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## EDITORIAL

Short stories are not easy on the reader. Each piece is a new departure, jolting the reader out of the here and now and into an unfamiliar environment. In the case of *Interzone's* fiction, this new environment is likely to be surprising and perhaps disturbing. Sometimes, we like to think, the reader will re-emerge into a here and now which is not quite the here or the now that it was before, because the reader's way of looking at it will have been subtly, perhaps even radically, altered. Such an experience requires flexibility of mind and a sense of adventure. It's much easier, much safer, to tune in to a TV soap opera or to pick up the latest volume in one of those interminable "fantasy" series which are so popular these days, in which the environment of the fiction is the familiar pseudo-medieval one of wizards and dragons, varying so little from book to book or author to author that it's become about as truly "fantastic" to the reader as his or her own living-room.

But we've always believed there are people who want something more – a substantial audience for *Interzone*, an audience of adventurous readers who want to be stimulated as well as entertained, who are not afraid to run the risk of having their preconceptions rearranged in the process of reading. Our problem has always been to reach that audience.

More people than ever before now read *IZ*, but after more than four years, we're still getting letters from enthusiastic newcomers who've only just found out about us. We live in a global village, of course, but it's more of a global village for some than for others. It's more of a global village for the leaders of super-powers and the manufacturers of cars, for instance, than for the editors of a small but growing science-fiction magazine. We don't have the funds for mass advertising, so it's difficult for us to compete for people's attentions with soap operas, quiz shows, the private lives of pop stars, and the attractions of modern domestic appliances. It's one of the problems of this global village, really, that people are much more inclined to pay attention to whatever's pushed down their throats than to go out and try to find something for themselves, even if it's something they might actually want for a change.

But we try.

We're grateful to those publishers who give us advertising space in the backs of their paperbacks, to the British Science Fiction Association, and to everyone else who has exchanged advertising material with us. We'd also be grateful for anything you can do to help us publicize *Interzone*. Word of mouth is a tried and tested method of communication in a village, and this is equally appropriate to a global village. If you have any friends you think might be interested in *IZ*, please tell them about us. You could even send them a subscription as a Christmas present. (Just send us £6, and the name and address of the lucky recipient. We'll send them the latest issue with a slip to tell them who has sent the gift. Don't delay – do it today!!) but of course we wouldn't be so tacky as to suggest such a thing. Just try to put the word around, that's all we ask. Read *Interzone* conspicuously on buses. Keep it with you at all times, making sure the cover is facing outwards. Carry placards in the street. Go on – spread the word.

Simon Ounsley

- 4 Gregory Benford: As Big as the Ritz
- 21 S.M.S.: Screaming of the Beetle
- 26 Ramsey Campbell: Boiled Alive
- 31 M. John Harrison: Interview by Paul Kincaid
- 33 Simon Ounsley: Paths of Dying
- 36 Peter Lamborn Wilson: Fountain of Time
- 42 Nick Lowe: Film reviews
- 45 Greg Egan: Mind Vampires
- 49 Ian Watson: When Jesus Comes Down the Chimney
- 53 Lee Montgomerie & John Clute: Book reviews
- 57 Letters

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Submissions: unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed, but each one must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript and two International Reply Coupons. We are unable to reply to writers who do not send return postage. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Story submissions should be sent to any one of the following addresses:

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# Gregory Benford As Big as the Ritz

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*It is youth's felicity as well as its insufficiency that it can never live in the present, but must always be measuring up the day against its own radiantly imagined future – flowers and gold, girls and stars, they are only prefigurations and prophecies of that incomparable, unattainable young dream.*

– F. Scott Fitzgerald

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” 1922

1.  
A lingering respect for the niceties of an Earthside education was the bane of the asteroid communities. Yearly it drained them of their brightest young men and women.

Thus the parents of Clayton Donner persistently pressured him to attend Harvard or Cambridge or Tokyo General, picking these names from a list as unfathomable as a menu in Swahili. Each locale was pictured in verdant 3D as a cultured pinnacle, a doorway to a different life.

The asteroids had been colonized by those who respected no conventional wisdoms but instead made their own. Those ancestors, now in their vacuum-dried graves, would have wrinkled their noses at the odour of flatlander-envy that pervaded the discussions of Clayton's destiny. The boy was quick, studious, clever. He would have made a fine metal-ceramics man, bio-integrator or syntho-miner. Instead, his parents relentlessly pressured him into an Earthside education extracted from books rather than from the grey tumbling worlds.

After his first year flatside Clayton was a convert to their cause. For a young man a career is a distant, fuzzy goal. Earth was concrete and fun. Gaudy. Effervescent. Deliciously lurid. He visited what was left of Africa, sampled the original abode where men had evolved, and came away with both a skin rash and a faint incredulity that anything worthwhile could have started there.

The east coast of the Americas was rather better,

though clearly past its great days. The focus of Earthside economic life had shifted to the pan-Pacific nations over a century before. The snug, smug eastern streets were steeped in murky history and claustrophobic assumptions. Clayton stayed in the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Boston, spending a week's worth of his father's profits in two days. The building was well preserved, eccentric by modern standards, and impressed him deeply with its timeless gilded swank. He tasted the now-rare lobster and savoured the heady fragrances of orderly decline. A woman he met in the bar seemed to find his asteroid origins interesting, exotic, and within a few hours she was in his bed. It was a perfect setting to lose his virginity. He was only mildly disturbed when, the next morning, she firmly showed him the Greater Boston price sheet and luxury tax scale. He irritably paid up, resolving that the experience would not blemish his memory of the Ritz and its majesty.

He had ended up at UCLA, his ability and personality profile matched with the school's needs and strengths by an elaborate trait-sifting program; the education of the young was too important to be left to their vagrant tastes.

Like virtually everyone, his life appeared dull from the outside, or at best made of elements from a soap opera, while from inside it had all the sweep and grandeur of *War and Peace*. Clayton went through the usual undergraduate crises. He learned to conceal his naive assumptions and be shocked at nothing. Fashion allowed one to be occasionally stunned, but only within severe limits. Dismay, however, was his for the asking; it implied a certain haughty despair. He tried the various exploits – sexual, social, hallucinogenic – appropriate to his age. Struggling, he ingested ideas from survey courses, earnest late night bull sessions, Op-Ed pages and other fast-thought franchises. He imagined that he was crossing new frontiers, when in fact he was only crossing into Iowa; billions had been there before. He did not suspect that a decade

later he would find these reaches a bit commonplace and not a little boring.

In his second year he met Sylvia. She was different from the other students – intent, dedicated, severe. Her devotion to the cause of selfless politics was already well known at UCLA. He was mildly attracted to her, despite her habit of wearing loose-fitting, dowdy attire in dull brown and greys.

She was known as Sylvia Hammersmith at UCLA, but that meant little – at that time students often adopted the names of famous people as a gesture. As the young grew more and more alike, devices to distinguish themselves became ever more enticing. Sylvia's taking the name of an explorer, fatally crushed on Venus the year before, seemed only a mild affectation.

When he discovered her true last name, his interest deepened. Clayton was still, compared to any savvy Earthy, downright naive. Still, he sized up Sylvia quickly and judged his best approach. She wore a perpetual frown, assaying even casual remarks for their moral gold, so – intuiting rapidly – he decided not to mention his major subject of study. Instead, he talked endlessly of his minor area, Analytic Economic Morality.

He was, without thinking about it very much, solidly for Earthside's social shibboleths of the era – strict equality of pay for all, abolishment of all inherited wealth right down to items of clothing and furniture, and numerous measures to alleviate any trace of economic envy. The university incorporated these ideas as best it could, but found difficulty staffing the scientific fields, since technical talent could easily find work elsewhere. Support for progressive ideas centred, naturally enough, among the professoriat devoted to such subjects as Greek pottery and interpersonal dynamics.

These notions met with Sylvia's approval, and she opened up a bit. He learned of her laughing, pouting mouth, her glinting sea-blue eyes, her natural and unstudied grace.

He knew he was making progress with her, but he was amazed when she invited him to spend December at her father's. Though this might be customary if she lived on Earth, or even in one of the crystalline orbital cities, she was Sylvia Townsworth Rollan, and her father was founder of the most bizarre enterprise in the solar system: Brotherworld. It orbited at a steep tilt to the ecliptic, about two astronomical units away from the sun. Getting there would have taken weeks by conventional transport.

Until this moment his interest in Sylvia had been entirely conventional. Mores of the era had swung back to a constraining reticence in matters sexual. Clayton was well-socialized, and believed various unsupported assertions which had the effect of delaying marriage, postponing children and generally defusing the explosive power of adolescent sexuality. Sublimation is a subtle game, one the 22nd century played well. His warmly remembered night in the Ritz now seemed to be a gauzy treat, unreal, like cotton candy at a circus.

Ambition he had a-plenty. After Sylvia's invitation he went immediately to his Major Tutor and asked advice. The grey-haired woman listened attentively,

then said flatly that he must go, of course. There was no question. It could make his career.

Clayton was slightly shocked to find his own secret thoughts so freely voiced. He observed a quickening in the Major Tutor's manner, a fine-drawn anticipation of possible benefits to herself. Clayton remarked that he was reluctant to mix his regard for Sylvia and his other interests, especially since she had such fixed views.

The Major Tutor pursed her lips, tapping a yellow fingernail on her amber desk-top. She began a set-piece mini-lecture on devotion to the profession, on taking every opportunity in a field where such things came seldom these days, on understanding that in certain unique circumstances he could allow no niceties.

Clayton had heard it all before but believed it anyway. He could see the elements of personal advancement in this, but something deeper drove him and the Major Tutor as well: curiosity. Among those with the souls of true scientists, this was the ultimate addiction which could not be deflected. Both of them wanted to know. If minor deception was the price, so be it.

The Major Tutor observed that he would, of course, need special equipment. She could arrange that. But even more important was care, a sense of timing, even downright guile. Clayton understood.

His Major Tutor gave him confidential summaries of Brotherland's construction, or rather, what little was known about it. The utopian colony was the outstanding enigma of the day. What's more, Dr Rollan had been acquiring advanced technology of an unsettling kind: plasma containment vessels, super-strong magnets, high quality ceramics and alloys. Could he be building something even stranger than Brotherworld?

These questions the Major Tutor implied with raised eyebrows, and gave him an inventory of recent purchases by the colony. Clayton tucked the inventory away for study at the site.

The task was not without risk. Clayton was an adventurous type, though, determined to get his kicks in life, even if some of them were in the face. He left his Major Tutor firmly resolved.

He accepted Sylvia's invitation, and changed his major subject to Undeclared, in case she should be of suspicious mind. Indeed, some of his friends did mention to him, as he was packing, that Sylvia had casually inquired into Clayton's doings. They took it as a sign of female caution; courtship was a rite given much thought in this era, and the preliminaries were often the most rewarding aspect. They slapped him on the back, made obvious jokes, and gave unsolicited and rather explicit advice.

Clayton took the precaution of leaving behind any reading cylinder which could give away his interests. Instead, he took texts on social responsibility, even one which denounced the anarchist-cum-free capitalist asteroid communities from which he came. He halfway agreed with the book, anyway. The 'roid clans were rude, unsubtle, even loutish, compared with the fine manners and delicate social distinctions commonly found in California. The books had a point.

They took a standard commercial fusion liner from Earth to Ceres, the conjunction being good. It made the trip under boost, at full grav, and arrived in five days. There they changed to a slingship. Its electromagnetic accelerating rings squashed them at three grav for aching, tendon-stretching moments, then abruptly set them free. They took a long arc across the solar system, out to the motes of asteroids. The ship moved like a darting wisp among the stately slow sway of worlds.

Their target was a lonely, rolling hunk of iron called Hellbent. The other people on the slingship were rough, silent types, ill-kempt and grimy, with no hope of ever getting far enough ahead to afford a true, full-water bath, or food not force-grown, or clothes of something finer than the fibrous weaves they wore.

At Hellbent men and women sucked a lean milk from bare, spongy rock. Economics had decreed Hellbent's smelted products valuable for one booming generation, and had then snatched away its blessing, leaving only a shadowy clan who had too much invested to leave the place. The large docking cylinders and electromagnetic accelerators were leftovers of the glory days, kept up now as the staple of the economy. Clayton and Sylvia found the maze of sheet metal corridors forbidding and chilly. The sheen of bare phosphors made them squint.

As they waited near the air lock for her father's shuttle, Sylvia asked, "Did you see that skinny man on the slingship?"

"Uh, yes."

"He was an astrophysicist, I'm sure of it."

"Why?"

"The way he looked at us. He knows who I am."

"Maybe he just thought you were good looking."

She shrugged this off, impervious to compliments. "And his fingernails were clean."

Clayton hid a grin. "A sure sign."

He sighed, and felt an itchy sensation as he breathed in. Hellbent was so poor they ran their public rooms at zero humidity. In their hour-long wait the system could extract a gram or two of vapour from their breath and sweat, an involuntary tax of fluids.

Clayton's home was never this badly off. He felt a twinge of guilt at thinking of his parents, labouring in the chilly grit of a rockworld not greatly different from this. He should visit them, but the cost was prohibitive. Sylvia had paid all the expenses of this trip; he could never have afforded it. One of Clayton's classmates had even suggested that as long as he was out this far, he might as well nip over and look in at home, too – all this said with an oblivious groundhog smile, never thinking that Clayton's parents were on the other side of the solar system from here. To Earthsiders, like New Yorkers the centuries before, everything beyond their neighbourhood boundary was a single, amorphous Elsewhere.

The shuttle arrived with a clanging thump. When the thrumming pumps had stilled, the two of them entered the bare, gloomy loading bay. A silvery body nestled there, sleek and chromed. From its nose a powerful beam of ruddy light turned and regarded them like a malignant eye out of the coagulated night. As they approached, Clayton saw it was a shapely fusion flitter, gleaming with polish. The slim craft

was studded with portals that winked and sparkled as he passed, looking exactly like enormous green and yellow jewels. Its nose was asymmetric and spindly guidance rods studded its sides, deftly functional. It was a work of art.

Two men, dressed in Spartan simplicity, stood inside the welcoming ramp. Clayton saw instantly that they were Brothers, the famous product of Dr Ludwig Rollan's cloning experiment. And indeed, he could not tell one Brother from the other.

"Welcome to the Gates of Paradise," one said, giving Clayton a warm handshake.

"I'm, uh, pleased to enter," Clayton replied.

The Brothers greeted Sylvia even more warmly, as was fitting. Clayton glanced back and saw a small clutch of Hellbent's miners, muttering to each other and staring with frank, wide-eyed awe at the magnificence of the shuttle. The well-lit interior had upholstery of woven silk and linen. Here and there were plump pillows of softness and subtly stated opulence. The bulkheads were a deep ebony, adorned with crescents of glittering ruby-like stones and iridescent splashes of some blue-white jewels. It all represented the firmament itself, artfully arranged to lead the eye from one glowing high point to another.

"Incredible!" Clayton cried out.

"Oh, this is the old one," Sylvia said nonchalantly.

"There are others?" Clayton could not take his eyes off the rich fabrics. An alabaster dome topped the passenger lounge, a miniature copy of the famous mosque in Cairo he had seen the year before – except even more glorious, here, in a sun-defying white.

"Of course." Sylvia gestured lazily at the Hellbent miners, who now crowded around the foot of the ramp. "It's for them, really. They like to see how well a truly different system works."

Soon they were boosting at a steady 1.5 gravs, the ship humming with solid assurance through slick blackness. Clayton could tell immediately from several constellations, and the orange disc of Jupiter aft, that they were arcing above the ecliptic. Hellbent was merely the nearest 'roid to Dr Rollan's famous experiment. Hellbent chanced at this moment to be close to the point where Brotherland intersected the ecliptic plane every eighteen months in its oblique path. Lonely miners perceived Brotherland as a glittering, sparkling speck high up in the darkness, orbiting serenely above the affairs of ordinary men.

Clayton saw it within a few hours. The Brothers kept to their business, scarcely sparing more than a few phrases after their warm greeting. They spoke to each other in a strange argot, which Clayton could not penetrate, so he turned to staring dreamily out the faceted portals. These were unusual in design, not giving a clear vision at all, but rather a series of refracted images, as though peering through a jewel.

Through this layered set of images Clayton first saw the glowing eye of the Vortex. It was burnt-gold near the centre, brimming with crisp light. Around it was a halo of red, and then an encircling, smouldering blue haze, like a bruise. He strained to see the very centre and was rewarded with a tiny, virulent twinkling. At first he could not be sure it was not an optical trick of the odd portal. The dot flickered like a will-o'-the-wisp in a distant, churning fog. Clayton felt his breath quicken, a tingle of excitement. The dab of



light hardened. He was sure now. The dazzling white speck was the roiling glow emitted by matter as it cried out in its incandescent agony, flaring brightly for one long groaning instant before it plunged forever down the yawning Schwarzschild throat of a black hole.

## 3.

The glory of Dr Rollan's empire unfolded in concentric rings. The fuzzy, glowering blue rim was a disc of dust that slowly spiralled inward, toward its death. As dust swarmed ever-nearer the hole, friction among the particles heated them. Stirred by magnetic fields to a turbulent frenzy, they radiated. Farthest out, a blue oxygen line dominated the emission, giving an outer rim the colour of a week-old bruise. Farther in, the faster-circling gas sputtered with an angry red. Radiation stole angular momentum from the dust. This minutely affected the orbiting particles, lowering them slowly inward.

Clayton quickly calculated. It would take years for a dollop of dust to bleed inward, into the next band, a brimming mustard circle. Then the compressed dust flowed into the sunlike, white-hot hub where a fraction of its rest mass energy was released, fully thirty percent. There lived the black hole, the dynamo that made this work.

"You can't see it," Sylvia said helpfully. "It's only a speck, anyway, no bigger than your fingernail."

"Uh, amazing." He must not appear to know very much.

"See the collectors?"

A wide array of solar collectors orbited above and below the luminous disc. Sylvia said, "They provide the solar energy we sell to the inter-planet runs."

Clayton watched the filmy sheets turn in their own elliptical orbits, feasting on the light that burst from the rim of the black hole. They were hundreds of kilometers away, but the scene was lit with dazzling intensity. The collectors beamed microwaves across the solar system, he knew, providing in-flight power to ships. That cut transport costs enormously. Rollan had been the first to provide the service.

"I don't follow the details, but it is lovely, isn't it?" Sylvia said with little-girl wonder.

Clayton agreed, but yawned and languidly said, "Uh huh." He shouldn't seem too interested. He would make some sketches as soon as he was alone.

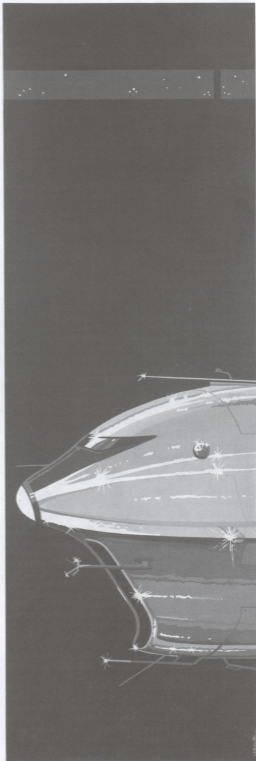
He allowed himself one more moment of rapt appreciation. The Vortex glowed with the mere waste energy of vast forces at work. The discs turned, a huge economic engine steadily rendering ordinary asteroid debris into limitless wealth.

"There's home!" Sylvia cried.

Until now the banks of dust above and below them had hidden the jewel of the system.

Further out, beyond the blue band, all was a mottled darkness, blotting out the stars behind. Further still, the infalling dust thinned. Beyond this shroud, Clayton could see the true marvel, the Hoop.

It was a thin glowing stripe, as ripely blue-green as Earth on a summer's day. The inner rim of the Hoop was lit by the glow of the Vortex, the light funnelled out and focused on the Hoop by the scalloped plates of the dust. This conserved most of the radiance and delivered it to the Hoop, bringing warm temperatures



to its delicately contrived biosphere.

Clayton knew from sketchy information available through the UCLA library that a monolayer shield floated on top of the Hoop's atmosphere. He could see the sheen of Vortex-light scattered by that thin air-trapping film, high above a cottonball cluster of cirrus. Below, basking in radiance, were shimmering lakes and softly undulating hills. At the "equator," the inward curve of the Hoop, a long lake stretched, dividing the span.

Sylvia said excitedly, "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

"Never," he said with complete conviction.

"The forests, the green hills..." Sylvia peered dreamily at the swelling Hoop. "Like Eden..."

Clayton realized she meant the "natural" beauty of the Hoop; he had thought she meant the marvellous engineering that made the thin slice of biosphere possible. He suppressed a disbelieving smile.

**T**hey slid outward toward the Hoop. He guessed the entire Hoop was a few kilometers thick, and they were only perhaps twenty kilometers from the black hole itself. Yet the tiny sucking mote provided brimming light for an entire ecology.

