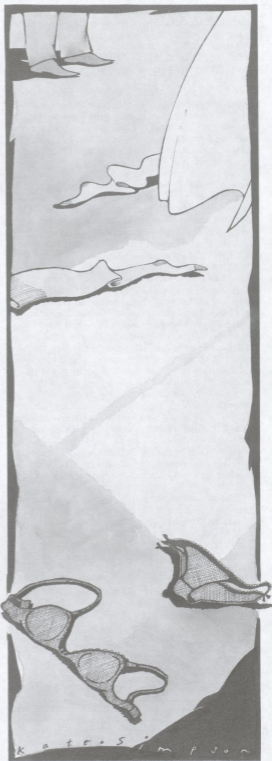
A corner of the floor was littered with newspaper cuttings, photographs, strips of paper, the debris out of which the final image had been excised, like the fragments of rock after the sculptor's chisel. Among them was a number of fragments and enlargements from the same sequence of pictures Faraday had seen in the newspaper that morning, of the same model wearing more or less the same clothes – rather less in some cases. Faraday couldn't help smiling, seeing the route the image-maker had taken to produce the myth required by the garment manufacturers. You didn't only have to be rich to afford these clothes, you had to be rich to understand them.

Again Faraday found himself drawn – but why? – towards the look in the eyes of the face of the nameless model in the photographs. It gave him an eerie feeling that it was for him – no other – she had something to communicate. But what?

Also among these bits and pieces was the picture of a woman whom he recognized even though he had never seen her before. She was posing – intimately, without clothes – between two people, a man and a woman, whom he had. The other woman was the model in the black and burnt orange sweater and challis pleat skirt; the man, too, Faraday had seen some place.

"Ms Patmore," Vergil Wymann muttered over Faraday's shoulder. "An attractive woman."

"Yeah," Faraday said. But he had already made her acquaintance. Having perused the semio-system of her clothing, her interior décor, her photographs, he felt he knew her well enough to inspect her stripped of those things. Here were the limbs, the breasts, which would fit exactly into the expensive black bodydress, the bra, to become one in the dialectic between form and content. The thing that intrigued Faraday most about Lindy Patmore, however, was not her unclothed body but the way one of her hands was resting on the man's sleeve. It was a simple enough gesture that would have meant nothing if Faraday – he experienced a moment of *déjà-vu* in the face of the man's gaze – hadn't seen those eyes somewhere earlier that same morning. He dug out his copy of the *Times* from the pocket of his air-jacket, unfolded it and placed the photograph next to the picture of Randy



and Alexei paddling palms. There, among the President's smiling retinue of aides, was the darting glance of Lindy Patmore's intimate friend – a different expression on the same black face – of the alert secret service bodyguard, the professional assassin on the look-out for professional assassins.

15.46 In the shade of his Martini umbrella, Faraday lay smoking a favourite quartz pipe on the back deck of his wooden house, listening to the silence. The house was unfashionably old, like most of his possessions, and so its original semiological significance had become worn out, like the surface of an 78 gramophone record. It didn't mean anything anymore, and therein lay its charm. As he looked out across the empty grassland towards the bracken ponds and beyond, to where the bay lay, hidden, his eyes stalked a pair of red-legged cranes slowly working their way along the shallow reaches of the salt-flats, unhurried and unafraid. There wasn't an edifice, billboard, electric sign in view – unless you counted the distant remains of the abandoned airport over on the other side of Jamaica Bay. This – had the prospect from the deck – had been the reason he had bought the house in the first place; it didn't assail his eye with linguistic data. There was nothing out there to be deciphered, unless you counted the sound call of the red-legged crane. Even in the days when Broadchannel had been a low-rent white-trash neighbourhood, the old graffiti'd A-Train crossing the middle distance through the bird sanctuary, on route for Rockerway, would have been far enough away to have looked picturesque in the afternoon sun, not withstanding the killings that had taken place on it and had eventually caused the line to be closed down.

The silence – of islands stalked by cranes since before the Indians ran the place – was broken by the sound call of the bug Faraday had planted in the reception room in Lindy Patmore's apartment, activating itself. Somebody had started speaking. Faraday leaned across and touched the mode-change key of the Filofax.

"What you want, Rossini?" a woman's voice said aggressively. "A beer? Or something stronger?"

"Scotch. Straight." Then, quickly: "What I want Lindy, is Donna. I got to get hold of her – fast," a man – Rossini? – said.

"I, ah, thought you already had a hold of her."

"What...?"

"Well, aren't you two sleeping together?"

"I..." Rossini faltered. "...That damn bitch has me on a string. I never got beyond first base."

Lindy Patmore chuckled softly. "Here...Drown your sorrows..."

There was a pause while – Faraday presumed – Rossini tasted his drink.

"What's the urgency anyhow?" Patmore said. "You know what she's like."

"Yeah. I know what she's like," Rossini said. As if he did.

"She'll show up in time. Her own time, sure." Then: "...Say, what did you think of my pictures of her in the Times today? Something, eh?"

Rossini granted a reply which the bug failed to pick up. "...Just tell me where I can... It's important I locate her!"

"Well, I'll tell her when I see her. She'll contact me over the next few days, I guess." Then, laughing: "I owe her money."

"I can't wait that long!" Rossini's voice rose. "I gave her...something she wanted. I want it back."

"That's not very nice!"

Suddenly Rossini was silent.

"Oh, I get the picture!" Lindy Patmore laughed. "You gave her a gift for her...favours!"

"Shit!"

"You tried to get her to sleep with you – is that right? She didn't deliver. Sensible girl!"

"Listen, I don't give a damn about all that. This is more serious. I... If I don't get it back in the next twenty-four hours I'm finished. In every sense."

"You mean, you gave Donna something that wasn't yours to give...?"

Another silence.

"I stole something from work."

"You fool, Rossini, to get serious over a woman like Donna. I warned you. Holy Jesus. Why are men drawn to women who can only destroy them?"

"No lectures, Lindy. Just put me on her trail."