The hills swept by, revolving cool and serene, as he watched. The Hoop circled the Vortex every seven minutes, a giant bicycle tire without spokes. But perspectives were awry here, the irreality of a glowering, gnawing mass-eater so near to placid forests was too jarring. He shook his head, dazed.

A faint pattering came through the alabaster dome of the improbable ship.

"Ah!" one of the Brothers said. He hastily dipped the nose down toward the Hoop.

"What was that?" Clayton said, alarmed. Any accident so near the virulent maw -

"A small error," Sylvia said calmly. "We probably hit a cloud of dust that strayed from its course." She smiled with the confidence of a person for whom the technical problems were always someone else's. Clayton had noted that she was becoming more easy-going, less severe, as they voyaged out from Earth's bright confusions.

Once told, he understood. The infalling dust was supposed to be channelled down in a parabola, flowing above and below the Hoop by a wide, safety margin. Some errant matter had brushed them.

They descended rapidly. As they dropped toward the slowly gyrating Hoop the Brother pilots warbled to each other in their strange, insular tongue. The ship looped outward and passed over the night-like outer side of the Hoop, where ice rimmed the terminator. The Hoop eclipsed the Vortex and darkness descended. Beneath the sole luminescence of the distant speck of the Sun the ice was blue.

"My father says this is where the past ends," Sylvia said, her face pensive and distant.

He reminded himself that to her this spectacular vista was as homey as a back yard. Yet he could see the homesickness welling up in the expectant pout of her mouth. Her high cheek bones gave her a severe, imperial look; the mouth belied that now. She was a woman of deep currents, emotions that at UCLA had found expression in ideas.

"And this -" Clayton had not yet digested the spec-

tacle of the Vortex - "is the future?"

"Why, of course." To her the intricate waltz of light and matter, wheeling here in infinite black, was the family farm, a fact of nature.

He had thought of her as a kinswoman of sorts, reared in a place more like his 'roid origins than the comfortable plush of Earth. But this place, despite his preparation, was bizarre to him. He began to understand how different she was, and felt the tug of a sublime strangeness. He remembered his Major Tutor's calculating eyes and a confusion of motives swirled in him for a moment. Only the grandeur of the spectacle outside made him put all thoughts aside.

They came over the rim of the Hoop, clouds allowing brief glimpses through to the verdant fields. From the Vortex a wedge of light poured outward, trapped between the blanket of infalling matter. The twin sheets of dust resembled plates that necked in to intersect at the hot central spark. As they converged the plates glowed, giving the bands of blue and yellow and brilliant white that he had seen earlier.

They arced around the face of the Hoop, toward the permanent high noon of the equator. The monolayer sheen was turquoise here, with distorted cumulus clouds wedged against its restraining boundary by the rising heat from below.

There - a lessening. The entrance hole, a swiftly-forming leak in the system which allowed ships in and out. It would be open for mere moments.

They turned and glided through it, thrusters focused down now. Here the jockeying was difficult. The ship dropped through the hole, through thick cloud layers, and emerged suddenly above a careening landscape. The Brothers worked furiously now, vectoring sidewise in an intricate gavotte, descending toward their landing field.

The ship, so graceful in vacuum, now seemed to have the aerodynamic properties of a brick. Clayton shrank into his couch, dizzy. What was a simple problem in vector mechanics back at UCLA became a sickening whirl. He felt the eternal power of matter over abstractions. This was nothing like piloting among serenely orbiting asteroids.

Thumps, rattles, a hollow whoosh.

Landfall. The side of the ship furled up. Clayton followed Sylvia down the ramp into a lush valley. A golden haze hung idly over the vast sweep of lawns, azure lakes and artfully arranged forests. The Hoop curved away in both directions, arching up into a blue fog. In the middle distance groves of oak studded the tawny hills, reminding him of California. Further away, rough masses of pine swathed the rumpled land in a grip of dark blue-green.

"It's... lovely," he said.

Three deer emerged from a grove of elms nearby, never giving them a glance, and meandered into a wooded gully. A falcon wobbled on changing air currents high overhead, then began a descending gyre. Above all this hung the incessant technicolor blaze of the Vortex.

**"H**ail!" came a voice nearby. Clayton turned to see a ruddy-faced man of about fifty walking stiffly toward them. The famous Dr Ludwig Rollan showed his years, yet his eyes vibrated with resolve beneath the

golden glow of the haze.

The next moments' customary greetings went by Clayton without leaving any lasting impression, for he was fascinated by Rollan's presence. It is common to be so overwhelmed by the celebrity of the great that at first the actual person seems unreal, too compact and mortal to have been the source of such renown. Clayton had never met anyone of remotely the stature or mystery of this tanned, fuzzy-bearded being who shook his hand slowly, blue eyes self-assured and calm and questioning. He could think of absolutely nothing worth saying. His mind hung in a vacuum, spinning fruitlessly as Sylvia hugged and kissed her father and peppered the grizzled, indulgent man with questions. They exchanged affectionate jokes.

Then Dr Rollan said, as if prompting Clayton, "I gather you are a young man deeply committed to our ideas here."

"Sure am," Clayton said, without specifying which ideas he meant. This place was certainly ripe enough with demonstrated ideas, with practical applications of huge forces.

"Fine!" Dr Rollan slapped Clayton on the back with gusto. "Out here we used to get lots of the other kind, you know, good Clayton."

Clayton nodded, supposing that Rollan meant the grimy, no-nonsense inhabitants of the asteroids. They were interrupted by Rollan's dog, a mongrel who seemed to become immediately fond of Clayton's leg. On Earth dogs were rare, other than as a delicacy, and Clayton did not know how to respond. The dog was trying to embrace his knee. Rollan was distracted, pointing out the sights, so Clayton gave the dog a quick, experimental kick. It backed away.

Dr Rollan took them to a handsome dinner in a vast, green stone country house, termed the Hostel. "Just something the Brothers made up as a greeting," he said, ushering them into a vast communal dining hall. "Do you know what this is?" he asked Clayton.

"Well, uh, a cafeteria," Clayton said uncertainly.

"No!" Dr Rollan cried goodnaturedly. "It is our equivalent of church."

They stood watching the throng for a moment, and soon Clayton saw what he meant. The Brothers dined with a ritual seriousness, passing food and observing social graces with a deadpan earnestness. Evidently the sharing of food was a crucial observance to them.

Clayton found it unnerving — a huge long room, filled with Brothers and Sisters who looked exactly like each other. Dr Rollan had cloned them all from the cells of a great genius of the last century, a social philosopher who had updated Marx and mixmastered in a blend of oriental religion, self-help and moral philosophy. The high steepled wall above bore the statement

**A WEED IS MERELY A PLANT SOMEONE DOESN'T LIKE**

Clayton frowned, trying to figure out the implications. Rollan's dog reappeared, this time eyeing Clayton's leg avidly but keeping a respectful distance. Fascism evidently worked with dogs. Clayton deduced.

"The Brothers and Sisters, they're really all alike?" he asked, to be saying something.

"Exactly," Dr Rollan said.

"Nothing's perfectly copied every time," Clayton

said.

Dr Rollan answered crisply, "Circus knife-throwers know it is possible to be perfect, and one had better be in anything truly earnest."

"Yes sir?" a Brother answered at the Doctor's elbow.

"Oh, I didn't mean you, Ernest. Meet Clayton."

Ernest was a burly version of the others, obviously the product of an extensive exercise program. He wore his shirt open to the navel, where a mat of brown hair exuded a husky scent. Clear blue eyes regarded Clayton closely. There were three women behind him, blank-faced, obviously waiting until his attention returned to them.

"Glad to shake the hand of anybody can give the Missy a good time," Ernest said, pinching Clayton's hand in a vicelike handshake.

"The . . . the Miss?"

"Miss Sylvia," Ernest explained. "She's the un-touchable around here."

"Ernest means I don't take part in their sexual calisthenics," Sylvia said lightly.

"Not genetically allowed, you see, good Clayton," the Doctor said. "Would pollute the strain."

"Ah." Clayton liked something in Ernest's direct, gruff manner and was pleased when they sat at a table together. The people all called Dr Rollan the Handyman, as though he were some mere technical assistant. Clayton thought this odd, and even stranger that Dr Rollan beamed at the nickname. There were greetings all around, but then the Brothers and Sisters fell into rapt conversation with each other, leaving the three genetically different people to themselves.

Food arrived, succulent and steaming. All vegetarian, of course. It was passed on plates of a hard, black, heavy substance which Clayton guessed must be a product of the Vortex itself, matter transmuted by the intense heat of the inner accretion disc.

Ernest quickly downed several glasses of sweet wine, smacking his lips and pronouncing in detail on its qualities. "Try more, good Clayton," Ernest said, slopping some on the table as he refilled Clayton's glass.

"Uh, thanks." He wished everyone wouldn't use the "good" preface, though he noted others routinely using it. It reminded him of old ideas about conditional training. Ernest began telling stories about the farming and labour of the Hoop, dominating the table talk for a while. They were seldom quick and light, and often had the leaden quality of pig irony.

Clayton got on well enough with Doctor Rollan, discussing his parents' asteroid community and the ever-changing economics of the Belt. The Doctor had once been a rockhound himself and still remembered much of what a catch-as-catch-can existence it was. At first the venerable man merely nodded and grunted assent, but as Clayton described his father's company and their hardships, Rollan began to break in with stories of his own, snippets of information, good-ol-days counter-examples. Slowly, listening respectfully, Clayton knitted together a picture of the man, filling in the spaces that had remained obscure in the biographies he had read.

**R**ollan had found the Vortex entirely by accident.

He was born Norman Vladimir Rollan, son of good socialist parents in middle Europe. At that time the planners were attempting to arrest the long economic slide of his native land, and so sent teams into the newly opened asteroids. Their National Mission was to return raw materials for smelting in high orbit.

Rollan was fully committed to the ideals of his government, and volunteered for prospecting duty. This was a chancy affair, involving long low-energy orbits between likely asteroids. Exploring robots, however intelligent, had failed; they had no intuitive feel for the crannies which concealed lucrative metal deposits.

The North Americans had gotten to the obvious candidate 'roids long before, so the European prospectors explored the lesser targets – those with odd spectra, or hard-to-reach orbits out of the ecliptic plane.

Rollan was not a lucky prospector. He turned up countless examples of the most common 'roid – a spongy assemblage of boring elements, with no seams of rare metals. He failed to find even one carbon-rich rock, which would at least have paid his expenses.

He was on his final run, having boosted up to three km/sec at an angle of thirty-seven degrees out of the ecliptic plane. He was fatalistically pursuing a lumbering mountain of unpromising rock. He never reached it. Fifteen hours after his pulse launch in a cramped, one-man slingship, Rollan registered a flash of x-rays that looked like the preliminary burst from a solar flare. Normally the warning system would give him an hour to find a 'roid and hide behind it, out of the sleet of protons spewing from the sun.

But when Rollan swivelled his 'scope around to confirm the flare, the sun was an ordinary disc. Turning the slingship, he found that the radiation came from a spot high above the ecliptic. Unless he had ventured off on this oblique orbit, he would not have been within range to pick it up.

He tracked the spiky, slow-simmering x-rays for hours. They came from a pinprick of UV emission which was swooping down toward the asteroid belt.

Rollan expended his remaining reserve fuel and rendezvoused with the fiery dab of yellow. As he approached he expected it to swell into a 'roid profile. Instead, he nearly collided with it, believing it must be still a long distance away. Only his acceleration meters warned him, seconds before it was too late, of a sudden steepening of the local gravitational potential.

It was a black hole, the first ever found in the solar system – still grinding up and devouring the small rock it had intersected, yielding the burst of x-rays.

Rollan was a competent astrophysicist and he knew a fortune when he saw one. Observation of distant quasars had shown that their dazzling energies came from matter processed by vast black holes at a galactic centre. Matter cast into a disc around a black hole could yield an entire menu of radiation, exotic materials and useful high-energy particles.

He also knew the hole was dangerous. His Earthside training had included elementary magnetic fusion methods; this qualified him to fly a solo slingship

craft and make his own repairs. That came in handy. He fashioned a magnetic trap for the hole, keeping a respectful distance. The hole, despite containing the mass of a medium-sized asteroid, was only a millionth of a centimeter wide. Rollan's magnetic bottle could be strong but crude. Slowly, gingerly, he towed it back to a grubby 'roid station, where he kept silent about the contents.

Only when he reached the tinny magnificence of Ceres Station did he begin to use the hole, injecting ordinary dust and extracting energy from the hole by driving magnetohydrodynamic generators. Electrical power was still at a premium and he – or rather, his National Mission – prospered.

The hole was kept a secret, but even its profitability did not stave off the effects of a general economic recession. Rollan's National Mission folded up. Most of his countrymen went home, but Rollan managed to keep the hole – he had never revealed, even to his superiors, what fed the generators.

These hard times were the crucible in which Rollan was hardened and formed. The decline of the socialist nations – democratic or totalitarian, second or third world, strict or reformist – led him to believe that only a new kind of society could bring about the aims of the old utopian thinkers. He took the hole and began a series of brilliant economic coups, manufacturing exotic materials and plasmas for anyone who could pay. He bought his own asteroid and moved it to a concealing orbit at a steep tilt to the ecliptic. This isolated him from the Belt society, allowing time to refine ore as he refined his own ideas.

He hired trusted assistants, all ideologically pure. He went on frequent, high-boost journeys to Earth, carrying his wares, and returned with huge credit balances payable in the banks of the Belt. He was an early investor in the self-replicating robot companies, and bought over a third of them in the first decade of the industry.

Then came the long plateau of his life, during which he travelled little and worked even harder. Inevitably, news of the hole escaped. Eager, ferret-eyed scientists came to inspect. The nations of Earth attempted to confiscate it. The Belt laid claim to "mineral rights." The system-wide economic community demanded that it be classified as a natural resource, the "proper heritage of all mankind."

In a sense, it was. Astronomers had long believed that the solar system began with a nearby supernova explosion. The supernova occurred in a star of about ten times our sun's mass, blowing outward a huge expanding shell of debris. A sector of this outrushing, highly radioactive junk collided with a neighbouring dust cloud, compressing it. Once begun, gravitational contraction proceeds apace. Within a thousand years the jolt applied by the supernova made the dust cloud shrink into a sputtering, newborn star, with an attendant disc which would eventually form planets.

All this could be deduced from the unusual concentrations of rare elements in present-day meteorites. The radioactive elements of the original supernova had long since decayed into daughter and grand-daughter elements, a telltale signature of a violent birth for the solar system.

What had not been anticipated, though, was the fate of the original supernova remnant. A black hole



formed, from matter crushed inward while most of the dying star rushed outward. The hole was of relatively unimportant mass, scarcely more than a mountain's. It was swept along in the chaos and currents of the explosion, and eventually formed part of the collapsing cloud that made the solar system. It apparently reached the imploding dust cloud late in the formation, and took up an orbit not fully aligned with the ecliptic. This gave astronomers a fix on the original rotation axis of the supernova star, and helped formulate detailed numerical studies of the event which gave birth, eventually, to all humanity.

Rollan didn't give a damn. He regarded astrophysics as a mildly interesting but fundamentally useless activity, unless it could be used to extract further wealth from the hole. After giving the scientists minimal time to study the hole—now surrounded by a complex system of infalling asteroid dust, transmutation cylinders and furiously working robots—he closed the entire community to outside visitors.

Earth had long manoeuvred to gain control of the hole. Rollan favoured neither Earth nor the asteroids, on grounds that it was silly to select one bull over another on the basis of the beauty of its horns, when what mattered was that you lived in a china shop. He manoeuvred the 'roidbelt interests into successfully countering Earth. In return they asked for preference in patents derived from the hole. Rollan freely gave that, demonstrating again his balancing act between the two economic giants. However, patent rights were all he would grant. All else was cloaked in isolation.

Scientists came to inspect and were turned away. Observations from afar were neatly blocked by the huge clouds of asteroid matter that were sent orbiting in toward the hole, masking whatever enormous engineering feats were going on below. Specialists hired for the tasks were sworn to secrecy. Their memories were wiped clean when they left Rollan's employ.

As the years stretched on, no scientists ever managed to wangle an invitation to see Rollan. He evaded government surveys of his holdings, keeping all but a few workers at a great remove from the actual hole site. Rumours circulated that his self-replicating machines were roving the high-azimuth orbits above and below the belt, searching for raw materials not claimed, or even other black holes.

The happy years of progress and expansion were punctuated by Rollan's marriage to a woman of the Lunar Nirvana Colony. Their short-lived experiments in "human-animal genetically altered communality" led to public outrage. There were some interesting, unanticipated side effects, however. The breakup of Luna Nirvana greatly enhanced the market in collies and cougars who could take care of the children and run the house, too. It created a whole new industry in big game hunting, promising more nearly even odds. But the experience left Rollan's wife a shattered vessel, a docile receptacle for his idealistic impulses. Sylvia was their only child. Inspired by his vision, Rollan thereafter devoted himself to the cloning program necessary for the new society he envisioned.

5.

Morning. As Clayton awoke he saw drowsily that multicoloured streamers of light lanced across his room, rippling the far wall with elegant tracteries of shifting blues, greens and oranges. This resonated with his technicolor headache, a memento of the sweet wine from the night before. He groped from the bed.

Through curiously thick windows he saw the great plane of the accretion disc, a broad stripe that ran straight across the sky. The sky was a pale blue that stretched away into oblivion, merging with the fuzzy vision of the Hoop itself, arcing up and away. He longed to see better, to be able to pick out the robot shepherds who tended the disc. They would be mere dots against this magnificence, lost in the glare, but they could tell him much from their location and movements. His heart pounded.

He tapped the window. It gave back a solid thump. He felt its slick surface, marvelling at the density and thickness of the glass. Each pane was faceted at its edges, refracting splashes of light. Even for a man of Rollan's expansive style, it seemed an incredible indulgence.

"Good morning, sir," a voice said behind him. He turned. "Are you ready for your bath, sir?" Ernest asked, holding out a towel.

"Well, sure." He hadn't expected such service. And Ernest's respectful "sir" he liked better than "good Clayton." Ernest was so devoted to Sylvia that Clayton automatically took him for a rival. It was reassuring that the man apparently knew his place.

Clayton began to shed his pyjamas, but Ernest knelt before him and undid the buttons, saying "Allow me." As the man slid the pyjama bottoms off, he observed Clayton's state of tumescence (caused by the vision of the accretion disc, plus a full bladder) and offered to provide any sexual service required.

"Uh, well, no, ah - no, not my kind of thing," Clayton gasped.

"You're sure?"

"No!"

"Perhaps one of the Sisters, then? I can summon Angela or Hadley quickly, they are nearby."

"No, no, nothing thanks."

Ernest nodded gravely and then smiled. "Anything you want, that's what you'll get. Our ideal is selfless service here, sir."

"So I see," Clayton muttered.

"Hot rosewater and vanilla soap?"

"What?"

"Followed by a plasma ionizer rinse," Ernest suggested. "Stimulates the body, while quieting the mind." He nodded significantly at the still-horizontal member.

"Yes," agreed Clayton, smiling inanely, "as you please."

He had only a few minutes before breakfast to draw sketches of the Vortex and Hoop, from memory. At the simple meal they were surrounded by the hubbub of the communal dining room. Brothers and Sisters everywhere brought forth and devoured huge glittering plates of eggs, toast, cereal, ham. The ham was a vegetarian substitute, of course, but Dr Rollan assured them that it tasted remarkably like true pig flesh. Clayton could not understand the streams of bodies

or follow their odd accents.

"They all seem to be about, uh . . ." Clayton began.

"Twenty-five, on the nose," Dr Rollan said. "They all came out of the cooker at exactly sixteen when I started the experiment, nine years ago."

"They're all sort of older brothers and sisters to me," Sylvia said. Clayton noticed she had forsaken her constant Earthside garb of severe pants and blue cotton work shirt. Now she wore a little white gown which came to just below her knees. He liked especially the wreath of marigolds clasped with slender blue slices of stone in her hair.

"All the same genotype," Clayton said. "And you hold the patent?"

"I have published the 'specs,' Dr Rollan said. "Anyone can clone more Brothers and Sisters if he or she likes."

"They are handsome," Clayton said politely. Actually, he was already tiring of them.

"A simple formula, really," Dr Rollan said. "I hired the best DNA artists to make me a chain with no inherited diseases, yes, that much is commonplace. But fashioning the right personality mix and making it breed true in the conception tubes – that was no trifling matter."

"I see," Clayton said. "To get the right sort of worker for –"

"No no!" Dr Rollan was agitated. He stopped slicing the blue-brown fake ham and frowned furiously. "The exact personality type does not matter. I know my ideas are not widely known in the reactionary citadels of Earth – and of course they are roundly despised among the 'roid rabble – but you must have gotten some misinformation somewhere."

"I just –"

"The point is that those societies contain a contradiction, a dialectical one, if you will. Earth, with its billions of citizens, preaches the virtue of tolerance, of passivity, of conformity. But who does it reward? The heads that poke up above the crowd! It is impossible to free them of their adulation of the special unless it becomes impossible to be special!"

"That's a scientific fact," Sylvia put in. "Father gave Brotherland its own dialect, too – it's the easiest way to program their worldview."

"Ah."

"You are training to be a social scientist, Mr Donner," Dr Rollan went on, cutting his cube of ham precisely into smaller brown cubes, all alike. "You must realize the central problem! One cannot carry out reproducible experiments on human societies. They are not a controlled environment."

"Well, yes."

"So I constructed this world, to prove that Uniformism will work. Here we can illustrate the central tenets of progressive thinking, begin the true evolution of the socialist man."

"Through controlled experiments."

"Yes. We will demonstrate that Uniformism produces more material goods, higher pleasures, healthier bodies."

"And you'll drive the 'roids into a depression."

Dr Rollan chuckled. "It is they who preach the virtue of their vaunted free markets."

"But my father's operation –"

Dr Rollan smiled shrewdly, his eyes rolling upward

in amusement. "Free markets . . . can be costly."

When he returned to his room Clayton quickly finished unpacking. He assembled the telescope which he had dismantled and hidden among his belongings. It was stubby and could not give fine resolution, but it did not need to. Its heart was the spectrum analyzer which attached like a lamprey to the base.

Clayton pointed the telescope at the huge strip of light that hung like a ribbon wrapping the sky. He would have liked to do this outdoors, but there he would have been quickly spotted. He sighted the telescope through the thick windows and thumbed the instrument into action.

Rollan's ingenious design of the inflowing matter made astrophysical observation of the black hole impossible from a great distance. The infalling matter masked the hole except for the thin wedge in the equatorial plane – which was blocked by the Hoop itself.

Clayton focused the telescope on each of the technicolored bands of the accretion disc in turn. The spectrum analyzer recorded emission lines, buzzing and humming to itself. There was a wealth of information here. Clayton began to perspire slightly, his heart thumping. He punched in commands for a finer scan and heard the door behind him opening.

"Clayton!"

He jumped. It was Sylvia.

"I, uh, I'm –"

"You must come to see the harvesting. The entire quadrant is there!"

He stood speechless for a moment before realizing that Sylvia could not see the telescope behind him.

"Well, sure, just give me a minute, huh?"

"Just one!" she cried happily, and left.

He quickly stripped the telescope into its components and hid them.

## 6.

As a festival of commonality it left Clayton feeling curiously left out. The Brothers and Sisters harvested the wheat, all right, using light-weight machinery and considerable skill. But they chattered together in the indistinguishable patois that was beginning to irritate Clayton.

They all referred to Clayton as "sir" on the few occasions when they addressed him. Clayton felt rather swell about this until Sylvia mentioned that to be exalted above the commonality was in fact a denigration, so "sir" was a term of polite contempt. Clayton remembered that Ernest had used "sir" in very nearly every sentence, starting with this morning. Had the man become surly over Clayton's romance with Sylvia? Clayton studied Ernest's brooding face, but could read nothing. He decided the man was either very deep or very shallow, and as with many people, it was difficult to tell which.

Dr Rollan tried to labour with them, sweating profusely, stripped to the waist. The man was old, of course, even neglecting the times he had spent in the coldsleep vaults, while his self-producing machines had built the Hoop. He so earnestly wanted to be included among the Brothers and Sisters that he ran the risk of overturning himself. Indeed, he quickly

became ashen-faced and had to sit down. Clayton had to admire the chaste and consistent selflessness in the man.

"See how . . . well they . . . work together," Dr Rollan observed while he shakily took a drink at the water trough.

Clayton agreed. He and Sylvia watched from the side of the fields, since he, as an outsider, was not allowed to take any part in the joy of production. Sylvia was in rapture. She confided to Clayton that she loved everything in nature, except perhaps anchovies.

Dr Rollan said meditatively, gesturing at the labouring lines, "They are the future, young man. Superior to the mess humanity has made of itself."

Like most idealists, Dr Rollan loved mankind in principle and disliked it in very nearly every particular.

"Do you plan to spread the Brotherhood and Sisterhood?" Clayton asked mildly.

"Where?" Dr Rollan seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Perhaps to those new worlds discovered around Tau Ceti?"

"Good lord," the old man said crankily, "I wouldn't run away from the problems of the human race. We have to face them here."

Clayton nodded, but frowned.

**T**hat night Clayton could not sleep. The vegetarian diet had proved an ineffective cushion for the weight of wine that had landed on it. Still, he was too cautious to go wandering about on his own. Best not to arouse suspicions.

He sat up reading, and quickly grew tired of reviewing the old text, *Supernova Debris*. It was the last major work on the subject. Dr Rollan had denied scientists access to the black hole and to Brotherland, so astrophysics had gained little from his discovery. *Supernova Debris* contained many speculations which could not be verified.

He put it aside and turned to an old text on social theory, tracking down details of the half-remembered Model of Utopias due to the nearly unreadable but famous social theorist and nudist, Darko Drovneb. Brotherland seemed to have all the characteristics. The textbook discussion rang uncannily true.

The Brothers and Sisters made a point of communal values, keeping their culture pure and without diversity. Rollan's program of genetic uniformity helped that, and also aimed at the second Drovneb characteristic: no change with time. Experiments required unchanging conditions, after all. Even more important, change implied that something had been wrong before.

Drovneb's third signature – a nostalgic and technophobic atmosphere – fit, too. The Hoop was a giant farm, recalling Earth of centuries ago. And the Brothers and Sisters knew little or nothing of machines beyond their farming equipment. Robots and Rollan made the Hoop work, with nearly everything technical kept above the bottled atmosphere.

And Rollan himself provided the fourth characteristic – an authority figure. He insisted on being called the Handyman, but it was clear that his word was law. He had built the very ground they stood on, after all.

Only in the final Drovneb characteristic was there



some doubt. *Social regulation through guilt*, the book said. *Responsibility is exalted as the standard of behaviour.*

Clayton frowned. The Brothers and Sisters seemed remarkably guilt-free, compared with the constricted folk of Earth. Maybe the rural surroundings simply made them seem more easy-going.

Certainly their absurdly low-tech agricultural methods were politically imposed, hopelessly inefficient. Yet apparently they worked well enough to make a profit for Brotherland. Of that the Handyman was proud. He kept the fields of the Hoop a nostalgic echo of the farms of centuries ago, and it seemed to work. The ghost of Rousseau walked here.

He wearily thumbed off the book. The Drovneb parameters fit nearly every utopian society of the last five centuries. The theory predicted a common end – as soon as the authority figure died, things began slowly to unwind. Diversity, curiosity, simple human orneryness – all conspired to bring down the golden dreams. He wondered what would happen when Dr Rollan was gone. Could this pinwheel in the sky roll on?

He sighed and fell into an uneasy sleep.

## 7.

**T**hey took a week to hike around the Hoop in the half-g centrifugal acceleration. They hiked through crisp rolling hills, wholesome flatland wheat and cloying dense jungle. Birds fluttered among high limbs, incredible to Clayton in their variety. His childhood in the asteroid belt had confirmed him in the faith that the best biosphere was simple, direct. Rollan's sculpted kingdom echoed Earth's mad profusion. Nature seemed unnecessarily messy and indecisive. Why both the crow and the blackbird, for example?

From the pleasant week he remembered only intense fragments:

One day they avoided the 'roidrock communal home of the Brothers and Sisters, and instead camped in a dense knot of oak trees. Their canopy blotted out the Vortex, bringing a false night.

Sylvia luxuriated on a bed of moss, which Clayton had gathered at her request from the moist upper limbs of the trees. "Moss is a parasite, after all," she had said. "It uses trees; we'll use it."

Her dress fluttered like a white sail in a breeze, a craft promising far destinations. Oak leaves stirred above in the firelight, making moving shadows as does the wind upon the sea.

"Right."

He took her some tofu, hot and jacketed in a crisp black crust from being held too long in the flames. He collapsed to his knees before her as she bit into the creamy warm taste inside. She smiled in lazy acceptance and he kissed her. He drew in his breath deeply, feeling himself on the verge of a great abyss. She parted the dress and shrugged free of it. The cloth fell like a table cloth on the broad stump, herself as the meal. He was tired of trying to be underspoken and witty. He inhaled and a musky scent of her swarmed into him. Insects chirruped in the twilight. "Ah," she said. The filmy dress, the thick air – if he had been sensible, he would have worried about his heart. She smiled, silkily stroked his neck, and slid the backs

of her knees over his shoulders.

**R**ollan had used Earthside techniques for constructing the Brothers' and Sisters' basic platforms of emotion, integration, and left-right balances. Anthology personalities, the press called them. The techniques were derived from the new methods of compressed indoctrination developed in some of the more deplorable nations. Rollan still imported Earth technology, and used mindtech when it seemed in accord with the aims of Brotherland. When Clayton asked one of the Sisters how she felt about Earth, she answered, "Why go to Earth at all?" A Brother joked, "Why do people go to zoos?"

He could see much that was unknown about the disc – the coal-dark lanes of thickening dust, the sudden yellow flares of magnetic reconnection further in. When alone, he took notes and used the finger-sized camera tucked snugly into his belt.

He chanced to see a craft descend from the Vortex and deposit what looked like ice on the edge of the Hoop. Rollan stored fluids as ice on the outside of the Hoop, but Clayton could not fathom how the craft got ice from the hot inner disc.

On their last day of hiking, he slipped away and observed the disc with a small telescope he had hidden in his pack. For a few seconds he saw something large blot out the whitehot light from the very inner edge of the disc. But the eclipsing did not recur, and Clayton was left wondering what the thing could be. A ramscoop vessel? Orbiting perpendicular to the disc, close in, it would be damnably hard to see... unless you chanced to be in the right spot for an eclipse.

Did Rollan plot to colonize the stars with the seamless sameness of the People?

**T**he return of Clayton and Sylvia to the Central Hostel, where Dr Rollan lived, was cause for festivity. Even Dr Rollan's dog was glad to see them, yelping and leaping at Sylvia. The dog eyed Clayton's leg adoringly with what Clayton took to be the Fuehrerprinzip.

Dr Rollan celebrated. He commented warmly on Clayton's hair, mentioning that it now resembled the Brother style, simple and utilitarian.

"Glad to see it, good Clayton," Rollan said.

Clayton chose not to remark that he had gone along with Sylvia's haircut proposal primarily because of the pleasant effect she had anticipated that the soft, short brush would have on her upper thighs. Instead, he had more of the aromatic wine.

That evening, as part of the sporadic celebration, Dr Rollan instructed the worker robots who tended the Vortex to perform for Clayton and Sylvia. In they came, hundreds of the ivory motes streaming out from the glossy bands. Further legions descended from the banks of infalling dust, leaving only a skeleton crew of robots to keep the dark shroud on its slow sure gyre.

They flitted gnat-like through a momentarily opened hole in the monolayer. At Rollan's wrist control, the puncture spread. It was a suddenly swelling black circle, into which the robots swooped. Then it zipped shut, summoned together again by intricate molecular commands.

The robots extended silvery wings and swarmed



through the Hoop's upper atmosphere. They formed letters, symbols, pictures. Against the sky the metal fleets swooped, performed adroit feats, defied gravity. In fact, Clayton realized, there was no gravity up there. Centripetal force held him pinned, but only the mild brush of the air acted on the flying robots. He craned his aching neck to follow their darting arabesques.

As they set to work on a large cloud, Clayton stode away. The crowd went ooh and ahhh as the cloud purpled, swirled, reformed. The robots were crafting some momentary sculpture from it. An ear poked out. An eye appeared, winked. Then a full, round lip.

"Oh, it's Daddy!" he heard Sylvia cry as he slipped inside the Hostel. The Handyman made some self-deprecating reply.

Clayton quickly found what he was looking for. Rolan's private quarters were encrusted with command and control modules, detailed sequencing arrays, luminous graphics – the nerve centre which controlled Brotherland and the Vortex. He felt like a spy, slipping through the doorway. Myriad columns and rows of data rolled on opalescent screens. If he could decipher even some of this, the right scrap of information –

"Why – Clayton!"

He jerked his attention away from the hypnotic welter. Sylvia stood in the doorway, eyes round with shock. "What are you doing?"

"Ah, I just wanted a look around the place."

"Daddy never lets anyone in here."

"Why not?"

"You know."

"The family secrets, right?"

She said archly, "I'm sure you really do understand. You're just being difficult."

"Come on, let's go see the rest of the show."

"It's nearly over. Robots bore me, really." She looked at him from the corner of her eyes, a lightly enticing smile curving her cool lips. "Besides . . . wouldn't you really rather go to our room?"

Her invitation was irresistible, her buoyancy contagious. Her dress fluttered in a vagrant breeze, as though she herself had just returned from a short, graceful, effortless flight in the uplifting air. Clayton sighed and gave himself over to her, though he knew he would have to try something daring if he was ever to make any real progress.

### 8.

*... As the supernova expansion continues, the shell will fragment into clumps whose size is difficult to predict. Despite turbulence and magnetic disruption effects, some clumps should survive. They should have densities in the range of their initial formation. Rapid radioactive decay will leave many of them in states of virtually pure silicon, magnesium, or carbon. Indeed, carbon chunks will be most common, probably in the form of graphite. However, if at the onset of expansion the incipient lattice structure were face-centred cubic, this form could persist. Numerical simulations of this stage are costly and unreliable, so it appears unlikely that theoretical work on this topic can proceed further without some observational spur. Since such solid supernova debris is not luminous, attempts to observe it near supernova remnants*

*in the galaxy seem doomed. This area of research thus appears to be at a dead end.*

– Supernova Debris

Valerie Thompson, 2078

Later, he tugged her along the passageway, nervously watching the doors ahead.

She whispered, "But, honestly, I don't see why we have to –"

"Shhhh!"

They walked softly through the rest of the Hostel, avoiding the distant sounds of movement as the skeleton night shift went about domestic duties. Sylvia led him through an obscure side exit and they stepped into glaring daylight.

She began sleepily, "I still don't see –"

"I want a better look at the Vortex robots," he said. "And I'm pretty sure your father wouldn't let me."

"Did you ask him?"

"What you don't ask for, they can't deny you," he said nimbly.

"But he might get angry if –"

"Where did you say they usually landed?" If they stood here and talked it all out, eventually somebody would come by.

"Over there, beyond that hill. The maintenance station is buried under that grove of apple trees." She pointed reluctantly.

They skirted around the Hostel and made their way, keeping well back in the leafy shadows. A section of hillside slid aside at Sylvia's command; he was quite sure the voice-actuator would have rejected him, perhaps set off a jangling alarm. He had gently gotten information from her after a sweaty tussle in bed. She had drifted into sleep, but a plan had bloomed in his imagination.

After their graceful aero demonstration, some of the Vortex robots had stayed on the Hoop, for routine repairs. Sylvia walked through teams of shiny robots without giving them more than a glance, assured that they would get out of the way. They did, too. Awake now, she was quite willing to show off more of her father's vast empire, though it became obvious that she knew very little about how any of this worked.

In the back row he saw a bulging cylindrical thing perched on a launch platform. Atop it was a transparent bubble. A giveaway; automatic machines don't need observation domes.

"Can I take a look inside that one?"

"I suppose so."

She was alert, yet quite willing to go along with his curiosity. The point, she had reminded him regularly, was to free people from machines, so that they could think primarily of each other again. She repeated this as they climbed up the rungs of the large, pear-shaped vessel. A hatch hissed open. Inside, she tapped a command phosphor and a voice obediently asked, "Yes, Missy?"

"We'd like some drinks."

"Of course. I have fresh squeezings of fruit, pure water, sniffer ale –"

Clayton's eyes swept the control panel, understanding its elegant simplicity immediately. His hands flitted over an actuation pad and the boards lit up. He tapped in a command. Standard stuff; his 'roid experience paid off.

The drinks were already splashing into opulent crystal glasses. The disembodied voice interrupted its offerings of food with, "Oh, sorry, I shall have to belay catering while we are under acceleration."

Sylvia blinked. "Acceleration?"

"Yes. Please be seated."

Clayton felt a gentle throbbing under his feet, then a tug. "What - ow!" Sylvia cried, as she tumbled onto a divan which had sprouted from a bulkhead.

"We're taking this personnel robot for a ride," Clayton said. "To see the sights."

Sylvia's eyes widened. "You, you . . ."

"Quite."

The craft rose with obedient, smooth competence. The hillside rolled away and they sprouted from it, a thin tongue of orange fire licking at the tail. Clouds wreathed them, visible through the transparent dome above. The ship asked, "Destination?"

"The Vortex," Clayton said.

Sylvia could have rescinded his order at any moment, he knew, but something strange had come into her eyes. She stared at him, a prettily puzzled frown marring her forehead. He had taken a move without consulting her; perhaps she was so surprised by this unique event that the possibility of a serious outcome to this adventure had not yet occurred to her? Somehow her crisp intelligence, so apparent at UCLA, was submerged. The true Sylvia seemed ever more unfathomable. She sat on the divan, stroking its gold lamé upholstery with a slow, distracted rhythm.

Clayton had worried about the monolayer, but he needn't have. It parted as they rose, unzipping a slice of raw black sky. The ship poked through it and free.

Sylvia said, "You don't mean to -"

"Oh, but I do," He smiled.

They sped swiftly toward the brimming disc of light. Dust thumped and rasped and sang against the hull.

"You'll tell me when the x-ray or UV count gets high?" Clayton asked the ship.

"Of course, sir. But I shall rotate my body away from the disc itself, so as to absorb the radiations before they reach you."

"Good idea."

"I was designed to think of such things."

"For what mission?"

"To take Dr Rollan on his journeys to the Vortex."

"To study what?"

"That I do not know."

"Does he go often?"

"Sadly, no. He has seldom made the trip this last decade."

"Any idea why?"

"No sir," the ship said stiffly, and Clayton wondered if its programming used "sir" as Ernest did.

"Clayton, I want to go back," Sylvia said. He recognized the petulant vixen approach - pouting lip, whiny singsong. But somehow he knew she did not mean it.

"No. I want a look at this."

"My father will be angry - very angry."

Ah, threats. "I think he'll understand. He was like me, once."

She said irritably, "I doubt that."

"Come on. Your father had curiosity."

"He was thrown into a place and a time, by imper-

sonal historical forces," she said, as if she had memorized it from somewhere.

"Is that from one of your father's speeches to the Brothers and Sisters?"

She looked surprised. "Well, yes."

"There's another similarity."

"What?"

"He was an astrophysicist, once."

She looked blank. "You're not, you're -" Then a furious look crept over her face.

"Right. I'm majoring in astrophysics."

Sylvia gritted her teeth and swore bitterly, her words like spat tacks. He said nothing. She began to shout at the ship, commanding it to turn back. When there was no answer she pounded on the firm but padded walls.

"It's no use," he said mildly. "I've switched the ship to control panel operation only."

"How - why -"

"I'll explain later. Don't think badly of me simply because I did what I had to do. Just . . . give me time. And watch."

He knew there was little time before Dr Rollan would be after them, and less still before the ship would reach the inner edge of the accretion disc. His heart thumped as he swung into the observation chair. It was mounted on gimbals and shafts, allowing easy movement about the transparent dome. Filtered telescopes and array sensors hung nearby, available at a gesture.

The central riddle of Brotherland came riding toward them, trailing clouds of glory.

**T**hey were coming down now, falling at an angle toward the accretion disc. It turned like an immense technicolor phonograph record. Luminous bands shaded from blue to orange to red and finally, at the furiously spinning inner edge, a startling glorious white. Clayton felt a giddy, seasick sway as the ship matched orbital velocities with the disc. Each striated section was at a different temperature and gave off its own speckled, roiling glow. He could see flecks of still-solid stone being swallowed at the outer rim, then ground into fuel by friction's raw rub.

But toward the centre, where the burning fire was a searing point, he caught a flicker of movement. Something solid, something large . . .

Sylvia was talking to him, using reasonable tones of persuasion, softly undulant. To Clayton it was babble, lost in the background pops and rumbles that echoed through the ship. He could not follow her quixotic changes. He concentrated on the shadowy thing ahead.

He punched in directives and the ship smoothly shifted, pressing them into their couches as it set off in pursuit of the inky thing that - Clayton saw clearly now - was orbiting at the edge of the disc, but not in the disc.

"It's in orbit around the hole, but perpendicular to the disc," he said wonderingly.

"What is?" Sylvia asked sharply, but even she was puzzled, frowning up at the strangely sombre, gleaming thing.

The distorting sweep of light made it hard to be sure. "It's no ramscoop vessel, at least," Clayton

muttered to himself.

The surface of the thing caught the dislight and threw it back in a shower of minute glimmerings, a thousand thousand wavering ice-blue candles buried deep in the slumbering mass.

**Extract sample,** Clayton ordered the ship.

The bulk's slow rotation brought into view long, webbed tubes mounted on the surface.

"Accelerators," Clayton said. "That's what your father bought the electromagnetic guns for."

"What?"