"I can't do that!"

"What are you talking about? You have her number?"

"I have a number, sure, but..."

"I'll take it."

"Slow down, Rossini. Donna works for me. She trusts me. Right now she's the golden goose. You can't expect me just to turn her over..."

There was the sound of a sharp smack and of glass fracturing.

"Rossini!... Fuck you!"

There was another smack. A woman shrieked. A man shouted "...Donna's number... By God... Kill you..."

"You...bastard..."

Lindy Patmore, trapped in her own apartment with a man who was trying to kill her, cried for help. There was a dull thump and then, except for the sound of breathing, silence.

"Lindy..." Rossini said, panting. "I don't want to hurt you anymore...than I have to... But I will...kill you..."

Lindy Patmore groaned.

Max Faraday paused the transmission with a touch of the key and tapped out the number of the Scryer Building. He waited. Down on the bay the two cranes lifted into the air with one accord, their big white wings flapping up and down like the sleeves of shirts on a washing-line, trying to get off the ground.

"Scryer Building, Reception Desk," a voice yawned finally.

"Wymann? It's Lieutenant Faraday."

"Oh hi, Lieutenant. How's the murder coming along?"

"It's going on in Ms Patmore's apartment as we are talking. Right now! Drop what you're doing, Wymann. There's a man up there trying to kill her!"

"Are you there?"

"Move..."

Faraday replayed the Filofax's memory of the bug.

"Give, Lindy, ...It's not worth it..."

"Aaaah! ...123...162nd Street...Apartment 116..."

There was a sudden absence of dialogue followed by the sound of a door quietly shutting. Faraday listened to the silence which was already a few moments old. He couldn't tell if the woman was breathing or not. In the distance a security-alarm started up. The privacy catch of the apartment door clicked.

"Ms Patmore... You all right?... " Vergil Wymann began. Then: "Holy Jesus!"

It took Faraday a while to find his gun. He began to regret the pipe he had smoked. He was zipping the gun into his air-jacket, on his way out of the house, when the Filofax in the other zip-pouch peeped him. It was O'Duff.

"Hi, Max... Sorry to interrupt your work," O'Duff said. "If I am."

"Make it brief, Dan. I'm on a case," Faraday lied into the Filofax. "I got to move."

"I thought you might like to hear how Wesson was murdered."

"I thought he died."

"We know he died. We know now that those mysterious fatal organ arrests were caused by unconnected simultaneous cell-disfunctions – unconnected with each other, that is. They were caused by some external agent."

"What's it called?"

"What's what called?"

"The disease he died of."

"They didn't invent a name for it yet. They only just invented the weapon. Anyway, he didn't die of anything."

"Uh?"

"He died of everything! It was Lazlo put us on to it. He had some pals of his in the Fairfax Company look Wesson over. Turns out to be no mystery to them. What they couldn't square with the symptoms – or lack of them – was how they could show up in a member of the public. Fact they were a bit sore about the whole business. Especially when they found out the victim was an Arms Salesman."

"Is that the Fairfax Company of Trenton, New Jersey?"

"Yeah. You know them?"

"No more than I read in the newspapers. They're having some wrangle with the Military."

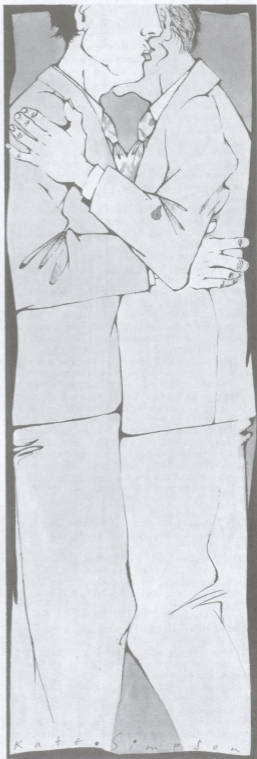
"Yeah. Lazlo said something about that. Hell, I don't read newspapers," O'Duff growled. "My work don't give me the time."

"Reading newspapers is my work, Dan," Faraday couldn't help reminding his boss.

"Yeah?"

O'Duff disengaged his end of the conversation. Faraday continued on his way out of the house and waited for a cab.

18.02 As soon as his ID had been returned by the security technology, Faraday stepped out of the warm venal evening into the AC chill of the lobby, leaving an environment possessed by strangers, deviants, foreign bodies, bits of dirt, for one where citizens sat around tables nursing cut-glass goblets and talking about politics and art. The two realms were not only different places, they meant different things, one of them hot with sweat and passion, permanently on the run, the other informed by the cool rationalism that inspired the Declaration of Independence. He passed



from those without to those within, the two conflicting interest groups that had made America the place it was.

The negatively-ionized air tasted brand new; organisms with difficult Latin names catalogued by Linnaeus had been extracted by powerful contract-cleaning equipment. Faraday couldn't help grinning at the small over-lit Henry Moore bronze on a plinth, at the irony of how all great art ends up as interior decoration. Its function, like that of the rest of the refurbishments, was to dictate the frequency on which the patrons synchronized with each other. All people are prisoners of the languages that articulate them, of course, but none more so than the unattached guests of an executives duplex dormitory building, not the sort of place he had expected the trail of the woman they called Donna to lead to.

From the Communications Room he discovered that apartment 116 was leased to a male by the name of Carl Sontag – 36, bisexual, of mixed race, and a UN employee. That was the only level of security information a Police Semiotician's clearance rating gave him access to. But when the occupant – and evidently there was one – failed to respond to a Police call, as he or she was required to, Faraday tapped out a request for a confidential interior vid-scan to be made of the place. He waited a moment while the reasonableness of the request was computed against the House Disclosure Convention and the authority of his own status. It would be a close run thing.