"To adjust the orbit of this big mass. To make up for the friction it encounters when it punches through the disc. And people Earthside thought he was building a starship . . ." He smiled mirthlessly. Sylvia peppered him with questions, but he brushed them aside. They watched silently as a sample-fetching robot returned and thumped into the lock. In a moment the ship's flawless servants had conveyed the sample case up to the receiving bay. Clayton snapped it open.

Into his hand floated a brilliant, icy stone.

"What . . . I don't . . ." Sylvia touched the cold, hard thing.

"It's a diamond."

"Are you . . . sure?"

"It fits with some studying I've been doing. Supernova debris is mostly rubble, junk, hydrogen gas. But the compressed star could form solid matter. At those temperatures . . ."

"Solid carbon? That's what diamond is, like graphite, isn't it? Only harder."

"Yes – far more compressed. The supernova star did that. The centre imploded into a black hole, the outer layers blew away – and somewhere in the middle, this."

He looked wonderingly out at the slowly spinning mass. It had lumps and hummocks, like any other small asteroid. Yet each minute turn brought forth myriad fresh facets of hard, cool blue, of russet, of sulphurous yellow. "But who would ever have thought . . . we always considered molecules, maybe a few pebbles at most. This . . . a chunk so big . . ."

He estimated distance, angle. He tried to think of something on a human scale to compare it to, something as worthy of this rich relic from a time beyond the first dim stirrings of earthly life, beyond the first raindrop, beyond the blind dumb buttings that formed the sun itself.

He whispered, "It's one whole stone. A diamond as big as the Ritz."

"The what?"

"A hotel in Boston. A fabulous hotel."

She said sardonically, yet distantly, "For the rich only, I'll bet."

"For the different."

"Sure they're different. They have more money."

Clayton could not argue of such infinitesimal things, could not take his eyes from the blissfully turning body, host of a billion starlike blue-white promises.

**"G**ood Clayton!"  
The rasp of Dr Rollan's voice on the radio yanked him from his reverie.

"Daddy! Look what we've found," Sylvia cried gladly.



Clayton put out a hand to block the small TV camera she swivelled, to transmit the image before them. Sylvia veered it away from him, and focused on the vast stone.

"Think of it!" she said. "It must have drifted in here from those dust clouds the robots are always working on, bringing in from the Belt. Dummies! They didn't recognize what it was."

Clayton began carefully, "Sylvia, you should wait and —"

"No, don't you understand? If Clayton — I know he's impetuous, Daddy, and I have to admit it, a liar, too! — If Clayton hadn't stolen this ship and come out here on a jaunt, we would never have known this was here. It would have fallen into the hole!"

Clayton said, "It's moving exactly perpendicular to the disc. That minimizes the friction it feels when it passes through the plane of the disc. Anyway, it's far out, at the edge of the disc. A small, steady push could keep it in this orbit for a long time."

"That's quite right," Dr Rollan's voice came crisply through the panel speaker. "This object will no doubt prove very interesting to study. Meanwhile, I must insist that you return at once to the Hoop and leave—"

"No, Daddy! I want to explore. A diamond this big, it's — why, I wonder if when you stand on the surface, you can see yourself, little pictures of yourself, waving back! All the way down to the centre!"

"Sylvia, there is all the time in the world to —"

"Never mind, the charade won't play," Clayton said.

Rollan asked menacingly, "What?"

"A diamond asteroid, orbiting just so it won't fall into the hole easily? But perfectly positioned so that when it is above or below the plane of the disc, it's screened by the infalling dust? So no one can see it from the Hoop? The only way I suspected it was the quick little flicker of its shadow passing between me and the disc."

Sylvia said, "The robots put it there. They probably were wondering what it was. But with all they had to do, preparing for their air show and all, there probably hasn't been time —"

Clayton laughed, though he sensed this was not wise. "And it just happens to arrive now?"

Sylvia said irritably, "You're making a lot out of —"

"No, he is right, Sylvie," the Handyman said. "The stone has been here from the beginning. I discovered it at the same time as the hole itself. They were in orbit about each other, even then."

Sylvia blinked. Her mouth opened — first in amazement, then in perplexity, then in a sad, wondrous expression of confused defeat.

"Then your biography is wrong," Clayton said. "You didn't make your first money out of the hole at all, did you?"

"No."

Sylvia asked wonderingly, "Then how . . ."

"He sold chunks of the diamond," Clayton said. "Right?"

"Yes. A little private courier run to Earth, some quiet deals. It was necessary."

Sylvia said distantly, "To finance Brotherland?"

"Yes. I could extract power from the hole, but not enough to buy all I needed. I left the diamond here in the original orbit, where no one would find it."

Clayton added, "We always wondered why you put Brotherland out here. That didn't make astrophysical sense."

Dr Rollan's voice said wanly, distantly, "Yes . . . a clue, one I could not avoid."

"But Daddy, why hide it?" Sylvia's lips hovered between stunned surprise and quizzical alarm. Yet her eyes studied the huge stone outside with keen intelligence.

"I used chips from it to finance the Hoop."

"But I thought . . . the black hole . . ."

Rollan said sadly, "Yes, I could make some profit from energy extraction . . . but I could see it would not be enough to accomplish . . . my dreams. Certainly it alone could not support . . . the economy of the Hoop as it now exists . . . all the Brothers and Sisters."

Clayton understood everything now. He opened his mouth to speak when suddenly he glimpsed a rapidly growing red dot, high above the diamond asteroid.

"What — ?"

Ernest's voice boomed through the cabin. "I've come to kick your ass back where it belongs, sir. The Handyman, he's taking this pretty hard. I decided to come out here and drag you back, you lying little —"

"Oh, forget that hairy-chested stuff," Sylvia said sharply. "Can't you see you've been outfoxed?"

Clayton found her sudden tart anger endearing. All along he had wondered if she found Ernest's sweaty, well, earnestness somehow attractive. To find that she could so quickly size up the situation, and automatically side with him, gave Clayton an unexpected jolt of pleasure. He smiled at her and gestured toward the immense gleaming stone.

"I believe the lady would like to take a walk upon the surface first, Ernest. We'll suit up momentarily. Then I'm sure I'm quite capable of escorting her safely home, thank you."

The sputtering exasperation that came from the speaker only deepened his joy.

## 10.

Clayton took a moment to himself on the veranda. It was pleasant to get outside, away from the hothouse festivities of the Hostel.

Dr Rollan had declared a holiday. The Brothers and Sisters had set to with an endless round of dances, feats, athletic competitions, songfests and general revelry. Apparently they required no explanation of the holiday, no pretext, but simply gave themselves over to a mad round of heartwarming ritual good spirits. Clayton had never seen people with such capacity, and wondered how such a remarkable ability fit into the dry, acerbic Drovneb parameters. Breathing in the succulent air of ripe fields and sweet promise, he decided that narrow dull Drovneb had missed something vital.

"Are you going to accept?"

Sylvia's sudden question, coming from behind, made him jump. He turned to find her glowing with energy, perspiring from a whirling folk dance that was just now ebbing away in the hall beyond.

"I . . . I came here to think it over."

"You have to."

"Well, I . . . it's a big decision, Sylvia."

Her mouth formed an incredulous O. "But you could



live here forever."

"But I couldn't return to Earth, or even to the asteroids."

"What does that matter? Earth can't compare to this, can it?"

He gazed out across the verdant fields, the gentle curve of the Hoop rising up into the sky with a seemingly infinite promise of bountiful natural wealth. There was astrophysics to be done here, utopian visions, a self-contained universe. Even if it was founded, finally, on a deception. But even that false centre was a giant jewel, a marvel unequalled anywhere.

"No, it can't."

"Father needs you."

"Yes, he told me when he made the offer." Clayton patted her hand uncomfortably.

Actually, Dr Rollan had revealed more than Sylvia or anyone else in Brotherland knew. Dr Rollan's health was declining, an arteriosclerotic gumming combined with gradual, accumulating organ defects beyond the healing powers of man or machine. Rollan was the scientific sorcerer behind the Hoop, and was finding the task more difficult as the great ring spun on. Even minor excitements, such as Rollan's confession to his daughter at the discovery of the diamond mountain, sapped his strength. He needed help.

"You know," he said distantly, "if you hadn't invited me, I wonder how he could have gotten anyone reliable out here."

"You mean any volunteers would have been Earth agents?"

"Well, yes," Clayton admitted uncomfortably.

"Just like you."

"But I'm different, you know that."

"Oh yes, as I know," she said, an enigmatic smile playing on her lips.

Clayton's arrival had seemed an omen to Dr Rollan, a possible eleventh-hour salvation. Rollan had never trusted outsiders enough to think of bringing them into his gyrating experiment. But now he had to. Sylvia's chance invitation had provided an unexpected opening.

"Is he resting?" he asked to deflect the conversation.

"I checked a short while ago. He's looking better."

"He knows I won't leak information about the diamond."

"Of course," she said mildly. "We trust you."

"Mere knowledge that so many potential diamonds could flood the market – that alone would drive the price to nearly zero."

Sylvia smiled. "Your sacred market system. Too much wealth and it becomes worthless."

Clayton shuffled uncomfortably, rubbed his hands together. There had been so many signs, clues, hints. The thick windows of his bedroom were diamond sheets. The robots he had seen at the edge of the Hoop were bringing a chunk of diamond to store among the ice fields of the Hoop's backside. Ernest's discomfort at discussing technical matters arose from the man's lack of experience at keeping secrets from strangers.

Rollan had not been deeply disturbed by Clayton's discovery. Perhaps the years of keeping the secret had built up a kind of pressure to share it with someone who could understand.

The old man did trust him. Earlier tonight the Handyman – face lined, hands visibly trembling,

voice reedy and faltering – had offered to bring Clayton forward as his inheritor, the Fixit Man. To transfer the mantle of humble power.

Rollan's dog came cautiously onto the veranda and sat a respectful metre from Clayton's revered leg. Curiously, the dog acted this way only toward the Handyman and himself, as if all along the animal had sensed some similarity.

"I . . . I don't know," Clayton said. "I'd have to learn so much astrophysics, handle Brotherland, teach people like Ernest enough to help me out."

"Father can teach," she said laconically.

Clayton nodded. Dr Rollan knew the quirky ways of the Brothers and Sisters, was sure that he could smooth the way for Clayton. They needed leadership, though of a gentle, self-effacing kind. For in their blissful, nostalgic world, the Brothers and Sisters were unprepared for the inevitable threats the Hoop faced.

One danger was obvious. The mass which was heated and thus lit the Brotherland skies, was in turn swallowed by the hole. As the hole's mass grew, its gravitational field clutched the Hoop harder, made it spin faster, stressed the steel webs that underlay the warm green fields. This would worsen. Only an astrophysicist could solve such a long-term problem.

The Handyman had peered at Clayton for a long time this evening, beseeching him wordlessly to shoulder the task. And now Sylvia did, too.

To maintain this idyllic simple communality demanded vast, intricate, gyrating technology, but even that was not enough. At the secret centre was not a dark secret but instead a diamond, a luminous cliché of capital. Something in these contradictions appealed to Clayton's heart.

He took her hand and walked inside, to the railing above the large dance floor. Below swirled the uplifted, perspiring, happy faces.

For the first time tonight, Clayton had begun to sense the strange social cohesion these people felt. They were the Handyman's ever more demanding and uncontrollable hostages to fortune, joyful souls born into a serene world shaped by unseen hands. They spoke to each other constantly, comparing their minor mishaps, accidents, confusions, fretful collisions with reality's unrelenting rub. The tireless torrent of pure, unashamed gossip shared out all misfortunes, tempered egoistic dread, purged anger of its uniqueness. There was solace in such a thick net of mutually invaded privacies, sexual preferences confessed and exercised under an unblinking sun, angst exposed to the social glare like a skin disease shrivelling away beneath searing ultraviolet. Like a heightened form of clubbiness, these people felt no oppression in their uniformity. They gained instead a reassurance that villages and tribes had granted their members down through millennia, the casual knowledge that no scrape or tragedy or disfiguring blemish was in fact new, that everything had happened before, or very nearly so, and could be shared, soothed. They were like a roistering army marching toward some battle they could not anticipate and so shrugged off, given strength to tramp forward by their own massed smell, their swelling songs.

Something in their innocent spinning dance endeared the Brothers and Sisters to him. Even dumb

but useful Ernest, waving up at them, seemed like an old schoolmate. The fevered music, humid thick air, heady sweet aroma of wine – all blended into an illusion of ample community and endless uncomplicated joy. It was a dream he knew he could share, as the *Ficit Man*.

"They never seem to stop," he said dreamily.

"Yes," Sylvia said precisely. "Like sex, only too much is enough."

The remark surprised him, like many of her sudden shifts, and he studied her for a long moment. She seemed coolly oblivious, and yet . . .

What an obliging accident it had been, that the fellow student she invited for a visit was an astrophysicist, even though he concealed it. Despite her thoroughness, her quiet investigation of him at UCLA had not revealed that deception. How providential, too, that Clayton had the right combination of curiosity and timing to discover the diamond, and force Dr Rollan to think about a replacement. In the long run, if

Clayton could not surmount the Hoop's gathering problems, he had contacts among the freebooters of the asteroids. Their craft and their silence could be bought, without alerting Earthside. Clayton's 'roid origins could be useful. And finally, how lucky for them both that romance had bloomed here, and that Clayton was a man she could share this marvellous mad pinwheeling world with.

His eyes narrowed at the thought, and she gave him a serene, full smile. He would always wonder exactly what it meant.

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**Gregory Benford** contributed "Freezeframe" to our last issue. The present story will appear, in somewhat longer form, in a 1987 collection to be published by Baen Books in America. His most recent books include *Artifact* (1985) and *Heart of the Comet* (1986) – the latter a collaboration with David Brin, reviewed in this issue of *IZ*.

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## NEWS

It has been reported in the *Observer* newspaper and elsewhere that **Steven Spielberg** may be directing the movie of **J.G. Ballard's** *Empire of the Sun* (!). We await hard confirmation of this amazing rumour. According to a casual account in *Locus*, the script is currently being worked over by a screenwriter called Menno Meyjes, whose next assignment will be the third "Indiana Jones" film for George Lucas. Meanwhile, Ballard is working on the final draft of a new novel which he hopes to deliver to his publishers early in 1987.

This year's **Hugo Award** winners are *Enders Game* by Orson Scott Card (Best Novel), "24 Views of Mount Fuji, by Hokusai" by Roger Zelazny (Best Novella), "Paladin of the Lost Hour" by Harlan Ellison (Best Novelette), "Fermi and Frost" by Frederik Pohl (Best Short Story), and *Locus* edited by Charles N. Brown (Best Semi-Prozine; no, *Interzone* didn't win). The Hugo Awards are voted upon by the members of the World Science Fiction Convention – held this year in Atlanta, Georgia, and due to be held next year in Brighton, England.

A prophet is about to be honoured: **Michael Blumlein** ("Tissue Ablation...," *IZ* 7, and "The Brains of Rats," *IZ* 16) has just sold his novel *The Movement of Mountains* to St Martin's Press (New York), and has also placed a short story with *Omni*. Apart from his appearance in the US edition of our anthology, these will be his first professional publications in his home country.

**Neil Ferguson**, whose *Bars of America* (Hamish Hamilton) was

reviewed all too briefly in the last *IZ*, tells us that the book will appear as an Abacus paperback next year. We recommend that you watch out for it. Neil is currently working on another story about Max Faraday, the semiotic detective who first appeared in "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw" (*IZ* 13); it may well turn into his first full-length novel.

More snippets from *Locus*: **Robert A. Heinlein** (now aged 79) has been hospitalized twice for serious nosebleeds. **Arthur C. Clarke** has also been suffering health problems; on a recent visit to Britain he said that he'd been experiencing bouts of partial paralysis. **Ted White**, sf writer and editor, has been jailed in Fairfax, Virginia, on "three counts of possession with intent to sell marijuana, LSD and mushrooms." **Russell M. Griffin**, author of *Century's End* (1981) and three other sf novels, has died – he was just 42.

A new bi-monthly American magazine, its premier issue dated October 1986, bears the odd title **Aboriginal SF**. It is edited by Charles C. Ryan, PO Box 2449, Woburn, MA 10888, USA. This "aboriginal" mag should not be confused with **Aphelion Science Fiction**, a new Australian quarterly magazine which produced its third issue recently (PO Box 421, Stirling, SA 5152, Australia).

The next three books to come from the small-press **Kerosina Publications** (publishers of Keith Roberts's *Kaeti & Company*) are *Shades of Darkness* by Richard Cowper, *Grainne* by Keith Roberts, and an as-yet untitled collection by Brian Aldiss, James Goddard, the leading light behind Kerosina, has

also announced that he is forming the Abbas Literary Agency to specialize in sf and fantasy; his address is Plovers Barrow, Nomansland, Salisbury, Wilts. SP5 2BY.

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*Interzone* experiments with a comic strip once more. "The Screaming of the Beetle" is quite different from anything we've previously published. SMS is known for his work in *Mad Dog* and other semi-professional publications. He is 27, lives in Southampton, and is one of the editors of "Oddmags" comics.

We welcome submissions from unknown and little-known writers. All manuscripts will be read sympathetically, but it will be helpful if you bear in mind the following points:

1. Read the magazine before you submit anything to us. Judge the standard of the material we are already publishing, and see if you can do as well – or better.

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

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

4. The preferred length is 2,000 to 8,000 words. We rarely publish longer stories.

# SCREAMING OF THE BEETLE

A BLACK ROMANCE • BY SAS



MY MOTHER HAD BEEN BURIED  
THREE MONTHS, AND THE SOIL  
GROWING FROM HER COULD  
FORM FUNDAMENTARY WORDS...

TO SEE I DIDN'T OUSST HER,  
I WAS CHAPERONED BY THE  
GARDENER SUPERIOR.

IN THEIR FIRST MONTHS,  
THE DEAD ARE OFTEN CONFUSED  
AND PREY TO MANY FEARS.

SIBILANT AND CLOGGED WITH SAP!



STARTING AT THE STILL  
SCRRAWNY BRANCHES, I WAS  
GLAD OF HIS COMPANY...



"BEETLE!"

TEARING!

SUCKING!

BEETLE!"



THE GARDENER SUPERIOR  
PROMISED WE SH'D WAS SHAPPLY  
DELIVERED FROM THE CHANGE.

THAT TERROR OF INSECTS WAS COMMON.



LEADING ME AWAY,  
HE ADVISED ME TO STAY  
FROM THE GARDEN OF REST  
FOR A MONTH.

I AGREED READILY.

BUT  
THE  
BEETLE  
FOLLOWED  
ME.

IT IS COM MOALY SAID THAT THE CLOSENESS OF WIND  
BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD CONTINUES AFTER DEATH.

THE MONTH GROUND ON  
WITH GAWING SLOWNESS.

- BECAUSE SHE WAS SCREAMING.



AND SO I FOUND I HAD  
INHERITED THE INSANITY OF THE BEETLE.

BY NIGHTS, UNSEEN  
HANDS BLESSED FOR ME  
FROM SLEEP.

... TO SPEND THE COLD THIN HOURS OF DAWNING, HUGGED  
UPON THE STOOL, HUGGING MY LEGS TO ME AND CURSING MY STUPIDITY.

BUT THE  
BEETLE STAYED,  
CRAWLING AT THE  
EDGE OF SILENCE.

FINALLY:

...THE MONTH  
WAS OVER AND  
I VISITED HER  
AGAIN.

SHE WAS  
SECURE IN HER  
NEW FORM, AND  
AS I WATCHED  
HER TUCKERED  
BUDS, SHE LAUGHED  
OF THE WEATHER.

...END

RETURNING  
HOME:

I WANDERED AIMLESSLY  
ALONG THE VIADUCTS,  
THE RAIN CAME DOWN,  
FLOODING THE PAVEMENT,  
SOAKED MY SHOES  
SQUEALED AS I WALKED.

SOON THEY  
WOULD BE RELEASED  
TO CLAW THE HILLS  
BARE OF PLANTS,  
READY FOR THE  
NEXT CROP.

THE  
BEETLE  
HAD  
LEFT  
ME.

BUT  
IT  
HAD  
NOT  
LEFT  
ME

FAR BELOW ME:  
THE HAVVETTE BIRDS  
ANSWERED THE SOUND  
WITH THEIR BUSTED  
WORDS, ...TEARING AT  
EACH OTHER IN THEIR  
CAGED PROTECTOR.

AND I  
BURIED THE  
DEA DEEP AS I  
COULD: SICK AT  
MYSELF.

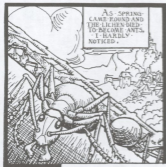
INSTEAD:  
I BURIED MYSELF WITH  
PLANS OF PROTECTION AS,  
DURING THE DAY I  
LEFT THE LICHEN  
FRAMES FREE.

IT IS A SIGN OF  
MY CONFUSION THAT OVER  
THOSE SEVEN MONTHS I  
DID NOT VISIT ANY OF  
THOSE GROUPS WHICH  
DEAL WITH SUCH  
TRANSFERRED  
FEARS.