On three of the small monitor screens appeared the interiors of the rooms of apartment 116, tidy, nondescript and without identity. They might have been sets for an advertisement for mail-order design furniture, as yet unpurchased by anyone. It wasn't obvious at first that there was someone in the apartment: a man lounging in a chair, his eyes focused on a point of space in front of him, one hand sliding into an inside pocket – a gesture Faraday had seen earlier in the day – his mouth open as if it were about to speak, something on the tip of the tongue, though it was clear to Faraday that no-one would ever know, now, what it was.

Without taking his eyes from the dead man's, Faraday put through a call to Homicide Division.

"Dan, it's me...." he said, when he was given O'Duff's desk. "I got a body on my hands."

"So why don't you call the Police?"

"I thought you'd want to be the first to poke this one around."

"Yeah? Who is it?"

"I don't know. Though I got my suspicions."

"Semi-logical ones, are they?"

Faraday took that one on the chin. "I didn't get a chance to find out yet," he said. "Besides, I thought that was your department."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. Well...." O'Duff sighed, now that the gags were out of the way. "What makes the party so interesting?"

"Except he's sitting in a chair looking at me like someone waiting to have his picture taken, one of his hands reaching into an inside pocket, nothing."

There was a pause quiet enough to hear a piece of furniture creak in O'Duff's office.

"I'm on my way," the Captain said finally. Faraday gave him the address and looked away from the face of the dead man in the vid-monitor.

The time it took O'Duff to arrive on the scene was how long Faraday needed to gain access to apartment 116 and have his suspicions confirmed; the still life in the mail-order chair was Rossini, a good-looking young feller with unfashionable wavy reddish-brown hair and a parting in it that made him look like a character in a story by F. Scott Fitzgerald – weak, intelligent, doomed – the kind of man whose girl would own a gun which she would nag him to get some bullets for, only to shoot him with when he did. Faraday, as he tinkered with the dead man's Filofax, was wondering what part the girl he was looking for, Donna, played in the present soap opera when O'Duff stalked into the room.

Neither man said anything until O'Duff, having separated the still-warm fingers in the inside pocket from the butt of the light automatic weapon around which they were entwined, said: "How much d'you got on this dude?"

"His name...." Faraday lied, "...is all this..." he tapped the Filofax, "...will tell us. It's coded. All it gives out is it belongs to a Tony Rossini. And a contact number."

"Well?" O'Duff replied, looking at him. "Dial it!"

Faraday punched out the number. They both watched the Filofax until a voice issued from it: "Fairfax Corporation, Security Section. Good evening. Please state your identity and your requirements. Thank you."

O'Duff grabbed the Filofax out of Faraday's hands. Faraday released it as if it was the entire case he was handing over.

"Yeah. This is Cap'n O'Duff of the New York Police Department – 110th Division. We're in possession of a Filofax belonging to a Mr Tony Rossini. We'd like the answers to some questions."

"Hold the line, please," the homeoactive desk iterated at intervals until it was replaced by another, more human voice: "You have Rossini? We would like to ask Mr Rossini some questions ourselves."

"No we don't," O'Duff said. "What was Rossini's connection with the Fairfax Corporation?"

There was a pause. Then: "You said 'was'. You mean..."

"Yeah. He's dead."

There followed a couple of moments of confusion at the other end of the conversation during which O'Duff persuaded the Security Section to process his identity.

"Rossini was a Grade V Assembly-technician supervisor – one of the team in the Pathogenic Defense Unit. He appears to have booked out some gear he had no right to. We want it back."

"You mean he stole a weapon?" O'Duff said crudely.

Silence.

"Well...?"

"That's substantially correct."

"How lethal is it?"

"Lethal? No more than a switchblade. The value of this one lies in the precision of its application. It doesn't leave a mess. I'm sorry that's as much as I can tell you..."

"Does it leave the victim looking fresh as a lily, like death was instantaneous?"

"I see... So Rossini became its first victim."

"Not necessarily. How much can you tell me about how it works?"

"Let me say it alters the molecular structure of specific cells in the body without causing any other damage. Which cells is a matter of programming. It was developed out of a surgical instrument for bombarding cloned pathogens in a bacterio-war victim. It can take out every cholera bacterium from a host system, for example. It depends how you set it up."

"Ah-ha. And this instrument, what does it look like?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not permitted to say..."

Faraday grabbed the Filofax back out of O'Duff's hand. "Just say this. Could it be integrated to operate in a simple shutter mechanism. Such as a camera, for example?"

"That, sir..." the voice said slowly, "...was precisely the possibility that Tony Rossini had been detailed to investigate!"

No wonder the Defense Department was trying to lay its hands on the thing!

Faraday had reached the foyer gates by the time O'Duff caught up with him.

"Hey, Max, slow up..." O'Duff said, puffing. "Where's all this leading?"

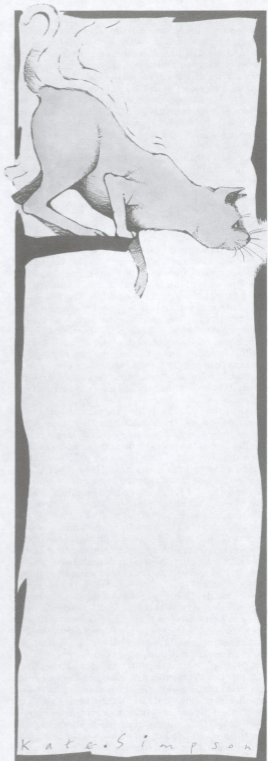
Faraday stopped. "You want to know, Dan?" He pulled out of his pocket the copy of the morning's edition of the *New York Times* he had been carrying around all day and shoved it into O'Duff's hand. "Read all about it!"

After a moment O'Duff looked from the picture of Randy and Alexei in one another's arms back to Faraday. "I don't get it."

Faraday fingered the face of the pale-skinned black man in the foreground, eyes squinting, hand tucked into his jacket. "That's Carl Sontag - the man who rents the apartment in which Rossini's body was found!"

Faraday flagged down a cab and told it to take them to the corner of First Avenue and 45th Street. The UN Building.