WELL, SI:  
AT NIGHT, I  
SARDED MYSELF  
INTO DROGGED  
SLEET.

I DIDN'T  
DARE VISIT THE  
GARDEN OF REST  
AGAIN, BUT THE  
BELL  
FESTERED  
WITHIN ME  
NONE THELESS.





AS SPRING  
CAME FORTH AND  
THE ALIENS BEG-  
TO DECONTAMINATE,  
I HARDLY  
NOTICED.



WHEN THE NOTE CAME FROM THE  
MEETING HOUSE THAT, AS A PENANCE  
FOR BAD ATTENDANCE, I MUST  
FORFEIT MY SALT ALLOWANCE...

I CALLED THEM "PAROCHIAL"  
AND TOLD MYSELF THE DRILLING OF  
ABSTINENCE WOULD DO ME GOOD.

AS WE PREPARED THEM WITH  
HONEY, THE FESTIVE ATMOSPHERE  
FELL DISTANT AND BELLOW.



THERE ARE DOCTRINAL  
ARGUMENTS THAT IT IS ONLY BECAUSE  
THE DEAD CONTINUE TO USE WORDS  
FAMILIAR TO US THAT WE ASSUME  
THEY ARE THE ONLY WE HAVE LOVED.

ONLY  
WHEN  
I  
WAS  
DECLARED  
EMOTIONALLY  
UNFIT  
TO  
KEEP  
MY  
KITCHENHOOD  
WAS  
I  
AGAIN  
FORCED  
TO  
FACE  
THE  
PROBLEM.



THAT, IN FACT, EACH SPECIES  
THEY BECAME, AS THEIR WORDS  
BECOME MORE ALIEN TO US WITH  
EACH SUCCESSION, FORM ARE  
SEPARATE BEINGS.



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THESE WERE THE ARGUMENTS-I  
REPEATED TO MYSELF, LISTENING  
TO THE GRINDING GEAR OF THE  
HARVESTER BIRDS' KEEPER.

AS I FILLED HIS  
PIPE AND LEARNED  
MORE OF THE FILTHY  
CREATURES.

BUT THE BEETLE  
WAS NOW SCUTTLEING  
INTO THE CORNERS OF  
THE EVENING.





DAWN STRETCHED SILENTLY  
SOME FROM THE FLEW CLOSING  
OVER A RAZOR-EDGED SUN AS I  
LAY CROUCHED IN THE DAMP  
GRASS BY THE GABLES.



THE BIRDS'  
LEVEL EYES  
FLICKED OVER  
MULEY PUPPETS AS  
I HELD THE  
SWAYING  
GUIDELINES TO  
THOSE I HAD  
NEWLY  
CONSTRUCTED.

I HAD EXPECTED  
THAT UPON MY  
THROWING OPEN  
THE BOLTS, THEY  
WOULD SCRAMBLE  
OUT WITH ALL  
THEIR USUAL  
FEROCITY.

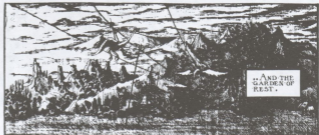


BUT THEIR  
MOVEMENTS WERE  
SLOGGISH. AS I  
PRODDED THEM  
OUT, THEIR NEW-  
HATCHED VOICES  
SPAT DISJOINTED  
PHRASES.

ALL THE  
WORDS WERE  
OF FOOD.

IT WAS ONCE THEY WERE OUTSIDE  
AND COULD FEEL THE PULL OF THE LEASHES,  
WHISTLING IN THE LOW WIND, THAT  
THEY BECAME THE BEASTS I FEARED.

TEARING AT EACH OTHER, YET HELD  
APART BY THE LEADS, THEY BEGAN TO  
MOVE ALONG THE GUIDELINES TOWARDS  
THE EAST OF THE CITY...



...AND THE  
GARDEN OF  
REST.

WATCHING  
THE FIRST  
OF THE  
FLIGHT.



AS MY  
PARALYSED  
BODY  
SCYTHED  
THROUGH  
THE GRASS,  
I CLEARLY  
HEARD THE  
GASPING  
VOICE OF  
THE FRED  
AS SHE  
FOLLOWED  
HER  
HATCHING-  
KIN.

I DO NOT KNOW WHETHER, NOW SHE HAS  
HATCHED INTO THE HARVESTER BEED, MY MOTHER  
IS INDEANT OF THE WORDS THAT RATTLE IN  
HER NEW THROAT.



CLOTHES HEAVY WITH STAGNANT  
MUD AND MY OWN BLOOD I LIE  
PARALYSED BY THE SLOW TIDINGS  
OF THE UNMILKED BIRD, HIDDEN  
IN THE SE GRASSES FROM THE  
KEEPER'S DRUG-DILLED EYES.



AND SOON  
I SHALL KNOW  
IF THAT SCREAM  
WAS REAL.

# Ramsey Campbell

## Boiled Alive

Each weekday morning Mee was first in the pay office. He would sip coffee from a dwarfish plastic cup and watch the car park rearrange itself as the factory changed shifts, several thousand random blocks of colour gathering about his green car on the concrete field. He would spend the next four hours at the computer, and three hours after lunch. The chirping cursor leapt to do his bidding, danced characters onto the screen. He had charge of half the payroll, half of the three-letter codes that denoted employees so secretly that he didn't even know if he was in his own batch. Now and then Clare trotted in from the outer office with a handful of changes of tax coding, but Mee was mostly unaware of Till, who computed the other half of the payroll, and Macnamara the supervisor, who was always repeating himself, always repeating himself.

Each day after work Mee listened in his car to wartime crooners rhyming the moon and waited until he had a clear path through the car park. The music rode with him along the motorway to the estate that was mounting the sandstone hills. His street was of sandy bungalows, identical except for curtains or cacti or porcelain in the windows. He parked his car in the garage that took the place of one front room and walked down the drive, round the end of his strip of lawn like a hell carpet, and up the path to his front door.

Each night he prepared the next day's dinner and stored it in the refrigerator. He would eat it facing the view back towards the factory, miles away. Roads and looped junctions left no room for trees, but the earliness of headlights signified the onset of winter. He was digging at his dessert with a fork and watching the swarming of lights, the landscape humming constantly like a dynamo, when the telephone rang.

A darts match at the pub, he guessed, or a message from the Homewatch leader, probably about youngsters using the back alleys to take drugs, as if reality weren't enough for them. Munching, he lifted the

receiver, and a voice said "Boiled alive."

"Pardon?" Mee wondered if the man had mistaken him for a restaurant – but the voice was too lugubriously meaningful. "Boiled alive," it repeated in an explanatory tone that sounded almost peevish, and rang off.

No doubt the caller was on drugs and phoning at random, and Mee wanted to believe the phrase was just as meaningless. He switched on the television and watched manic couples win holidays on a quiz show. A dentist's receptionist was leaping and squealing and popping her eyes at her prize when the phone rang again. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?" a voice said.

"I'm afraid not, sorry." Mee waited politely for a response, and was about to break the connection when the voice said "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"I've already said not. Can't you hear me?" perhaps deafness was why the man was calling. "You've got a wrong number," Mee said, so loudly that the mouthpiece vibrated.

This time the silence was shorter. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What do you want?" The doctor, Mee thought, and felt somewhat ridiculous himself. It wasn't the voice that had called earlier; it had an odd quality – a blandness, a lack of accent. "Is this –" it recommenced, and he cut it off.

Had its silences really been exactly the same length? Certainly it had repeated itself with precisely the same intonation. He might have been talking to a robot, he thought, but that seemed to miss the point somehow. He went out to the pub, a longer bungalow, and tried to interest himself in the quiz league's semifinal, questions about places he'd never heard of.

Next day the lassitude he always suffered after a morning at the computer was worse, but the sight of men from the assembly line swap-

ping pirated videos in the windowless canteen wakened him and a memory he'd been trying to gain access to. He stopped at the video library in the wine shop on his way home after work. Horror films had occupied the shelves nearest the window: *Shriek of the Mutilated*, *Headless Eyes*, *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain*, *Boiled Alive*.

The box showed photographs of people reddening and screaming, presumably the actors who were listed, though they sounded like pseudonyms. He would learn no more unless he hired a videorecorder. At home he ate boiled beef and watched the lights until he felt their swarming was preventing him from thinking. He was late for the committee meeting at the church hall, and had to struggle to interest himself in the question of rents to be charged for jumble sales and Boy Scout gatherings. He voted against letting the peace movement use the hall. Life wasn't as precarious as they made it out to be, he thought as he strode home, it had a pattern you could glimpse if you had faith.

The phone was ringing as he reached his path. He slammed the door, dashed to the phone, snatched the receiver. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?" the voice said.

Mee let out a long sigh, which his panting interrupted. "Do I get a prize for the right answer?"

Silence. It really was a total silence, empty even of static. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"Where you are, you mean? It may be, for all I know."

Silence. Mee found he was counting the seconds. If the silence was even fractionally longer he would know he'd thrown the caller, as he realized he very much wanted to do. But no: "Is this —"

"Go to the devil where you belong, you lunatic," Mee shouted, and chopped at the cradle with the edge of his palm. He nursed his bruised hand and thought of contacting the police. They would only tell him to keep on receiving the calls so that the caller could be traced, and he wouldn't be able to sleep for waiting tensely. He left the phone off the hook overnight and watched *Boiled Alive*, which varied wildly from dream to dream. Whenever he awoke he felt colder, as if the dreams were draining him.

Next morning he said to Till "You've a videorecorder, haven't you?"

Till blinked at him under his perpetual grey-browed scowl. "Used to have. Can't afford it with the kids at private school. Besides, most of the films weren't fit for them to watch. Puts ideas in people's heads, that sort of thing."

"Something you wanted to watch, Mr Mee?" Macnamara said across the room, his hollow drone resounding. "Was there something you wanted to see?"

"A tape in my local library."

"Bring it round on Sunday. Come for dinner after church, my mother likes the company. You can't get too much use out of a machine, am I right? You can't get too much use out of a machine."

Should Mee let him know the kind of film it was? But he might seem to be rejecting Macnamara's gesture. He busied himself at the screen, wondering afresh whether any of the three-letter codes coincided with the employee's car registration or whether some-

one had ensured they did not. Certainly none of his highest earners had the same codes as the limousines outside.

That night he hired *Boiled Alive* for the weekend. He'd finished eating dinner and watched the racing lights for some time before he realized the phone hadn't rung. He had a sudden irrational conviction that it wouldn't while he had the video-cassette. Such thoughts were dangerous, things didn't work like that. All the same, the only call that weekend was from Macnamara, to make sure Mee was coming.

Macnamara lived in the town beyond the factory, in a house at the top of a flight of railed steps. "Here he is," he announced as he let Mee into the long narrow hall beneath a lampshade like a flower of stained glass. "He's here."

His mother darted out from the farthest doorway. She couldn't really be that small, Mee thought nervously, but when she squeezed alongside her son her head was barely as high as his chest. Otherwise, apart from having all the hair, she looked much like Macnamara: thin oval face, sharp nose, colourless lips. "Didn't you bring the film?" she said in a stage whisper. "Sidney said you were bringing a film."

They made Mee think of the voice on the phone, but neither of them would be capable of that voice. He dug the cassette out of his pocket. "Some kind of comedy, is it?" Macnamara said, raising his eyebrows at the title, and to his mother, "Some kind of comedy."

She herded them into the dining room then — to Mee's acute embarrassment, she pretended to charge at them like a goat, emitting sounds of shoeing. Dinner was Greek, and went on for hours. Whenever he thought the end was near she produced another course. "Is it good?" she demanded anxiously before he'd had a mouthful, and as soon as he had: "It's good, isn't it?" Her whispering was the result of a throat disease, he realized, but nevertheless she talked constantly, interrogating him about himself long after the details ceased to interest him. Worse, she told him in intimate detail about her problems in bringing up her son after his father had deserted them. "How's my Sidney getting on at work?" she asked Mee, and wouldn't let him mumble vaguely. "Fine, I'm sure," he stammered, yearning for it to be time to watch the film.

Macnamara's reluctance was obvious as he picked up the cassette. "Sounds exciting, *Boiled Alive*," his mother whispered enthusiastically, and he slipped it into the player with a despairing shrug. "That's funny, isn't it?" she suggested as several thin flat scientists squeezed into sight behind the wide-screen credits, then she gasped as they inflated, released from the bonds of the words. Whatever they were doing to measure psychic energy, their experiment was going wrong: laboratory monitors were melting, a man's face was blistering. "How do they do that?" Mrs Macnamara cried in a whisper, and Mee had to restrain himself from hushing her, for one of the scientists had just been called Doncaster.

She talked throughout the film. Mee wondered if she was trying to shut out the sight of people being boiled alive by some vindictive psychic power. "Is that the kind of car you make at the factory?" she

whispered as a scientist's hands fused to a steering wheel. Another man's eyes burst one by one, and she struggled to her feet, croaking "I think I'll go to bed now."

Mee stared open-mouthed at the screen, which was filled with a telephone dial. A detective's finger was dialling Mee's phone number. "My mother wants to go to bed," Macnamara growled, but Mee barely noticed he was speaking as the detective, mouthing, said: "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?"

"I'll see you up, mother," Macnamara said furiously, and Mee lurched forward to listen to the detective. "Is Dr Doncaster there?" . . . "What do the words 'boiled alive' mean to you" . . . "We all have hidden powers that only need to be unlocked" . . . "We can't talk now, this may be being traced" . . . "Right, I'll meet you in an hour." But he was boiled en route, leaving only his girlfriend, a reporter, to gun down the culprit in a refrigerator. Suddenly the gun was too hot to hold, and as she dropped it, a silhouette stepped out from behind a side of beef. "I am Dr Doncaster," it said.

"The End." Had something been missed out? The tape began to rewind, and as Mee picked up the remote control he noticed Macnamara, who was watching him from the hall. "That wasn't funny," Macnamara said, even slower than usual. "Not funny at all."

Mee thought of apologizing, but wasn't sure what for. Had Dr Doncaster really been the culprit, or only in English? The question formed a barrier in his mind as he followed taillights home. Even the inclusion of his number in the film couldn't quite break through.

**I**n the morning he tried to phone the distributor of *Boiled Alive*, but whenever the number wasn't engaged there was no answer. He had to desist when Macnamara kept glaring at him. Otherwise Macnamara behaved as if Mee's visit had never taken place. Mee crouched over the screen and tried to interest himself in the dance of the symbols, telling himself that they were as real as he was.

He had to make himself return the cassette, for his notion that its presence precluded the calls was even stronger. In the library the proprietor held up a box to the bars of his cage. "Lots of naked women being tortured. By the feller who made the one you just had."

"I've no interest in that kind of thing. I only borrowed it this because they used my phone number in it."

"I'd sue them. Or send reporters after them, they'll cough up quick enough."

Mee had meant to consult the factory's lawyers, but the nearest television station was less than half an hour's drive away. His phone call was put through to a bright young woman who wanted him to come in straight away and record an interview for the local news programme. They made up his face, sat him in a puffy leather chair on a metal stalk, shone lights on him while the bright young woman asked him if he thought films like *Boiled Alive* should be banned and how "being haunted by phone" was affecting him. On his way out, his head swimming, he made her promise not to broadcast his number.

Why did the interview persist in troubling him? He spent the evening in trying to think, and flung the

phone off the hook when it rang just before midnight. Next day he was so preoccupied that he almost deleted his morning's work on the computer. Working at a screen while waiting to watch himself on another didn't help. He was home well before the six o'clock news. Rising crime and unemployment, nuclear escalation, famines, terrorism . . . The bright young woman appeared at last, and there was Mee, trying to look as if he belonged in the leather chair. How plump and red and blotchy his face was! His voice sounded bland and timid as he said that he believed films should be banned if they did harm, he didn't think much of the film anyway, his privacy had been invaded, at the very least the number should be changed in every copy of the film . . . They might just as well have broadcast his number, since he'd named the film. His consciousness lurched at that, and then he wondered if he had actually just said "It's Dr Doncaster's number, not mine."

The co-presenter turned from the interview with a look that all but winked. "We tried to contact the film's distributor in Wigan but we understand they're bankrupt. Serves them right, our friend at the wrong end of the phone might say. Now, if you've ever wondered where flies go to in the wintertime . . ."

Mee turned him off and waited for the phone to ring. Eventually he realized he'd been waiting for hours, hadn't even eaten his dinner. Of course, he thought, people couldn't phone until they'd seen the film. By midnight he thought they might have, but the phone was a black lump of silence. Even when he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, it stood out from the dark.

At last now Macnamara ought to know why Mee had been interested in the film – but neither he nor Till gave any sign of having seen the interview. Their silence unnerved Mee, made him feel guilty about letting himself be interviewed, but why should he blame himself? In the canteen he sensed that half the people who weren't looking at him had only just looked away. They'd better not offend him. Maybe they hadn't been impressed by his appearance on the screen, but they ought to see themselves, bunches of letters he could treat however he liked.

**T**he calls began that evening. Mee heard smothered laughter and sounds of a party in the background every time a different voice asked for Dr Doncaster. None of them was the bland voice that had plagued him with the exact intonation of the line from the film. To his confusion, he found he almost missed that voice. After the fourth call he went to the pub.

Though he didn't recognize many of the drinkers, he thought they all recognized him. Freddy from the darts team bought him a drink, but his small talk sounded stiffer than the dubbing in the film, and so, when Mee listened, did all the conversations around him. When he began to suspect that some of the drinkers were assuming more than one voice, he stalked home through the floodlit identical streets.

He waited for the voice that knew its lines, but there were no more calls. He slept unexpectedly, woke late, drove hastily to work. He had to park at the far side of the concrete field and trudge between the cooling cars in a drizzle. Several people and some kind of



machine paced him beyond two ranks of cars.

"How's your mother now?"

"Getting better, getting better," Macnamara told Till, and they fell silent as Mee came in. If they blamed him for that too, let them say so. Maybe he sounded like three letters on a screen, but they mustn't treat him as if he weren't real. Perhaps the voice that knew its lines hadn't been able to reach him last night because of the hoax calls, he was thinking.

Despite Macnamara's disapproval, Mee switched off his computer in time to beat the homework rush. But by the time his car started, there was a long queue for the exit. Car, he thought, feeling trapped in three letters. He swung into the course of light at last and edged into the middle lane as soon as he could. He was almost unaware that the car was moving when lights blazed into the vehicle and flung his silhouette onto the windscreen.

He thought of the floodlights at the television interview. But it was a lorry, blaring at him to force him into the outer lane, where lights were racing faster than he was. When he trod on the accelerator the car jerked toward the taillights beyond the half-blinded windscreen, too fast, too close. He swerved into a momentary gap in the outer race, overtook the car in the middle lane, dodged in ahead of it. He was groaning with relief when the entire lorry slewed toward him.

It had jackknifed, swinging across all three lanes. It struck the car behind Mee's, hurling it into the inside lane, where it smashed into another vehicle. The impact jarred a roof light on, and Mee glimpsed the driver's face, lockjawed with terror, in the instant before it went out. As he sped onward he heard traffic crashing into the far side of the lorry and into one another, the tardy screech of brakes, crash upon crash, screams of the injured and dying. When he reached home he could see fires from his window, vehicles blazing hundreds of yards apart. Behind the blaze headlights bunched for miles, a comet's tail.

The local newscast was devoted to the crash. "Some of the drivers were driving as if they had no sense of reality," a police spokesman said. He couldn't mean Mee, since Mee hadn't been involved. Later, at the committee meeting in the church hall, Mee mentioned how he'd been ahead of the crash. How could he have known that the chairman's sister and nephews had been killed in the pileup? The committee seemed almost to blame Mee for surviving. As he trudged home he recognized screams in an empty street. Someone must be watching the nude women being tortured in one of the neat bright houses.

**I**n the morning there was no sign of the crash. A sprinkling of snow covered any traces it had left on the motorway. Till asked how close to it Mee had been, but Mee denied all knowledge and stood at the window, hardly aware of the plastic tumbler of coffee in his reddening hand. Surely the car park hadn't always looked so short of perspective.

He was restless all day. He felt as if the heat of the fires on the motorway, or of the guilt that everyone was trying to make him accept, were building up in his skull. Even the green screen wasn't soothing. He kept straying near Till's desk, but was never in time to see the letters of his name. If they were there, what

would it prove? They couldn't reduce him, nor could Macnamara's inability to get his lines right first time, nor the unnatural silence when the computers were switched off.

There had been no calls while he was at home last night, but tonight the phone greeted him with the young shrill voice of an admirer of *Boiled Alive*, accusing Mee of having put the distributor out of business just because he wasn't able to distinguish between fiction and reality. When it wouldn't listen to his objections, Mee cut it off. On television a streetful of identical houses let out their men to advertise a car, and he saw that one of the men who had the wrong car was himself.