20.49 In the throng of reporters, photographers, TV men and women, Faraday and O'Duff allowed themselves to become separated as they were politely jostled towards the stationary pair shaking hands on the raised dais at the far end of the big reception room. The rope guard-rail between the two important old men grinning at each other and the clamour of those seeking a clearer view of them was more symbolic than real. There must have been a more powerful, more magical force keeping them apart, as if the two men possessed some unnatural characteristic, like fair-ground grotesques, that made them awesome to behold. In fact, behind the sonar projectile defense screen, both men showed good even teeth through nice-guy smiles out of still good-looking faces. Their fascination did not lie in what they looked like - hadn't they both got where they were by convincing ordinary people they were no different than them? - but in what the image-makers, the photographers, reporters and TV men and women, had turned them into.



The two Presidents – when they were through kissing each other – moved towards the UN-embazoned rostrum, Randy steering Alexei with an intimate arm around his shoulder, the other outstretched as if he were holding an invisible restaurant door open for him. Film hummed in hand-held cameras. This would all look good in the morning editions and on the breakfast shows. No one can resist watching two enemies meet, whether on Main Street or, like now, in front of the world press corps, when what is dreaded actually takes place. It's what gossip is all about: the delicious terror that tantalizes the voyeurs of any strip-tease, whatever the semiological system, as the signifier is slowly, purposefully, erotically, divested from that which it signifies.

"...Frank...intense discussions....our close association...powerful and direct differences....between our two great nations...."

Faraday listened to the President's preamble no differently than he would to any other piece of discourse, emptying it of its content in order to isolate the formal conventions governing it. This was the last of the colloquys between the two men intended to ease the current international climate of uncertainty over projected warfare research. By degrees Randy McCrae strove to convince the peoples of both nations that the struggle was not between them – he and his good friend Alexei – personally, but between the ideologies of the peoples themselves: it was *their* fault. The similarities between the two men – their elegant light-weight Canali suits, jazzy eye-catching ties, and the friendly little winks they gave each other – certainly gave the impression they were on the same side.

While the old Ad-man lied through his good even teeth to the rest of the inhabitants of the planet, Faraday searched the crowd of international media people for the face of the person among them who was there to assassinate him. There was a lot of folk out there holding cameras to choose from. He watched O'Duff across the crowd, stalking the same quarry. Anyone could see he was a cop of some kind keeping a weather eye open. Around State leaders you expect that sort of security. But when O'Duff made his move it was so fast and brutal that Faraday found himself wrong-footed. He lost sight of O'Duff until one of the photographers in front of him turned and, stumbling, ran into him, the camera he was holding still held poised. It didn't take a semioticist to read what was written all over the man's face, one Faraday had already seen twice that day, once on the front page of the newspaper O'Duff was still holding in his hand, later with the arm of the woman they called Donna resting on his sleeve on the floor of Lindy Patmore's studio. Too late Faraday remembered that his gun was still zipped into the pocket of his old air-jacket.

O'Duff – there was the dull crunch of a knee-punch – stamped the man over Faraday who had no choice but to become an obstacle in his way. As he fell he wondered what it would feel like to die as quickly as he would if the camera's firing mechanism accidentally went off. O'Duff, meanwhile, just kept coming and the three men ended up in a heap on the floor. The collision had happened so abruptly and pointlessly it might have been a clumsy accident. Almost immediately the people on both sides were helping them to

their feet and dusting them off and enquiring whether any damage had been done. All three men thanked their colleagues and headed away from the pack, Faraday holding a camera in his hand and O'Duff the UN security officer, Carl Sontag, in his.

Behind them the foreign President began to speak.

21.32 It wasn't that Wesson's cat's tail was missing – Faraday decided – but that it was invisible.

"Move your foot over a bit..." O'Duff said. "...to the left a bit more..."

Faraday adjusted his position on the uncomfortable Madison Avenue ottoman sofa to coincide with that of Craig Wesson's in the newspaper picture O'Duff was holding. For effect he let his foot nestle into the pile of the carpet, crooking the other gracefully around it, while his hand, as if it had a will of its own, reached into the inside pocket of his air-jacket. On the edge of the thick glass top of the cocktail table, next to the camera, Wesson's cat was balanced, making ready to jump. Just like any other cat.

"Right..." Carl Sontag said. "And I would have been..." He dragged O'Duff across the carpet. "...about here."

"How come he let you..." O'Duff asked him, "...get so close?"

"Guess he knew the answer to that one as soon as I did," Sontag said with a disarming smile. He was an attractive fair-skinned semi-negro with a stylish dress sense somewhere between West Side Cool and East Side Hauteur: he had on a loose dog-toothed cotton suit over what looked like an organza shirt. "...He must have known – as soon as I had my hands on the camera – I was bound to see if it worked."

The cat leaped...

"Then put it another way..."

...silently through the air.

"...Why did he give it to you in the first place?"

"He didn't give it to me. I bought it. Craig Wesson was a salesman, as I think you know. He knew how to strike a bargain."

"Either he knew you were going to kill him," O'Duff, trying to box his man into a corner, said. "Or he trusted you."

"Or else..." Sontag said, too quick for O'Duff, "...He got a kick out of the idea of being photographed to death."

O'Duff opened his mouth but nothing came out of it.

"You obviously didn't know Craig Wesson!" Sontag laughed quietly. "You do, of course. Only you don't realize you do. It would be part of the joke."

"Joke? What joke?" O'Duff said, looking for assistance in Faraday's direction.

Faraday listened but said nothing. Sontag lifted the hand of O'Duff holding the newspaper with his own hand that was handcuffed to it, and, with the one that wasn't, tapped the newspaper contemptuously with the back of his knuckles. "That one, for a start."

O'Duff peered at the newspaper. "Nice-looking girl," he said finally. "Who is she?"

Sontag – when it was clear that the point of the joke had been lost on the Captain – sucked his teeth disdainfully. "Why don't you ask Lieutenant Faraday?"