Did they think they could do what they liked with him? Now that he'd appeared before the cameras, was he fair game for however they wanted to edit him? They were trying to undermine his sense of reality, he thought; the police spokesman had as good as said Mee's was above average. That would explain why, when he went shopping at the supermarket, everyone not only pretended not to recognize him but acted like extras around him, most of them using the same voice. When he strode home the only sounds in the glaring streets were his footsteps, as if someone had turned off the other sounds or forgotten to record them.

The idea of living in a film wasn't entirely unappealing. If it had been a better film he might even have been flattered. Being able to repeat favourite moments and speed up the boring parts was certainly tempting, not to mention the ability to say of bad times "it's only a film" or to have a hidden voice explain things when he looked at them. But how much control would he have? About as much as one generally has of one's life, he thought, then felt as if the voice that knew its lines could put him right if he could just work out how to respond.

Next day the snow had melted, but there were no marks of the crash. The view from his car trembled slightly in the frames of the windscreen and windows. It must be the car that was shaking, not the image, for he noticed cameras in several of the vehicles that passed him, filming him. They must have been filming him before the crash – that was how they'd been on the scene so quickly. Why, the camera car might have made the lorry jackknife!

He would have pointed this out to his colleagues, except that they didn't seem real enough to be worth telling, Macnamara and his dogged repetitions, Till and his switched-off silences. The computer screen seemed more real, and took more out of him. But in the canteen at lunchtime, he was unexpectedly upset by the sight of two men smirking at him as they exchanged cassettes, for one of the cassettes was *Boiled Alive*.

They wanted him to see them, did they? Then let them see what he could do. At last he knew why he'd been missing the voice on the phone: he wanted to be told about the hidden powers – but he didn't need it to unlock him. As he stared at the cassette of *Boiled Alive* the fire in his head flared up, yet he didn't feel as if he was focusing it, he felt reality focusing through him, the cassette and the man who held it growing intensely real. "Shit," the man cried, and dropped the cassette deafeningly to clutch the fingers of one hand

with the other.

"Hot stuff, eh? Too hot to handle?" Mee suggested, and felt he was cheapening himself. He swung away and hurried through the corridors, past the unstable windowscapes. The shaking of his reality had just been a step in the process of unlocking, then. In an impersonal way, he had never felt nearly so real.

He sat in the pay office and gazed at his blank monitor. What would happen when they realized what he'd done in the canteen? They already disapproved of him, but now they'd try to use him or stop him, not realizing how they would be endangering themselves. It wasn't as if he was sure he could control the power: he felt more like a channel for reality, far harder to close than to open. The inside of his head felt dry and hot and shrunken. He had to think what to do before Till and Macnamara came back.

He prowled the office, staring at the blank walls, at his car in the midst of the random pattern of cars. He even switched on Till's screen and scanned the columns. There were the letters of his name, against a salary several times the size of his. Something about the sight of a version of himself he would have liked to be inspired him. He turned off the computer and slipped down to his car.

Between the factory and home he managed not to pass or be passed by another vehicle. It was a question of balance, he thought. He had to preserve a balance between reality before he'd seen the film and after, between himself and the way the world saw him, between the governments that would want to use him as a weapon. His street was deserted, which was welcome: to be seen at the start of his mission, to have to cope with someone else's perception of him, would only confuse him. It seemed wholly appropriate that he would start by entering so unremarkable a house.

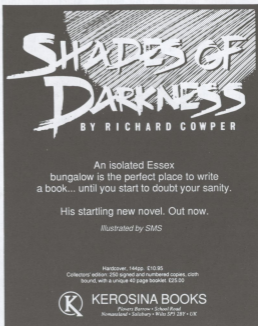
He bolted the front and back doors and secured all the windows. He hadn't prepared tonight's dinner, he saw. That didn't matter; the less he ate, the sooner he would finish. He was surprised how easy it was to take responsibility for the world. He'd expected to feel lonely, but he found he didn't; perhaps there were others like himself. He used the toilet, combed his hair in front of the mirror, straightened his tie, brushed his shoulders, and then sat down by the phone with his back to the window and dialled his own number. When the phone rang he picked it up, knowing that he wouldn't get the intonation quite right and that he'd have to go for retake after retake, especially if he heard any kind of a response. "Is this the house of Dr Doncaster?" he said.

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**Ramsey Campbell** is Britain's best-known writer of horror fiction (one James Herbert excepted), and we are delighted to welcome him to *Interzone*. He was born in 1946 and has been a full-time author since 1973. His last novel, *Obsession*, has recently been reprinted in paperback by Grafton Books (£2.50). His latest, *The Hungry Moon*, is due to be published in Britain next January.

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# M. John Harrison

## Interview by Paul Kincaid

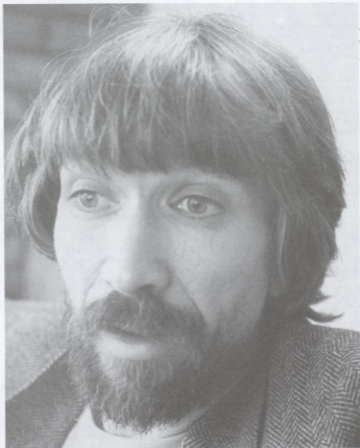
M. John Harrison's books *The Centauri Device* and *Viriconium Nights* have just been reissued in paperback by Unwin (£2.95 each). The former is a rousing novel of interplanetary adventure which dates from 1974; the latter is a recent collection of atmospheric fantasies, three of which appeared in *Interzone*. In issue 13 of this magazine we said of Mike Harrison that "he declares he has now abandoned science fiction forever." We were pleased to learn otherwise, from what follows...

(The Editors)

**How do you react to being described as a stylist?**

I don't think I am a great stylist, and I'm very pleased to get the opportunity to say something about this. As far as I can articulate it now, writing is a heavily technical business. It is impossible to say anything without using linguistic techniques so complicated that they have to be taught to a child from the age of whatever it is, 5 to 18. That makes it at the base a very technical business. It is further complicated by the fact that you're not simply using sentences across a novel. A novel is a kind of sentence. You have to learn to use very large structural units as nouns and verbs, compact them into clauses, concatenate them.

I'm not a stylist, I like precision. I'm a perfectionist. I'm not interested in a perfect surface, if I've got a good surface it's because I've got a good technique. You see, the surface is evidence of the technique, not just at the level of composing sentences one would hope, but at the level actually of composing that sentence which is a story. In a way, too, so that every individual sentence will feed in some way into the mass, and the mass will feed back into that sentence. I'm not a stylist, I'm a technician. I very firmly believe that. It's very difficult when you're a younger writer to articulate distinctions like that. People say to you: "you've got a really good style," and you go away thinking "Yes, I've got a really good style, great." You don't analyze that. I don't think I have, and I certainly wouldn't want one. I



Photograph by Paul Kincaid

wouldn't want to be known as a man who can write a sentence, because that seems to me to have very little to do with this larger sentence which is the work itself, and which is obviously what counts.

**I describe you as a stylist because I find it impossible to separate the surface structure of a sentence from what's going on underneath it and how the story is shaping up and developing, as if each word, each sentence is perfectly shaped in order to**

**fit exactly within the story at that point.**

One would hope that it works out like that, but that does not mean to say that there is not a separation between the deep and surface structures. There is. I'm very glad if the reader perceives there to be a seamless surface across which he skims, but I know that it doesn't work like that, because it's my job to get pleasure out of writing not as a reader but as a writer. Somebody who doesn't decode but who encodes

it, someone who doesn't take it apart but someone who puts it together. It's very important for me at the moment to think of it in those terms.

**So you do actually enjoy the process of writing?**

I wouldn't do it so poorly paid for so long if it wasn't one of the only things I enjoy. I mean in the instinctive sense, for instance, that it's the thing I do if I'm bored, even if I don't want to be doing it. But also at a very much more conscious level.

I was brought up in an engineering town with the myth of precision engineering. As a lad I built model airplanes, got a technical education which simply didn't stick because my leanings were elsewhere. But I've obviously been left with the legacy of trying to look at a piece of fiction as if it's a racing car. Basically, a jet fighter or a racing car look the way they do because that's the way they have to look to do what they do. On a racing car the only thing that isn't functional is the colour they paint it – even the glossiness is a necessary part of the function. If you can look at fiction like that, as something that is produced by almost mechanistic techniques, then you're a long way towards getting control of your method of expression.

The great big rider to put on this is that it is no damn good doing that unless you've got some spirit as well. You can't simply be a technician, the only people who can afford to look at it like that are romantics who've got plenty of soul to start with. I started as the most starry-eyed romantic of them all, so I don't need to worry about becoming obsessed by technique. There are writers whose names I will not mention who shouldn't think technically in their lives otherwise they will become so mechanistic. There are hacks for instance who shouldn't be let into this wonderful secret that writing is mere technique, otherwise God what a flood of rubbish.

**Were you always so intent on being a writer then?**

Oh yes, first romantically, then doggedly and in misery as it were, and now with a kind of light heart and a mission to convert the world to technique.

**You seemed to arrive at a time when the outlets for fantasy and science fiction were things like *New Worlds*, which were just exactly geared up to a writer like yourself.**

Well in fact that's an illusion of the process itself. There is a feedback, you gear yourself to the outlets. When I arrived, the only alternative to being published in a science-fiction magazine as an sf writer was the *New Wave*. I would therefore automatically gear myself to that because I couldn't and didn't want to do the other thing. But the moment you as a writer impact on a school of other writers a feedback

process begins immediately anyway. I mean, I actually joined *New Worlds* in late 1968 and from then on, well I couldn't quite believe it because it was such an amazing thing to happen to me. I became a contributing member of this feedback system that was *New Worlds* and from then on was making my contribution to shaping these outlets as well as using them.

**Has that process shaped your fiction since *New Worlds*?**

Since *New Worlds* the fiction's been shaped by a deliberately reactionary process against *New Worlds*. I felt that I'd become extremely limited by the forms of thinking that were current within the *New Worlds* school – I felt that we were rejecting far too much. Not that most of what we rejected we were not correct to reject, obviously one rejects Robert Heinlein for ever and ever, bad writing for ever and ever – but it became very limiting, especially towards the end of the large-size *New Worlds*. The range of subject matter which it was acceptable to write about if you were a new-wave author had become very limited. You weren't allowed to be sentimental, you weren't allowed to laugh except in certain ways at certain things, and I found that cramping. Not that I particularly wanted to do anything else, only that I don't like to be cramped. So I have been somewhat in reaction. We had a very considerable myth of being non-literary, and I've been making up for that for ten years. I don't read science fiction any more, I read modern fiction – I don't just read it, I as it were study it. **You are being accepted outside science fiction. I assume that that reaction pleases you.**

Oh yes. It's very hard for me to think of science fiction as a serious literature, very hard even now that I can point to examples by writers like Tom Disch of science fiction or fantasy which is genuinely serious work. I still find it, because of my education, impossible to take science fiction seriously.

**And yet you write the most serious fantasy I think I've ever come across.**

Obviously, in an attempt to try to do this. So it was welcome to me to have that treated seriously by people who, like me, don't tend to treat fantasy seriously. It was a cross-check, as it were, on the direction I was moving in. But it's also simply nice to have feedback of a less limited, less generic kind than I was used to.

Another process is going on at the same time which is that I seem to have become more acceptable within fantasy and science fiction as well.

**Is that part of the impetus behind writing a mainstream novel?**

I knew that would give me a chance to do it. It would put a publisher behind me and it would give me critics waiting in the mainstream to see a book of mine

which they regard as totally serious. Indeed most of the reactions to the fantasies I've published since I was runner up for the Guardian Award have been "Why is he still messing about? Where's the book?" This is the only thing that will get you going. This is the kind of thing that I need to make me work hard and cheerfully, I need that kind of confidence. Something that was equally useful in that sense was selling mainstream short stories to mainstream outlets. I sold a story to *Woman's Journal*, which is like the up-market woman's magazine, called "Old Women" which seemed to suit them very well. And when I get time I shall do another one. I would very much like to end up writing only mainstream work – but I believe anyway there is an imp of perversity and the moment it looks likely I could start doing that I shall start some fantasies just to be contrary.

**You're writing another fantasy novel at the moment, I believe.**

I am indeed. In fact I'm three chapters into it. Having been told by *Interzone* I'm never going to write one again I decided immediately to do one simply to be contrary.

**But you're writing a mainstream novel at the same time.**

Well, I do one or the other. The mainstream novel works by a methodology which is crazily documentary, almost everything in it has occurred. It's material that has been collected by observations in situ. It's about climbing and most of these observations have been collected on the crag. Because of that I had to wait for certain things to occur so I could write about them, and I'm still waiting for a couple of incidents to crop up. I mean I could ham them up but I don't see the point since they will inevitably happen. Also of course if you work by this method you often have to see one incident or a particular type of incident several times before you can really get the feel of it, take several notes, many observations, and layer them on top of one another to give the reader a feel of the complete experience.

**Is that the way you work normally?**

That's the way I work in everything but the most obviously fantastic Viriconium stories, and even in some of them I use material I've collected in the real world.

**So as a writer there seems to be little difference between a realistic novel and a fantasy?**

There's not very much. Obviously in a highly realistic documentary novel about or pertaining to rock climbing you use material literally collected from the real world. In a fantasy where after all you're trying to give the reader a feel of a totally alien place, you've two choices: you can make it up or

Concluded on p.58

# Simon Ounsley

## Paths of Dying

“Many things about our country must surprise you, Master Envoy,” said Mrs Freeborn, as we walked through the park, giving Grandad an “airing.” The wheels of the bathchair squeaked as I pushed it before us and the old man himself added to the noise as he sat inside it, mouthing some gibberish about wind conditions as he fondled his stomach lumps.

“There are many things indeed, dear lady,” I told her, though it was difficult to find something innocuous enough as to be suitable for small-talk. I finally settled on “tea,” that strange brown weed which is transported by sea from the south of the continent; the practice of “athletics”; and the peculiar concept of the “handkerchief.”

“Do people in your own country not blow their noses then?” asked Mrs Freeborn, apparently amused at the idea.

I was spared from having to reply to this indelicate enquiry by the arrival of Mrs Liversedge, a neighbour of Mrs Freeborn’s, who stopped to admire Grandad and tickle him under the chin.

“Gooby gooby goo,” she said, as the old man chuckled and squirmed about in his bathchair, slavering profusely. “That’s a fine jumper you’ve knitted him,” she said, “but he’s almost grown out of it, hasn’t he?”

“He has,” said Mrs Freeborn proudly. “His lumps are swelling half an inch a day now.”

“So it won’t be long before he goes,” said Mrs Liversedge, feeling Grandad’s bumps herself.

“I’m knitting him another jumper, but I don’t know if he’ll get the chance to wear it.”

“Won’t be much use to him up there,” said Mrs Liversedge, laughing and pointing at the sky as she hurried away.

“Of course,” Mrs Freeborn said to me, “I expect you find Grandad’s condition a little strange, don’t you?”

I suddenly felt like crying. “Yes,” I said, struggling to control my voice, “it’s different where I come from.” And I swiftly changed the subject, enquiring

as to the average pay of a park warden.

My greatest wish was to be able to maintain a professional attitude to the assignment. But I sat in my room for hours, trying to work on the interim report for my government, and could not proceed beyond the opening sentence:

“At the start of the present month,” I had written, “I became resident in the house of a typical family of Northlanders in order to study the life and traditions of their people, with particular respect to the process of death and the ceremonies which surround it.”

And there I had stopped writing. When I tried to go further, I could think of nothing but a narrow street at the other end of the world and the stink of the nearby canal as I walked along, squinting at the numbers on the doors of the houses. I really should have known the house where my parents lived. I should have visited there more often.

“So you’ve come, Ortho,” my mother said, kissing my cheek with cold lips. She showed me up the stairs to the darkened room where my father lay.

“He is sleeping,” she said. “It is a mercy.”

There was a croaking of frogs from a large tank in the corner of the room.

“There are twenty-three,” said my mother. “It is all I could find.”

“You have done well, mother,” I said, though reflecting that the medicinal draught I could see on the bedside table had probably done more to help my father than the old superstitions ever could.

“We’d better not wake him,” my mother said. “You can speak to him later.”

Looking at the poor, drawn face against the pillow, it seemed miraculous to me that such a thing could still be capable of speech.

“I’m going away, mother,” I told her later, as we sat smoking river-moss together. “I’m going to a distant land.”

My mother looked puzzled at this. “I thought that’s



where you were already," she said.

Naturally, it mattered little to her whether I was living, as I had been until then, in a distant city in our own country, or in a different country altogether. Either way, she hardly ever saw me.

As the river-moss entered my brain, I saw how things must seem to her: plain and simple; enough frogs or not enough frogs; being here or not being here. Near or far. Life or death.

**T**hey dressed Grandad up in his new jumper to go to his funeral. Their holy man, the "vicar," stood in his pulpit and chanted from his prayer-book in a rich voice which echoed off the stones of the church. "Air to air," he said, "wind to wind." Grandad sat in the front row and belched, as though to illustrate the point.

Afterwards, everyone came back to the house for tea and ham sandwiches. Grandad spilt tea down his jumper. Then he wet his trousers and all the women fussed round, helping to "change" him.

"Want a sherry?" Mr Freeborn asked, sidling up to me and speaking in a quiet, confidential voice. "It's women's business, this dying," he said. "Personally, I'll be glad when it's all over."

**M**y father lay with his head on the pillow, looking out of the window, though all he could see was the pale sky and the crumbling facade of the building opposite. I was sitting beside the bed. I had been talking about my childhood, our time in the countryside, when he and I had walked by the river, talking of fishing, and flying machines, and the great ships which sailed the world's oceans. But my father had not responded to my recollections. He had kept his silence and stared out of the window. What could I say now? How could I make him talk to me? What else did we have in common now, except the past?

"I have been ill for such a long time," he said, turning to speak to me at last. His voice was frail, like the sound of the breeze in the reeds on the riverbank. I had come from so far to see him, but still he seemed a great distance away, his voice carrying to me faintly on the wind. Had he heard what I'd been saying to him? It seemed he had: "Do you remember when your cousin Benno came to stay with us?" he asked me. "You must have been about five years old at the time."

I nodded, though the memory was dim.

"He said he had a present for you," my father continued. "He was holding something in his fist."

Yes, now I could remember.

"He told you to close your eyes and hold out your hand to take the present."

"And he put a worm in my hand."

"I thought it was a beetle. No matter. I remember you ran away, crying."

"And all that summer, he taunted me with the same trick."

"That's right. But you would never hold out your hand again. You always ran away."

I was silent. What a strange thing for my father to remember.

"I'm glad you came at last," he said. "It's good to see you."

"I would have come earlier . . ."

"I know," said my father. "I know why you haven't come. There's no need to explain." He suddenly pulled down the bedclothes, exposing his stomach.

I thought he was losing his mind.

"Father! No!" I said. "You'll catch a chill." But my father fixed me with a hard, wilful stare. He knew what he was doing.

"You can feel through my night-shirt," he said. There was some strength in his voice all at once. "Now that you've come so far, you might as well reach out your hand and touch it. Go on – you can feel the thing that is killing me."

**G**randad had taken to constant babbling now. I used to dread mealtimes. He would dribble and spit out his food as he spoke of mountains and flying and distant oceans. He hardly seemed to know where he was at all.

And every night I would be woken several times by his pitiful crying or his high-pitched babbling. Then Mrs Freeborn would come and try to calm him down by singing lullabies which told of far-away lands. I would lie awake, listening to those lullabies, hoping they would chase away my own nightmares.

**T**he priest came and placed a candle in every corner of the bedroom and hung a blanket over the window to keep the devil out. Then he danced around on his mat, invoking the powers of all the elements.

But my father still died.

I sat on one side of the bed, my mother on the other. My father muttered something – about flying, was it? – and my mother asked him to repeat what he'd said. There was no reply. His face was motionless, his eyes blank. The priest came across to close them and my mother threw herself over my father's body, sobbing wretchedly. I turned away, wishing – I have no idea why – to hide the tears that were streaming down my face.

I stood and stared into the flame of one of the candles, thinking of my father's last words. "Flying," he had said. Had he been thinking of flying machines, I wondered, of our conversations by the river all those years ago?

The frogs croaked to each other in the corner, unaware that the reason for their presence had passed.

**E**veryone was gathered round the bed, waiting for the old man to die. Several of the neighbours had been invited specially for the occasion, and Mrs Freeborn was passing round tea and cakes.

The children were growing impatient.

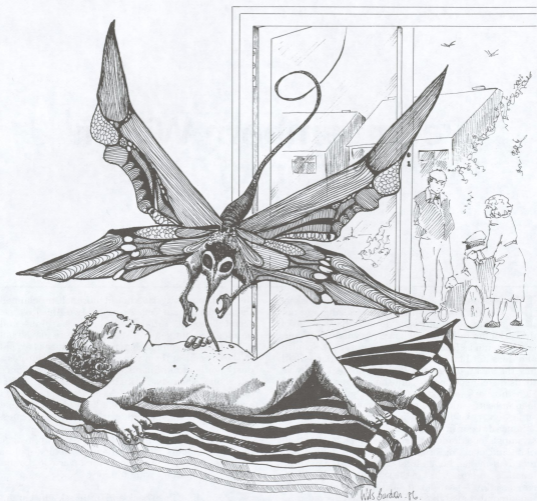
"Is Grandad going to die soon?" one of them asked, and was told to be quiet or he would be sent to bed and have to miss it all.