The invisible tail of the cat – Wesson's widow – brushed against Faraday's calf as it passed under his legs and, with a leap, bounded from the floor onto his

lap and stood there for a moment looking into his eyes as if there was something about him that wasn't quite right.

"She's a fashion model," Faraday said with the flat voice of a Filofax.

"I can see that, Max!" O'Duff growled. "Just spell out her connection with..."

"Her name's Donna. She works for the Carnell Publicity Agency."

"Do I have to drag it out of you?" O'Duff was almost shouting. Sontag almost grinning. "What's she got to do with Wesson?"

All the signs pointed to the trap the quarry had led the hunter to, even though Faraday, the semiotician, had never particularly trusted signs.

"She is Wesson," he said.

"Uh?"

Faraday and Sontag waited while O'Duff compared the two pictures, that of the stylish young arms-salesman and fashionable cult figure with that of the haunted young girl modelling outdoor garments for the Bonwit Teller fashion house. "She... He... Well, she don't look like him," O'Duff said, then, to Faraday, muttered: "How did you pipe to this piece of hocus?"

"Reading newspapers," Faraday said evasively. "I keep trying to tell you it's my job."

Sontag said: "Craig Wesson created for himself a multiple personality, as if he were psychotic, which of course he wasn't. He just thought he should be. But he was a trickster. For Craig everything he did was part of an exquisite joke, a parody, he used to say, of the joke life plays on human beings. He knew what he was doing."

Carl Sontag began to weep.

“You, ahem, saying he knew you were going to kill him?” O'Duff said quietly.

Sontag put his hands to his face, pulling up the one that was handcuffed to O'Duff's. O'Duff let his hand hang there while he waited for the answer to his question.

"He...virtually asked me to," Sontag said. "He knew it was the Fairfax weapon I was after. He was simply covering my tracks."

"OK Carl, let's leave Wesson for a moment..." O'Duff said. Then he hesitated as if he couldn't bring himself to start on the next part of the interrogation. "...Let's move on to the bit where you tell us why you wanted to murder the President."

"You'll only understand the answer to that when you understand that they are not necessarily different questions," Sontag said with some dignity.

"Uh-ha..." Then: "Let me help you out. Tell me if this is where the Fairfax Company comes into the picture. It was doing all it could to keep the gizmo from the Defense Department. Clearly the Defense Department could only get its hands on the thing through an intermediary such as Wesson - or you. Once Wesson had suckered Rossini into letting him have it, he could control the market. He could sell it to who the hell he liked and name his own price. To the Defense Department. Back to Fairfax... Even to Alexei's mob... The town's crawling with them, after all."

Sontag swatted O'Duff's conjecture away with a flap of his free hand. He sucked his teeth again - less

disdainfully, this time, Faraday thought. "That was Wesson's territory. It was never mine. I wanted the gizmo to use!"

"On your own President?" O'Duff queried with ironic mildness.

"On my own President. Yes Captain. You put your finger on it."

"I guess..." O'Duff spoke so softly Faraday had to listen hard. "...ah, you have some reason why you think, ah, regicide is a less serious crime than murder?"

"I had to kill Randy," Sontag sighed wearily.

"But you were his bodyguard. Your job was stop people like you doing that."

O'Duff was beginning to get the point of the joke.

"I had to kill him because I was his bodyguard!"

Faraday watched O'Duff wait for Carl Sontag to say something else, patiently. They had all night, guests of the murderer in the murdered man's apartment.

Until: "You see, when he no longer wanted me."

"What?"

"To look after him... I mean...his body..."

"Are you trying to say...?"

"Yes..."

"Holy Shit!"

"When he didn't want to sleep with me any more, he wasn't my own President any more," Sontag said, as if this explained everything. "Don't it make you want to vomit? Every time you pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV? Just look at those two guys..." He nodded in the direction of the photograph on the front page of the *Times*. "It's all you ever see! Randy and Alexei cuddling and cooing to each other. It's disgusting!"

O'Duff looked at Faraday.

Faraday looked at Craig Wesson's cat.

Craig Wesson's cat looked around for Craig Wesson.

Carl Sontag - who didn't look at anything in particular - said: "Ever since he started sleeping with Alexei it was my patriotic duty to kill him. Don't you see?"

Time passed, neither slowly nor fast. Like a posed tableau, the three men and the cat were frozen in a momentary eternity, ikons in a daguerreotype exposure. In the silence the cat let out a small perplexed miaow. As if someone had just let it out of a bag.

Neil Ferguson has been described as a "poet and bicycle journalist." His first story, "The Monroe Doctrine," was reprinted earlier this year in *Interzone: The 1st Anthology* (Dent, £3.95). It drew praise from reviewers in *City Limits* and the *New Statesman*.

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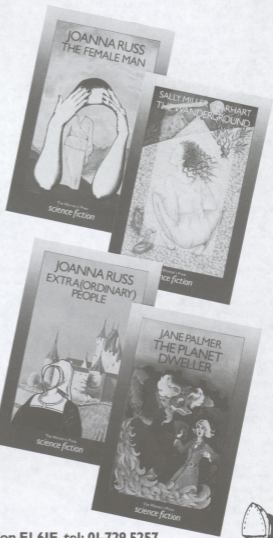
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THE OUTER ZONE

ON THE EDGE

BOOK REVIEWS BY MARY GENTLE

When I was a child I read as a child, and believed as a child, but after that things weren't so easy. Or to put it another way, the nature of the belief that one has in books is a curious thing. People who read, often tend to read a lot, and what happens when you read a lot? Print becomes irremediably fictional. Disbelief is suspended on a fraying rope. In short, we are no longer able to believe that stories are anything else but stories — there isn't the infinitesimal possibility that they are something more. And behind all the para-fiction and choose-your-own-adventure paperbacks and interactive computer games is only one desire: to use the devices of a technological society to make books what they were before their own hyper-accessibility, and the advent of audio-visual media — that is, real. Or is that "real"?

We are still capable of the belief that lasts from jacket-cover to cover, given that the covers enclose a good story, reasonably well-told. But that's not enough. That's too safe. What about the uncertainty that leaks out into the real-time world? What about the sneaking shadow of a doubt that maybe, just maybe, . . .

Some examples, then. There's James Morrow's *The Continent of Lies* (Gollancz £9.95), a novel which, to begin with, like most of its characters, is unashamably eccentric, if not certifiably barking mad. The hero, one Quinjin, is a critic of cephapples, commonly known as dreambeans; productions of genetic technology that make the eater hallucinate fictions as temporary reality. Says Quinjin,

"Other critics got to analyze realistic psychological dreams about love, hate, marriage, divorce, friendship, parenthood, death, and angst. I got to review dreams in which homicidal maniacs stalked through back alleys, sucking out streetwalkers' brains with weaselpumps. . ."

Hmm, yes. *The Continent of Lies* is labelled New-Tech fiction, but it could have been written any time these past forty years. Mention of RNA and DNA technology are buzz-words to capture the belief of a 1980s audience; but then, why not?

As far as plot goes, the novel begins with enthusiastic satire about publication and censorship, and moves on to melodrama with the discovery of "The Lier-in-Wait," an illegal dreambean that leaves its audience demented and muttering "my only god is Goth." Quinjin's twelve year old daughter falls foul of this, and a merry crew goes off to find the Trees that grow the beans: space-going, asteroid-sized dark continents of lies curiously reminiscent of Rider Haggard and Sanders of the River. The narrative displays a barefaced refusal to be ashamed of clichéd situations, and a nifty line in humour.

The Continent of Lies is a reverse Tree of Knowledge myth, up to its knees in multiple literary allusion and, at least part of the way, cheerfully irreverent about it all. It's the progression from satire and melodrama into Psychology that fails to gell. The bravura silliness of the first doesn't match the Freudian orthodoxy of the second. But I suppose orthodoxy here isn't as strange as it might seem. Quinjin is only would-be unconventional, and assumes, despite the far-future setting, that he lives in a Newtonian universe; that evil is only a matter of mental health, and human unhappiness is curable. For all its anti-religious satire, *The Continent of Lies* is standard 20th century Liberal fare; and there's little here that's "unsafe," though from time to time there are (ultimately unrealized) hints: "When the shadow attains every last property of the substance — its

weight, texture, smell, soul — then which is casting which?"

Which moves us along nicely to *Lovecraft's Book* (Arkham House, \$15.95). There are times when I wonder if the redoubtable Arkham House isn't doing a sideline in undermining the sanity of its readership. A couple of columns ago I mentioned Michael Bishop's *Who Made Stevie Crye?*, now there's *Lovecraft's Book*, which isn't Lovecraft's

book but Richard A. Lupoff's. It has nothing in it to indicate that it isn't what it says it is — an academically-researched documentary reconstruction of an episode in HPL's life. Pseudo-sources aren't uncommon in sf and fantasy, but it's rare to find a publisher playing the same game. Lovecraft's Book, like Stevie Crye, has illustrative photographs — always suggestive of "reality." And an entirely deadpan jacket blurb, with just maybe a hint in a final exclamation point, Maybe.

In Lovecraft's Book, then, 1927 is the period in Lovecraft's life after he split up with his wife Sonia Green, and shortly before he wrote "The Call of Cthulhu," a story upon which this academic study casts a good deal of light. The unworly Lovecraft is approached by George Sylvester Viereck, an American propagandist for Hitler, to write a US version of the Aryan WASP myth, similar to Chamberlain's *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, HPL being at this time somewhat to the right of Ronald Reagan, it seems likely he might have planned the *New America* and the *Coming World Order* that Lupoff mentions. Depressingly likely. (To be fair, Lovecraft's attitudes did change, if one takes the difference between, say, "The Horror at Red Hook" and "At the Mountains of Madness" as paradigm for vanishing xenophobia.) And so Lovecraft, an unworldly, appealing, and temporary Nazi sympathizer, dreamily assists a plot that has less in common with history than with Saturday morning cinema serials. Here are *Mein Kampf*, *Sinatra* and *Vanzetti*, the Ku Klux Klan, and Houdini's brother; submarines, riots, Clark Ashton Smith and Vincent Starratt, seaplanes, and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. . . but then, history is more often than not highly cavalier about plausibility. Lovecraft existed, and for all I know, George Sylvester Viereck did too; and who really knows what happened in America in the 1920s?

Lupoff's book (if not Lovecraft's) thrives on the paradox, and on incongruity; on HPL's status as real and fictional, and on putting the hermit of Providence in with mobsters and Nazis. Towards the end, Lupoff can't resist one all-American gesture towards making Lovecraft a macho hero — which is about as incongruous as you can get. If there's a doubt here, it's only about the precise nature of the narrative's attitude towards fascist ideas. Or, as someone warns Lovecraft, "you play with these ideas as if they were purely ideas. You must make yourself understand that they are not just concepts, that people and nations are involved."

To take the theme of belief from another angle, it was Tolkien who coined "suspension of disbelief" as a useful critical phrase; but there have been tourists from Academia in the subworlds since the days when he found it necessary to apologize and explain. And what definition of "real" does the literary critic come under, treating fictional worlds with all the solemnity of the historian?

The premise of David Harvey's **The Song of Middle-Earth** (Allen & Unwin, £10.95) is that Tolkien's stories don't derive so much from previous literature as from the shapes of Myth itself, and that Tolkien's intention was to create "a Mythology for England." The problem with *The Song of Middle-Earth* is that it shares, for its critical viewpoint, the philosophical basis of Tolkien's subworld; that is, the same philosophy of hierarchy, authoritarianism, absolutism, and Christianity. This means that Tolkien's assumptions are taken for granted, not questioned — the world may not be relativistic, but criticism ought to be aware that there are people who see it that way.