The lumps were starting to wriggle now.

"Come on," said the midwife. "We'd better get his clothes off or they'll be in the way," and she and Mrs Freeborn heaved away at the bulging nightshirt, exposing the old man's stomach and the dark form which could be seen moving beneath the skin.

"It looks like a big one," Mrs Freeborn said proudly.

One of the lumps suddenly swelled in size, the skin around it stretching like a balloon. The old man seemed



unaware of his predicament. He was staring at the ceiling, muttering.

"It won't be long now, Dad," Mrs Freeborn said, stroking his forehead. The midwife went over to open the window. She was only just in time. All the lumps swelled at once, as though the thing inside was stretching itself, then Grandad's stomach burst like a ripe pod—and the thing was out and fluttering about the room, showing off the red and gold of its wings. I cried out as it brushed against my face and then it was gone, out in the open air, stretching its wings to soar above the city. A cheer went up, people in the street stopped and waved their hats, and we ran to watch from the window, the children shouting, Mrs Freeborn wiping the edges of her eyes with a handkerchief, her husband taking photographs with an automatic camera.

"Look at him go!" the little boy cried. "He'll be over the mountains in no time."

"It's beautiful," said Mrs Freeborn, "absolutely beautiful."

I came away from the window and sat by the bed, looking at Grandad's burst chest and his face, still staring at the ceiling as though there was something left behind it. As I looked at the ruined body, I was thinking of another time, another place. I sat there and wept, while something like a butterfly and something like a bat climbed in the sky towards the mountains, its wings glinting red and gold in the sunlight.

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**Simon Ounsley's** first story, "Adam Found," appeared in the last issue of *Interzone*. He is the magazine's Co-Editor, Co-Publisher and treasurer, and dwells at our Leeds address.

# Peter Lamborn Wilson

## Fountain of Time

**P**once de Leon walks into a bar in Chokoloskee, Florida, last town into the Everglades and not too far north of Ponce de Leon Bay, and asks the bartender in Spanish if he knows where the Fountain of Youth is? The bartender does not speak Spanish and does not like spics. The Shark Point Bar & Grill has the tacky dangerous look of isolated highway roadside redneck taverns, blue neon "Tree Frog Beer" sign, three or four pickups with racist bumperstickers, men in beards and baseball caps, some of them dope smugglers, coke dealers, whatever.

Ponce de Leon in once-splendid Conquistador drag, swampstained orange and red bloomers, rusty breastplate and clanking ornamental cutlass, dented helmet, half-melted boots, long white beard, hawknose fanatic Spaniard. A lull in the smugglers' and bullies' conversation – beer-dazed, suspicious, they stare in the airconditioned dank. Ponce repeats his question in English, with a slight Cathillian accent.

He introduces himself. Caught in a time spell, he explains, not a ghost but the discoverer of Flower-land in person, doomed to search for the Fountain forever. Bartender nods carefully, asks if he'd like something to drink, Ponce takes a glass of red, pays with crusted genuine doubloon, refuses the change – useless to me.

No one else in the bar gives a shit. The TV is showing them a ballgame, a commercial, beams them with catholic photons that wash away that tiny hint of the uncanny that blew in with Ponce on the steamy insect-hot night air.

Some freak, some refugee from a fuckin Historical Pageant, that's what they think (if they think), and their souls buy up shares in Consensus Reality, and their minds glaze over like critics of Fortean phenomena, till they cannot see the great explorer and conqueror rotting with age, slumped on naugahyde barstool, sipping plonk and chainsmoking a pack of Marlboros.

The bartender doesn't quite faze out with the rest, primarily because of those pieces-of-eight but also

from pure curiosity. He's one of those self-proclaimed Deranged Vietnam Vets, ex-hippy, two-time divorcé, secret bisexual, former coke-head, garrulous and opinionated but a good listener, a failure maybe but not yet quite a zombie. Ignoring the rednecks except to shove beers at them when they grunt, he locates a dusty bottle of old Spanish brandy and offers Ponce a free one. They start drinking together, having discovered a taste in common. As for Ponce, he doesn't expect any clues from the Shark Point B & G, what he wants is a sympathetic ear, an intelligent questioner. He's got it.

I love the airconditioning, Ponce says, I appreciate the little moments of late 20th century luxury – before this, the Indians, the swamps, the fever – and afterwards . . . you don't want to know . . .

**Y**ou, like, flash back and forth, asks the bartender, who has at once intuitively grasped the basic idea. A uh time warp between the uh late 1500s and now, and the future?

Certainly. But don't ask for predictions, it doesn't work that way, no way to profit from it at all, endless and repetitive, I hear no news, I search the mangrove swamps and backwaters not cities and casinos.

Like a curse.

Exactly a curse, Señor. Tell me, you were born in this state, you read in school of my famous exploits?

Yeah well I remember some – how you discovered Florida, looked for the Fountain, killed by Indians . . . history wasn't my thing, but shit yes everyone's heard of you. It's weird you walk in here like this, really bizarre. Hey, you don't have to pay for each drink with gold, man.

I insist . . . endless supply, virtually. Access to buried treasure . . . but no questions or maps please, my lips are sealed, I go there in a trance, never know exactly where I am, earth opens up, broken gold and unfading rubies, pirate hordes, Civil War caches of family silver, rotting away with green corroded pearls,

and the Spanish gold, always Spanish gold. But no maps.

OK, no maps, no packdrill. I'm a vet myself, security is security, you want to be that way, no offence.

A soldier. Excellent. I myself conquered Puerto Rico in 1509. And the Moorish wars, of course . . .

The towel-heads? The sand-niggers? You fought them? Shit, the a-rabs are a popular enemy right now.

Si, the Barbary pirates, the emirs, beys and red-beards, the galleys of the Sublime Porte, the corsair sloops, slant-sailed, blood-sailed and black, the Hand of Fatima in gold on long black banners, the crescent silver on green silk . . .

Well now I'll admit to a sneakin admiration for them moslems myself, tho it ain't a widespread opinion round here. It's their gas, right? and Israel used to belong to them too . . .

Bah. Infidels. But . . . they understand the ways of pleasure, and have much wisdom in occult matters as well. The benzoin and aloes, rosewater, ivory carved as growing vines, coffee scented with amber, musk and cardamon, the kif in long chibouks of rosewood and jade, tapestries heavy as sleep and woven with the dreams of mathematicians drugged on opium . . .

**S**omehow the Shark Point B & G has cleared out, Ponce and the bartender are alone. Outside the bug and reptile chorus harmonizes wetly, an occasional car whooshes down the county highway, headlight beams flicker against the windows, then silence, cypress-shrouded, radiant black.

The bartender asks Ponce if he's interested in a little Permanent Brain Damage as he rolls a j of columbian and lights up, passes it to the Conquistador, who tokes absentmindedly but efficiently.

I spent nearly a year among the Moors as a captive, treated well while my ransom came through. Billed in Fez, Andalusian atmosphere, shades of old Granada, emigré families there with keys to their houses in Seville and Murcia, boys with Berber eyes and the tarnished gold hair of Visigoths . . . the architecture of paradise, cool and green with eternal water, like music, like the aimless geometry of their cabballistic calligrammes . . .

Boys huh? Lot of faggotry go on in those parts? In those days?

Ponce gives the bartender a long appraising look with eyes that have burned down centuries of futile pretence and dug up all the nastiest motives, compared to which a little pederasty counts for nothing.

Handsome women and beautiful boys, he finally says, the saracen taste, and a highly addictive one. Like fawns, eyes the colour of strong mint tea, long limbs like Spanish gold or Turkish amber . . .

My sentiments exactly, admits the bartender. Been married twice and divorced twice and damned if I don't think boys smell sweeter.

Such is the Moorish philosophy, hence no doubt your covert sympathy with their culture . . . and mine too, I confess.

So . . . the Fountain of Youth was like . . . like . . .

True, somehow I associated the idea of eternal youth not so much with my own immortality but with a paradisal vision of cupbearers - a return to that paradoxically playful year in Fez, absolved of my

Spanishness, even of my Catholicism, a temporary heathen in gardens designed to mirror Eden or the groves of Hyperborea, severe compositions of golden oranges, damask roses, mosaic tile - "water, green things and a beautiful face" - their Mahomet praised these above all . . . the cursed schismatic with his lutes and cymbals. A moment of regret . . . and myth enslaved me.

I heard of the Fountain first in Fez, from one of their holy beggars, a mountebank and jongleur with cloak like patchwork quilt, a teller of mystical lies. Alexander the Great, having conquered the world, searched for the Fountain and failed and damned his fate, flew to the Moon in a silver car pulled by swans. The mendicant cursed me with his prophecy: that I would travel so far out of myself to discover such a secret I might find a new world - something no one had ever dreamed of till then - this was 1480-something. . . long before Columbus

and then came my release, my return to Cadiz, restructuring of an orthodox self, ambitious, fearless, pious. I drank wine again, and married for advantage. Still, nothing moved for me till '92 - I met Columbus after his first voyage, a pompous know-it-all, typical Italian but nevertheless he'd done it, knew the way, planned to go back, needed soldiers - the last Moors had been chased out of Spain that very year - and a New World to discover.

**T**ell me, innkeep, when you soldiered did you sometimes forget you owned an inner self, were you ever seduced by glory?

Rape and plunder, huh? grinned the publican. Naw, I seen em like that, kill a slant for Jesus, but I lost my head other ways, kickin the gong and whathaveyou. No ambition really.

I conquered Puerto Rico - I told you that already - took me twelve years, but by the time I finished I was made governor. I had a servant, a Moor converted by force to the True Faith, we called them Moriscos, an untrustworthy lot of instant heretics. Juan de la Cruz he baptized himself, but his real name was Khadir, born in Fez. Excellent cook, rapscallion, layabout, joker, an ugly little old man, knowledgeable about herbs and sorcery, a gifted linguist, and queer for boys. He'd learnt the Carib tongue and did a bit of spying for me - useless in combat and nearly useless as an ADC - but every once in a while a priceless bit of intelligence

so one day, after the island had finally been pacified, like Alexander I brooded over what to conquer next, where next to plant flag and cross. I cared nothing for that new age of the spirit, that Hispanic flaw, the gold-thirst, the alchemical dream reduced to murderous frenzy. I craved instead some philosophical/magical goal, some marvel worthier of a New World than my own malarial fort, some revelation stronger than tobacco, a platonic conquest, a fate

and Khadir wormed his way into my room where I sweated in my armour in a self-induced auto-da-fé of frustrated ambition, and whispered something about a fountain of youth

a toothless Carib squaw, a bruja who might have chewed bayleaves at Delphi

or squatted with the Sibyl in her crystalline cave. Khadir dragged her in, gave her tobacco to munch, urged her to speak, translated her cackling into his flawed arabo-spanish patois, and squeezed her till every detail ran out

Bimini, she called it. I heard the myth again, the same tale of Hyperborea, Arcadia, the evergreen land, the gardens from which rivers flow, the Eden that might be taken by storm or guile, no vulgar Eldorado but an ideal Nowhere where the Saviour had never walked, never broken the spell, where Pan and Eros still lived, and the hours and sakis of a saracen heaven of flesh, wine, cool breezes, magical smokes, love that never cloy

and heard it all in broken pidgin from the ancient savage witch, vague about directions – “somewhere to the North” – “learned it from her mother, who had it from a great sorcerer of the Arawaks” (a race of cannibals, now extinct) – vague about everything, even the Fountain. Did it grant immortality? longevity? renewed youth? mystical insight, the Beatific Vision? was it a pool, a manmade fountain, jungle spring? guarded by headhunters or unknown and hidden? The old charlatan had no opinions.

So I commandeered three caravels, a lucky number, and in the flagship Khadir and the bruja sailed with me toward the Pole Star over miles of sapphire waste, the cerulean realm of Poseidon, his nymphs and undines and merboys, sky and sea like the closed half-globes of a beryl sphere, and our ships the moving stars, the still-living flies in that blue amber, that cloudless blue nothingness

a storm blew up out of a clear sky and lacquer-flat sea, a sudden whirlwind or tornado of water a hundred feet high, sluicing like a blue djinn across an indigo desert, sucked up one of the ships in its aquamarine funnel, crushed it to splinters . . . the other two ships scarcely rocking, untouched and astounded

March 27, 1513, an unknown horizon breaks the monochrome; we tack closer and closer, the shore unveils itself as a shimmering peacock's tail of colour – scarlet and yellow, purple, green and pink, blue and gold, pearl-white – blending and shifting like some damascene shawl with colours never before seen, or so it seemed to our blue-drenched eyes, nearly painful in its sudden variety. “Florida” I dubbed it, still floating half a league offshore – terra incognita. Was it Bimini?

As I recollect, the bartender interrupted, it was St Augustine, the Retirement Capital of the South – land of eternal senility and wasting disease, of cancer and bypass operations, not Eldorado but the Golden Age City, not the Fountain of Youth but the swamp of old age . . .

Ha, said Ponce sourly, so it is – now. But what was it then? Could it have been something other than what it became, once I'd landed? Perhaps we'd found the right place, but were not the right people, or came at the wrong time. Before we arrived perhaps there was no time, and we set clocks ticking with the tread of our European boots. Perhaps, at that moment, it was Bimini – and in the next moment, nothing but a fever-ridden botanist's hell. In my letter to King Ferdinand

I claimed I named it Florida because it was Easter-time, and I hinted the local natives had mentioned gold – both were lies. All the names belong to priests, all the gold to kings. A man keeps nothing for himself either of meaning or wealth, save what he steals from them. Even then I suspected this.

Right, slurred the bartender. Fuckin IRS and fuckin Baptist politicians . . .

It seemed to me, Ponce continued, simply that the place was empty. Devoid of inhabitants, of wealth, of meaning. A blank slate of palmetto scrub and mosquito-noisy nights. Glades that go on forever. A big disappointment – nothing but flowers. I determined to impose my meaning, my words, on this topographical abyss of swarming greenery. Here – or somewhere along the coast – or somewhere inland – here there would be a Fountain. I decreed it. We sailed on

the Indians found us. The land might seem blank to us Spaniards, for we believe that God himself inhabits a City, that Nature belongs only to fallen Adam and the Snake. But for those savages the random writhing of vines and rivers and the melancholic fever-songs of jewelled paroquets spelled out an entire literature of significance. They decorated their bodies with this alphabet of feathers and mud, pierced their bodies with bones and tattoos till each of them became a book, an unreadable text

ropes of conch-pearls, heavy as yokes – patchwork robes of forest colours and sunlight, long-sleeved and Moorish-looking (to shield them from insects and sawgrass and swampspine) each of them traced ancestry to some beast, alligator, wildcat, turtle, long-billed curlew, marsh-wolf, hummingbird – and boasted of brains only half-human. Was I wrong to tell the king this was a land of monsters?

The first tribe we met was the Calusa (now extinct), their words to us were shot from longbows and tipped with poison. Eighty war canoes rowed out to repulse us, and of our two ships' companies nearly half were lost. Then we met the Timucua (also now extinct), and they spoke a language of gifts, of deerskin and mangoes and astonished almost-amatory gestures. In a typical Spanish reaction my men slew them all in revenge, and no doubt they cursed us as they died. All those redmens' curses have soured the very land by now, I mean by nineteen hundred and whatever-it-is. All those extinct tribes – their lost words of hatred have metamorphized into chemical waste and plastic rubbish, and their words will end by choking you

but I digress. Our third encounter brought us the Apalachee, a small and timorous tribe but incredibly beautiful, as if their beast-halves were inherited from some exquisite golden marmoset or delicate lynx. They spoke no words at all but turned and fled, thinking us (as I later learned) to be devils – and of course they were quite correct. This time we slew only the men, and took the women and boys as slaves.

This is some heavy action you're describin, Commander, marvelled Ponce's one-man audience. You got me flash on my bad days in Nam . . .

Military glory, my friend. As you yourself put it so



aptly, rape and plunder. My little army had gotten out of hand, you understand? I was obsessed with the Fountain, spent my days murmuring with Khadir and the old enchantress, and drinking up the last keg of canary. The rest behaved as they wished: all of us on holiday from Christianity, me as gentleman scholar and mystic adventurer, the crew as pigs

my share of the Apalachee loot, however, distracted me from the Quest. At first I'd mulled over a virgin girl or two, but then noticed a boy about thirteen, not yet pubescent, bare-chested, skin the colour of faery bronze – obsidian-bright-black hair, like the “Dark Radiance” of the Mahometan faqirs’ trances, knotted and tressed with iridescent feathers – heart-shaped face with Chinese eyes, Moorish-black almonds – necklaces of abalone and conch and mother-of-pearl, more than any of the girls (Nature adorns the male of the species, I’ve noted – Culture decorates the female) – bracelets of garnet and moony quartz. No gold. No precious stones. Nothing to share with the King

a belt, loin-cloth and leggings of soft deerskin, chewed by his aunts to the texture of fine morocco, ivory-white as clotted cream – so when he moved I saw flashes of brown warm thighs softer than the suede – moccasins of the same leather but beaded with purple and yellow shells. Khadir wanted him too of course, and so did several others. Our Missionary Friar scowled like Jove’s thunder. But I . . .

You pulled rank.

Quite. Khadir grew insolent, I threatened to throw him overboard, he hid in a trunk for two days quivering. That marked a break in any trust between us. But . . . I had Mistippe (that was his name) for myself. The name says it all . . . Mistippe. For the first time in his career the Governor of Puerto Rico and Bimini proceeded to make himself a fool for love. I treated him like a princeling and kept him well-fed while the others survived on stale biscuit and raw fish – I never rushed him – I began teaching him Spanish – I overcame his fears and wiped away his memories of European cruelty with gifts and attentions (or so I hoped). Soon we shared a common language, mostly touches and smiles but some spoken words as well. And eventually . . . well, I’m certain you . . .

Hey. There was one shoeshine boy in Saigon . . . well. So the kid was ready? interested? hot? willing?

More than that. Experienced. And yet also at the same time completely innocent. Even the sybarite children of Fez have heard that love is a sin, and all their pleasures are scented with some muskgrain of shame. For Mistippe however the most hair-raising and polymorphous embraces seemed no more than joyful play, intense, laughter-lightened, clean as swimming. Locked in my sweltering cabin and naked, I became two people: the Conquistador (who was largely a fraud) and a middle-aged besotted pederast with obsessive mystical tendencies – a much more genuine person, but fragile and new-hatched, feverish and uncertain. Meanwhile

**W**ith the expedition, nothing was going right. Half the men fell ill, the healthy half fell out over women and cards. We never dared spend a night ashore for fear of ambush. We lost



another caravel on a coral reef, and had to squeeze the entire remaining force into the flagship, sick and filthy and mutinous. The old bruja died, muttering imprecations. I decided to turn for home, beat a temporary retreat and organize a fresh expedition back in San Juan. And then – an astonishing thing!

Mistippe had learned my tongue quickly (if you'll pardon the innuendo). One day off the coast of Cuba we spoke of the Fountain – he'd heard of it! a legend of his people! a secret place in the depths of the Everglades, a spring of magic properties flowing into a vast placid lake where pelicans and flamingoes waded – Lake Okeechokee. I presume he meant – there I'd find my Fountain. In my madness I now healed into one person again, for my obsession with Mistippe linked and twined itself with the old dream, and I saw him transfigured, the Angel of my Quest, the heavenly Witness of my devotion to the goal – the water of *unio mystica*, the unfolding of universal Self. The boy was the messenger of the Elixir, the living clue to the Fountain

back at Headquarters I scarcely rested, drafted my famous letter to the King, assuring him I was on the track not only of limitless gold but also unending life. While I waited for the reply I ordered ships repaired and fitted out, new crews and soldiers recruited, fired with plunder-vision. I realized that to reach the interior I'd need to break and slash my way through the territory of the fierce Calusa, ruled by their king Calos the First from an island in a mango swamp in Estero Bay. This Calos was no paltry Carib caïque but the true monarch of all South Florida – like a pasha he maintained a harem, taxed his people and dandified himself with savage exquisites. Mistippe's people hated and feared him, and the boy assured me that the Apalachee would raise no objections to the subjugation of such an overbearing tyrant

at last the royal scroll arrived from Madrid, calligraphed, picked out with gold leaf, wax-sealed and red-ribboned, praising me for adding so much land to Spain's empire and promising so much gold to its coffers. He'd gladly pay for a new fleet, and appointed me governor of everything in sight. All the footloose adventurers in San Juan tried to sign on at once – armoured horses and cannons and arquebuses and cutlasses piled up and glittered on the decks of my galleons – Crusader crosses fluttered on long fork-tongued pennants of scarlet and gold. In imitation of that nincompoop Columbus I ordered huge cloth crosses sewn to each sail, and all the Dominican monks quivered with holy zeal. And everyone spoke of the Fountain, the Fountain, till endless talk had made it real, unquestionable, no myth, but a mere military objective

everything began to go awry. First, Mistippe, reluctant to return to his country, begged me to stay with him there on the white beaches under the palms, naked and free forever. What does a boy know of forever, I thought; for the first time we quarreled. I had to command him – for his own good of course – for once we reached the Fountain he'd get his forever, an eternity of fourteen summers, endless pubescence – and I, I would be, oh, twenty-two or twenty-three, virile and wise

second, no sooner had we set sail than a great unseasonal storm arose and blew us off course, and never stopped till we were halfway up the East coast, the place you call Palm Beach today. Fever struck, and virtually the entire expedition fell prostrate, retching and shitting and yellow. Mistippe caught it, and only Khadir's magic herbs seemed to keep him alive (for which I forgave the ugly old sneak and promised him a Dukedom in Utopia).