This critical study is weak on definitions of its own terms. If myths are "the stories of a culture," then shouldn't one identify the primary myth of the 20th century as science, considering Tolkien's attitude to industry? Harvey assumes there can be myths without science, but not that science itself can be a myth — yet another meta-theory designed to explain why What Is is the way it is — and so can't go on to ask, for example, what the real basis of Tolkien's technophobia might be. *The Song of Middle-Earth* is useful purely as a synopsis of later works, especially *The Silmarillion* and those published after it, and may well explain what Tolkien "meant"; but then, Tolkien could explain what Tolkien meant: what one looks for is some account of why. To pick up a couple of points that this study leaves unexplored: if hobbits are "yeomen," does that make Elves the (genetic) aris-

tocracy, and what does that imply about the real-world roots of a "mythology for England"? Or: is it justifiable to treat the works as if they were written in chronological order, from the creation of Arda to the end of the Third Age, when in fact the matter is much more complex? There has to be some account, surely, for the difference in nature between *LOTR/The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion* and the rest?

As far as style goes, *The Song of Middle-Earth* is mediocre: I can do without being told that "Sauron's big mistake lay in the One Ring," and chapters entitled "The Importance of

Divine Endurance by Gwyneth Jones (Allen & Unwin, £9.95; Unicorn Paperback, £2.95)

I am lost between speechless admiration and a blurb-writer's Thesaurus of adjectives — supply balanced, finely controlled, ironic and luminously elegant. . . . The girl-child Cho, the "wayang legong," with her companion the cat *Divine Endurance*, walks from a deserted palace on the edge of a glass desert to where the people live. The people's culture is traditional Malay (more alien to Western customs than most of extraterrestrialism), projected to a post-Holocaust future and given a matriarchal twist, enduring the yoke of the disinterested off-shore Rulers enforced by squads of Koperasi thugs. Around Cho a rebellion catalyzes, not only against Koperasi colonialist exploitation, but also against the mysteries which uphold the Dapur women's authority. It's a novel about human desire and human nature, about love and power and death. Cho, the *tabula rasa*, the innocent, the unhuman observer trying to make sense of the conflict and unreason that simmers under what people say and do, is the focal point of the narrative. Anyone who's played with a magnifying glass in hot sun will know how a focal point, properly fuelled, can start a conflagration. Gwyneth Jones keeps the conflagration under cool control.

Judith Hanna

REVIEWS IN BRIEF

Skeleton Crew by Stephen King (Macdonald, £9.95). From the master of warm family stories about the love between fathers and sons, this 500-page collection of more than 20 pieces is, as they say, a guaranteed bestseller. The most notable tale is the 1980 novella "The Mist" in which father and son are trapped in a supermarket besieged by many-tentacled monsters. King is a perfect sibling to Spielberg: both are marvellous packagers of middle-class suburban horror.

Being Eärendil"; and with the species of criticism that tries to fit all myths into one pattern — according to the cultural preconceptions of the Christianized West. *The Song of Middle-Earth* ought to be strong on Christian analysis, which is an essential part of Tolkien's fiction, but it presents discussions of choice, the Fall, and free will without grappling with the paradoxes inherent in those concepts. But maybe the real problem with this study is that it doesn't read like yet another academic-bandwagon Tolkien thesis, but as if written from a genuine love of the books. You might say, a belief in them.

Top Science Fiction: The Authors' Choice ed. Josh Pachter (Dent, £2.95). 340 pages, 25 stories — not too many of them over-familiar. The hardcover edition got a rave notice in the *American Fantasy Review*: "What's happened to the wonderful sf anthologies of yesteryear? They're being published in Europe! — where the authors are allowed to decide what their best stories are, and an editor has the sense to ask them. This is the kind of reprint anthology that creates new fans, warms the hearts of old ones, and restores the faith of the jaded." It's nice to know we do such things well on this side of the Atlantic.

The Third Millennium: A History of the World, AD 2000-3000 by Brian Stableford and David Langford (Sidgwick & Jackson, £12.95). Part pop science, part Stapledonian "future history," this is a lovely book — copiously illustrated, intelligently written, and most impressive in its imaginative sweep. Stableford's ability as a prophet may be called into question, however: back in 1982 he predicted that *Interzone* would not last four issues!

Machines That Think: The Best Science Fiction Stories about Robots and Computers ed. Isaac Asimov, Patricia S. Warrick and Martin H. Greenberg (Penguin, £4.95). Another big, big book: over 600 pages of very variable stories, ranging from creaky old 1930s pieces by John Wyndham and Harl Vincent to good recent stuff by Gene Wolfe and Vernor Vinge. This is an area in which sf can claim to have been prescient: Murray Leinster's "A Logic Named Joe" (1946) now seems an astonishing forecast of the home-computer boom — but to enjoy the story you have to overlook its extremely arch sexist tone.

Across the Sea of Suns by Gregory Benford (Futura, £2.95). **Sundiver** by David Brin (Corgi/Bantam, £1.95), and **The Integral Trees** by Larry Niven (Futura, £1.95). Three novels which will satisfy lovers of old-fashioned

hard sf. By far the best of them is the Benford (it's a sequel to his *In the Ocean of Night*, 1977), even if it does bend over backwards to be "literary." In contrast, Brin and Niven both subscribe to the hearty philistine school of American sf writing. William Faulkner, who he? Give us Freeman Dyson any day. . .

In Search of Schrödinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality by John Gribbin (Corgi, £2.95). If you want to understand the theoretical physics which underpin Lee Montgomerie's story "War and/or Peace" (IZ 11), this clearly-written book will be of use to you. Gribbin is a regular contributor to *Analog* as well as the *Guardian*, and he makes frequent references to science fiction.

Microworlds: Writings on Science Fiction and Fantasy by Stanislaw Lem, edited by Franz Rottensteiner (Secker & Warburg, £12.95). Fierce, knotty and occasionally ignorant, this is an important (if wayward) collection of critical essays. Lem extols Philip K. Dick at great length — although he appears not to have read *The Man in*

the High Castle or *Martian Time-Slip*!

The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction by Raymond H. Thompson (Greenwood Press, £29.95). An exhaustive description and critical account of how 20th-century writers have used the ancient "Matter of Britain." It's all here, from T.H. White and Henry Treece to Gillian Bradshaw and Parke Godwin. One of the best volumes so far in Greenwood's patchy "Contributions to the Study of SF and Fantasy" series.

(DP)

ALSO RECEIVED

The Man in the Tree by Damon Knight (Gollancz, £8.95). His first new novel in many years. Worthy.

Demon by John Varley (Futura, £2.95). Over-whimsical conclusion to the "Gæaen" trilogy.

The Dragon Waiting by John M. Ford (Corgi, £3.50). Long, colourful novel which won the so-called World Fantasy Award for 1984.

Demon in the Skull by Frederik Pohl (Penguin, £1.95). Revision of his 1965 novel *A Plague of Pythons*.

Heechee Rendezvous by Frederik Pohl (Futura, £2.50). Third in the series begun with *Gateway*. Getting tiresome.

Anackire by Tanith Lee (Futura, £2.95). Very long fantasy sequel to *The Storm Lord*.

Gilgamesh the King by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz, £9.95). Non-fantasy historical novel in the Mary Renault vein, though drier.

Starhunt by David Gerrold (Hamlyn, £1.95). Sixth in the "Venture SF" programme — a retelling of *Yesterday's Children* (1972). Space-war claptrap.

The Blue Sword by Robin McKinley (Futura, £2.50). First of yet another fantasy series: "debut of a land to rival Narnia and Middle Earth."

The Twilight Realm by Christopher Carpenter (Arrow, £1.95). A fantasy role-playing game comes true. Gosh.

The Wishsong of Shannara by Terry Brooks (Futura, £4.95). "Volume Three in the epic..." Sigh.

Words

The New Literary Forum

WORDS 4
(September) features
J. G. BALLARD
(2 new interviews . . .
Empire of the Sun . . .
Essay by David Pringle)

WORDS 5
(October) features
Extracts from David
Pringle's new book
'Science Fiction 100
Best Novels'

Future issues will include two
new stories by Brian Aldiss,
an interview with Michael
Moorecock plus a science
fiction issue in the New Year

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- 1: "The New Rays" by M. John Harrison; "Kitemaster" by Keith Roberts; "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" by Angela Carter; "Guesting" by John Sladek; "The Brothel in Rosenstrasse" by Michael Moorcock.
- 2: "Memories of the Space Age" by J.G. Ballard; "Seasons Out of Time" by Alex Stewart; "The Third Test" by Andrew Weiner; "Angel Baby" by Rachel Pollack; "Cantata '82" by Tom Disch.
- 3: "The Dissemblers" by Garry Kilworth; "Overture for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'" by Angela Carter; "No Coward Soul" by Josephine Saxton; "Cheek to Cheek" by Nicholas Allan; "Saving the Universe" by David Garnett.
- 4: "Calling All Gumdrops" by John Sladek; "The Caulder Requiem" by Alex Stewart; "On the Deck of the Flying Bomb" by David Redd; "After-Images" by Malcolm Edwards; "The Quiet King of the Green South-West" by Andy Soutter; "The Ur-Plant" by Barrington J. Bayley.
- 5: "The Flossh! Kid" by Scott Bradfield; "The Tithonian Factor" by Richard Cowper; "Vitamin Memories of B-12" by Edwin Dorff (art feature); "Novelty" by John Crowley; "What Cindy Saw" by John Shirley; "Strange Great Sins" by M. John Harrison.
- 6: "Something Coming Through" by Cherry Wilder; "The Monroe Doctrine" by Neil Ferguson; "The Views of Mohammed El Hassif" by John Hendry; "Radical Architecture" by Roger Dean (art feature); "Angela's Father" by L. Hluchan Sintetos; "Kitecadet" by Keith Roberts.
- 7: "The Unconquered Country" by Geoff Ryman; "Kept Women" by Margaret Welbank (art feature); "Life in the Mechanist/Shaper Era" by Bruce Sterling; "Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration" by Michael Blumlein.
- 8: "Unmistakably the Finest" by Scott Bradfield; "The Electric Zoo" by Chris Jones (art feature); "Dreamers" by Kim Newman; "Strange Memories of Death" by Philip K. Dick; "Experiment with Time" by M.J. Fitzgerald; "McGonagall's Lear" by Andy Soutter; "What I Believe" by J.G. Ballard.
- 9: "The Object of the Attack" by J.G. Ballard; "The Gods in Flight" by Brian Aldiss; "Canned Goods" by Thomas M. Disch; "Synaptic Intrigue" by Richard Kadrey (art feature); "The Luck in the Head" by M. John Harrison; "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" by William Gibson; "Spiral Winds" by Garry Kilworth.
- 10: "John's Return to Liverpool" by Christopher Burns; "Green Hearts" by Lee Montgomerie; "Soulmates" by Alex Stewart; Photographs by Ian Sanderson; "Love, Among the Corridors" by Gene Wolfe; "The Malignant One" by Rachel Pollack; "The Dream of the Wolf" by Scott Bradfield.
- 11: "War and/or Peace" by Lee Montgomerie; "Cube Root" by David Langford; "Fogged Plates" by Christopher Burns; "Rain, Tunnel and Bombfire" by Pete Lyon (art feature); "The Unfolding" by John Shirley & Bruce Sterling; "Kitemistress" by Keith Roberts.
- 12: "The Bob Dylan Tamourine Software..." by Michael Bishop; "Little Ilya and Spider Box" by Paul J. McAuley; "The Fire Catcher" by Richard Kadrey; "Laser Smith's Space Academy" by George Parkin (comic strip); "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" by M. John Harrison; "Instructions for Exiting This Building..." by Pamela Zoline.

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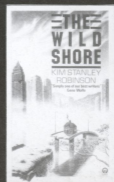
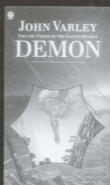
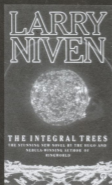
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