**T**hen the visions began. Foretastes of my eternal damnation, glimpses of my future – but at the time, I thought them scenes from Hell. Each day as the men groaned and rolled in their own puke, I stared at the monotonous green shoreline of Florida, and had visions. I saw Miami Beach

lit up like a saint's pity of Purgatory, monolithic with its satanic hotels. Schools of dead fish, tarnished silver bellies putrescent in the oily scum, drifted past our bows – the sea was poisoned. The coppery Indians were vanished and replaced by white faces, English and Spanish, white bodies, grotesque with hormones and food additives, a race of febrile giants. The alphabet of Nature was half-erased, and scrawled over with palimpsests of cardboard, tin, plastic, candy-wrappers, used condoms – clusters of cigarette filters stuck together with chemical tar washed up on beaches, and yellow smoke tinged the horizon with hepatic pallor. In the nights, retired alcoholics with crippled legs crawled like crabs on aluminium crutches toward their televisions, coughing with hate

I won't bore you with catalogues of murders, thefts, plagues – you people hear enough of them from that moronic tube you worship, none of it real. An official dream, a government-approved litany of psychosomatic woes, evidence of your degradation and helplessness, your alienation from the real. You no longer live your lives, your servants do it for you, and your servants are illusions, puppets of coloured light. To understand murder and soul-hunger you must live them, not hear them from an old ghost in a bar, not yearn for them with sick dread as you drowse before that frigid blue glow . . .

Hey Ponce, said the bartender gently, you're forgetting who you're talking to. I was there, mano. How does it go? "I was the man, I suffered, I was there . . ."

Forgive me, Señor.

De nada. Matter of fact, General, I agree with you.

It was a suicide I witnessed that really wrecked my spirit. A houseboat in a marina somewhere around Naples, off Big Cypress Swamp. A young woman pleading with a drunken pervert to blow her head off with a shotgun, she lacked the courage for it herself, lacked the courage to live. The stars were leering as usual . . .

A bumper. Hey, lemme fill you up here . . .

Gracias. Finally we had to land the expedition, somewhere around Fort Meyers or Punta Rassa. Got the whole force onto the beach, we were down to two ships and about 200 men. Mistippe was slightly better but still depressed. The men seemed somewhat recovered as well. I decided to set out for the interior with our Indian guides (four Apalachee slaves, in fact) and cut our way north-east toward the Fountain

they tell me some of the later Conquistadores faced nastier jungles in Yucatan and Peru – but remember, we were unprepared for the Everglades. We dulled our swords hacking at palmetto and sawgrass, we lost cannons in the mud, broke horses' legs in quicksand, swelled up with mosquito bites, half-drowned, half-choked on slime. Alligators and snakes picked off a few of us, malaria a few more, dysentery a few more, madness and despair a few more. I too was insane. But I pushed on.

And still the visions persisted. In the midst of some mangrove-tangled desolation we'd troop across a two-lane blacktop county highway that only I could see – or file past some lonely gas station with its "Dr Pepper" sign rusting away over the sagging porch – at night we'd camp near a cheap motel, pink neon sign flashing in the empty waste, "TV – Pool – Eat" – scene of sleazy adulteries, sheets stained with solitary prayers. The soldiers dozed in nightmare, not hearing the pick-up trucks whizz by blaring fragments of shit-kicking music down the midnight country road

I didn't realize it yet, but I was already half-trapped in my time loop. I could have spoken with you people, even then. Already we shared a language

we'd been wandering in circles, totally lost and disoriented, hallucinated to the point of no return. When the Calusa attacked us, we were somehow still no more than a few hundred yards from our beached ships – even though we'd wandered for days around the thickest jungle I'd ever seen, so dense with vegetation the sun never broke through, so that night and day blurred into each other, into a ceaseless threatening twilight

and there, the Indians, brutally and treacherously defending their homeland, their freedom, their savagery, crept upon us in the gloom, quiet as foxes, and began to spit, flit, zip their poisoned darts and arrows between the orchids and lianas and creepers and "Spanish" moss, so that we fell, bewildered, unaware of death even as it took us, like candles blown out by an unseen breeze

no one spoke or shouted, as if we were hexed, passive as cows, waiting for the word which would enter our throats or breasts and paralyze our hearts, one by one we keeled over in the muck. An arrow found me. I fell

I pushed myself to my knees and saw Mistippe and old Khadir running ahead of me toward a sudden clearing into the brush, a pathway. Two angels (saracenic in appearance, I thought, with peacock wings and turbans rather than white feathers and halos) stepped onto the path, smiling and beckoning the boy, the old man . . . even me. I tried to cry out, to call them back, to protest. Poison filled my lungs and glazed my sight. I collapsed

when I came to again I was alone in the swamp. The dead bodies had disappeared. I felt like pigswill, but my wound seemed to have healed somehow (perhaps Khadir had doctored it?). Staggering and sick I lurched to my feet and ran off into the jungle where I'd seen them vanish with

the angels . . .

I never found them. I wandered for days, weeks. Little by little I realized my condition – UnDead – and my place – lost in some temporal insanity, some rip in the continuum – and my fate: the eternal search . . .

Ponce de Leon seems tired, dawn is breaking and lighting up the unsavoury nooks and crannies of the Shark Point B & G with a gritty and uncomplimentary glow, that all-night drinking/smoking/talking tiredness and itchy light, stale light, like waiting rooms in Greyhound bus-stations at 4 AM.

Sheeyit, says the bartender. Way I remember it from highschool, you were DOA, bodybagged and shipped back to spic-land.

Ponce, perhaps too stoned to notice the slur, replies: They took someone back and buried him in Cuba, but it wasn't me. Am I corpse? Have you polished off three bottles of brandy and a quarter-ounce of Columbian Gold by yourself?

No sir, you helped considerable. And these here doubloons or whatever got the ring of truth too. Hell, I believe you; ain't the first time the media fucked up a story, right?

I've enjoyed our talk, Ponce announces with careful gravity. Not often I meet a fellow-soldier, intelligent enough to . . .

. . . and a fellow prevert, grins the bartender. Speaking of which, what about the kid and the old towel-head? Ever catch up with any news of them?

Not a word. It's them I'm looking for, much as any-thing else.

Ponce climbs down off the barstool and tests the floor. In the morning light he has that hawkish-fanatic look again, like an El Greco nobleman or Inquisitor. The bartender creeps out from behind the fake mahogany. Together they make their way to the screen door.

One thing I don't get, Ponce ol buddy. Seems to me you found what you was lookin for, this here immortality. Fountain or no Fountain. Course, it's a bit of a cheat; but ain't everything. What puzzles me is, why are you still on the road? What do you hope for? Death?

The publican opens the door, they step out on to the porch and breathe in the swampy dawn. The Apalachee (now extinct) called their chief god "The Maker of Breaths."

Certainly not, Ponce de Leon says firmly. Nice morning, no?

He steps down off the stoop. Dew darkens his scuffed boots. He walks around to the side of the house, away from the road, and steps into the underbrush. He unsheathes the rusty sword and hacks away an overhanging vine. Turns and bows, a stiff courtly Hispanic or Moorish little nod. Farewell, he says.

He crashes through the trees, hacking right and left, and disappears into the Everglades.

Take care now, says the bartender.

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**Peter Lamborn Wilson** was born in Baltimore in 1945. He has travelled a great deal, and lived in Iran and India for ten years. He has written (or translated) several books on Islamic esoterica and Persian poetry, and is also the author of *Angels* (Thames & Hudson). The above is his first short story to be published in an sf magazine. With Rudy Rucker and Robert Anton Wilson, he is currently preparing an anthology of "radical crazy sf" for Semiotext(e) (New York).

# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

I was starting to worry that *Re-Animator* would end up both the best and the worst of 1986, and perhaps it would sum the year more accurately if it had. Pretty much everything has been witty, enjoyable, cinematically literate, and professionally made within the appropriate bounds of budget, and practically nothing has felt like a real film. That's fine; there's nothing wrong; real films, like good science-fiction novels, are an aberration of form, not something we have a regular right to expect, and tend to be hard work when they arrive. Fantasy cinema is doubly a popular artform; it's not its job to deliver staggering voltages of imaginative force direct to the brainstem, although an occasional discreet fix, at suitable intervals, can be quite refreshing. Last year there were two real films and about three serious crows; this year there isn't really more than one of each, and the first is only twenty minutes long. If this makes the pick of 86 a bit of a one-horse romp, at least the standard of mediocrity is higher than it's ever been. And in the meantime, we have **The Street of Crocodiles**, a genuinely radical and poetic fantasy of astonishing power that leaves you rather glad, for all sorts of reasons, they don't come along too often.

For years I used to wonder how such promising characters as the Brothers Quay could make such remorselessly dull films. A pair of twin stop-motion animators, who dress identically and refuse to be individually named, sounds so perfectly like something out of a Greenaway film that it's almost a disappointment to find that they are. (They appeared, with mischievous aptness in the guise of a still photograph, as the twin aviators in *The Falls*.) What's more, the Quays have made themselves a niche as a unique kind of cultural maverick. American by birth, British by adoption, they've perversely turned their back on western traditions of animated film and aligned themselves instead in subject, mood, and technique firmly with the east European avant-garde - particularly the Czech and Polish surrealists like Borowczyk and Jan Svankmajer in the 60s and 70s.

And there's the problem. The Quay Brothers' eerie, erudite puppet films have mostly drawn inspiration from the art and literature of eastern Europe, with painfully few concessions to cultural distance. The nearest thing to a narrative Quay film so far, the 1981 adaptation of Kafka's *A Fratricide*, was delivered in German, and if anything their recent work has been even more arcane. The most substantial Quay offering to date was a series of weird half-hour fantasies for Channel Four doodled loosely around the lives of European composers and artists, exploring the inner lives of subjects like Stravinsky or Janacek through a series of dreamlike tableaux, with gaunt staring puppets stalking through a universe of bizarrely sculpted cardboard. It sounds about as accessible as the Katmandu Grand Masonic Lodge, and so it was. Despite the Quays' arresting flair for the uncanny image, I found the films so impenetrably involved in their own fathomless mythology as to numb the eye.

This makes it all the harder to explain why *The Street of Crocodiles*, the Quays' first fully overground opus, is the most breathtaking short fantasy film since Mike Jitlow's (original) *Wizard of Speed and Time*. In all essential respects, after all, it's exactly like every other Quay film of the last five years, plundering the life and works of an esoteric European artist to inspire a brooding, quite plotless montage of haunting surrealistic scenes. This time around the luckless subject is the Polish writer and cartoonist Bruno Schulz, who published two slender volumes of darkly fantastic stories in the thirties before being shot dead in a street outside the Drohobycz ghetto as a result of a petty feud between two SS officers. But the resulting film has almost nothing to do with Schulz or the stories from which it draws its title. Rather it tries to remake a part of the imaginative texture of Schulz's extraordinary writing in a highly idiosyncratic visual analogue. Schulz's own "Street of Crocodiles" was a dazzling satirical essay, a sharply symbolic sketch of the hollow heart within the Jewish bourgeoisie in contemporary Drohobycz. In the Quays'

film, this ironic core is discarded and the vision wrenched into pure metaphysics. The new street is a nightmare world, a puppet theatre quickened to consciousness by a gob of spittle from the living world outside, and in which a trench-coated protagonist (clearly Schulz himself) snips free of his strings to wander through a city of incomprehensible and half-observed actions. Impressions, textures, transmuted images are lifted piecemeal from Schulz's writing, but the miraculous visual imagination that vitalises the whole is drawn from a different world altogether, at once more familiar and more irreducibly strange: the animator's world of found objects conjured by stop-motion into an alien semblance of life. Raw meat breaks from exploding watches; flocks of screws unwind, migrate, and burrow at random into floorboards; dolls without eyes and scalps dismantle the hero and disintegrate to crippled robots in their turn. As a film essay on Bruno Schulz's life and writings, it probably does both an infuriating disservice; but viewed simply as a poem in film it has few equals east or west. See this beautiful film and at least twenty minutes of your worthless life will not have been in vain. And yes, it knocked 'em dead in Zagreb.

It's been a vintage year for really stupid movies, with some stiff competition from eleventh-month entries *Labyrinth* and *Big Trouble in Little China*; but there couldn't be a much more deserving victor than **Invaders from Mars**. Buffs will recall this is the remake of the 1953 oddity remembered now more for its William Cameron Menzies designs than for its in-period plot of Martians taking over a small American town. It's a strange choice to convert for the 1980s, and from the beginning the remake finds itself vacillating uneasily between straight juvenile thriller and campy adult spoof of the reds-under-the-flowerbeds 50s paranoia genre. Little David Gardner (Hunter Carson) sees a UFO land behind the hill outside his window, and soon Mom and Dad and all the other grown-ups start eating all this WEIRD FOOD and wearing band-aids on the back of their necks. Luckily the

blowzy school nurse (Karen Black!) believes his story, and so does his good friend General Wilson in the local marine base, so after a deal of chasing round tunnels by and after the most amazingly inept Martian blobboes ever to attempt universal domination, the squelchy ruffians are put to well-deserved flight and it was only a dream after all. Or so it seems...! (Yes, I'm afraid so.)

Invaders from Mars is the second teaming between Cannon, director Tobe Hooper, and scripter Dan O'Bannon, none of whom has ever notched an award for good taste, and on the strength of this offering and *Lifeorce* one can only say they deserve each other. At least last year's absurdity had naked lady vampires, a daft London setting and some high-grade hamming from the principals. *Invaders from Mars* is sloppily written and lazily made, with paper-thin characterizations and a deadening succession of witless in-jokes on the original and auterial nudge-references to Hooper's past films. Killer lines come tumbling over one another, defying even the native charm of leads Carson and Black (both looking rather jowly and unappealing these days, I fear) to salvage. "Suppose the ship absorbed energy instead of reflecting it! Then it wouldn't show up on your radar." "Why," (gapes the NASA scientist), "the boy's right!" Performances and direction are dreadful, really bog-plumbingly dreadful: from the sad spectacle of Louise Fletcher driven, ten years on from her Oscar, to scrape a living from swallowing live frogs as a zombie biology mistress, to the complete failure of match between studio and location versions of the same sets. The film's oddly hypnotic fascination comes mainly from the astoundingly obtrusive subtexts bobbing around between



the principals like sacks of warm meat, and the wish-fulfilment surrogation of American parenthood by an insistently sexual matron on the distaff hand and the US Marines on the other. (Stick around for the patriotic credit in the end titles, which makes *Top Gun*

seen a model of liberal restraint.) Grotesque and tasteless beyond belief, it surpasses anything I've seen offered to a main-stream movie audience all year. But then I haven't seen *Howard the Duck*. Happy 87.

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## COMING NEXT ISSUE

The first part of our two-issue celebration of *Interzone's* fifth anniversary. To begin with, we have an All New Star issue: watch out for Neil Ferguson's "The Second Third of C" and Kim Newman's "The Next-But-One-Man," brilliant stories both. We also have good pieces by Richard Kadrey, Christina Lake and Paul J. McAuley. *Interzone* 19 will be out as early as possible in the New Year. Following that, in issue 20, we shall present an all-star line-up which should include (among others yet to be determined) Iain Banks, Brian Stableford and Michael Swanwick.



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VOL. 3, NO. 4

SEPT. 1986



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# Greg Egan

## Mind Vampires

There are moments when my mind misses a beat. I find myself, in mid-step or mid-breath, feeling as if delivered abruptly into my body after a long absence (spent where, I could not say), or a long, dreamless sleep. I lose not my memory, merely my thread. My attention has inexplicably wandered, but a little calm introspection restores my context and brings me peace. Almost peace.

I suppose I am a detective, a private investigator, for why else would I be prowling the corridors of a posh girls' boarding school, softly past the doors of the dark-breathing dormitories?

I suppose the headmistress rang me, hysterical. I'm sure that's right. She was sixty-two and had begun to menstruate again. What a surprise for her, what a strange shock. No wonder she went straight to the telephone and dialled my number.

She was calm in her office when I arrived in person, if a little embarrassed. Women have problems, she said. These things *do* happen, she explained. Rarely, but one cannot attach any significance. I find it very irritating to be told one minute to hurry and the next to get lost; I could have shrugged and walked out, abandoned her right then, but I have my code of ethics. My reputation. My pride. For her sake, for the sake of those in her charge, I frightened her into hiring me.

I described the next few stages to her. Prepubescent girls, even infants and newborn babes, would also start to menstruate. Sweat, tears, saliva, urine, mother's milk and semen would all turn to blood. Dead rats and birds would be found everywhere. Water pipes would issue blood, and every container of any kind of fluid, from disinfectant to dye, from vinegar to varnish, from wine to window-cleaner, would be brimming with blood.

There is definitely no semen on school premises, she said. I think she was trying to make a joke. I showed her a colour photograph from a previous case, the kind the police don't like me carrying about. She

turned pale and then wiped the perspiration from her face with (oh yes) a white lace handkerchief, which she carefully examined for any trace of red. Then she signed.

New England. Connecticut? How?

Young soldiers come home with bad dreams.

Atrocities in a muddy trench, a bloody trench.

Young soldiers who would rather be dead than return to their friends and families bearing this European curse. A horrible embrace, a horrible feast. Much better to feed the rats and the worms.

The smell of the trenches drawing them for hundreds of miles. They devour the gangrenous parts. Later the healed will attribute this to the rats. Struggles in the mud, the blood rains down. Screams are natural enough. Nobody will ever guess, they'll be lost amongst the shell-shocked.

"I'm responsible for the girls. You must be discreet."

"Discreet? There'll be no discretion when the snow turns red."

I may be wrong. Sometimes there is no carnival of horrors; fear of detection dampens their natural flamboyance, their love of dark theatre. But it's a new moon tonight, the nadir of their strength, and already they have announced their presence! Whatever shows so little caution is afraid of no one.

"You mustn't cause a panic." Her chin trembled, she pleaded with her eyes. "You know what I'm concerned about."

I knew, all right.

"If there were nothing to fear but fear itself," I said, "wouldn't life be sweet?"

So I prowl the corridors, watching for signs, preparing for the fight. My reputation is the highest, I have never lost. My clients shake my hand, hug and kiss me, shower me with gifts and favours. No wonder.

A thin young girl, a somnambulist, wanders past

me and my heart aches at her vulnerability. In my mind her swan neck becomes a giraffe neck, a single throbbing artery tight with blood ready to gush and sate the hugest appetite. How sickening, when the skin of her neck is so pale and delicate and, I am certain, cool as the night.

In the prisons, where they mutilate their limbs with razor blades, there is feeding every month. The gatherings in the alleys of abortionists are indescribable. The torture cells; well who do you think run them? I stay away from all of these. I am no fool. Large old families in large old houses, the better schools, the quieter, cleaner asylums call for me. My reputation is the highest.

The gardener's apprentice, a quiet young lad named Jack Rice, disappeared two days ago. The headmistress thinks it's just a coincidence (such a helpful boy). Nobody knows his family's address, but his father is said to be a veteran and to shun the light of day.

A legless spider moves its mandibles in distress.

A girl cries out: "Whoa, nightmare!"

Strange, dark flowers appear in the fields. They open at midnight to send a sickly sweet narcotic scent to corrupt the most innocent of dreams.

Fear comes to me, but only as an idea. I think about terror, but I do not feel it. Fear has saved my life many times, so I do love and respect it, when it knows its place.

I enter the dormitory itself, I walk quiet as a night-gown between the tossing beds. Over one bed, two heavy men in dark coats shoulder a fluttering cinematograph machine with the lens removed, while a third man holds open a girl's right eye. The pictures flash into the empty spaces of her brain. Fear will not save her life; it has seduced her, possessed her, paralysed her, as it has done to thousands, sweeping the countryside like fire or flood wherever that one dread word is whispered. Even far from the sites of true danger, men and women hear that word, form that image, and choke on the terror that rushes up from their bowels. It is a plague in itself, a separate evil with a life of its own now. I nod at the men, they nod (so very slightly) back at me, then I walk on.

I find Jack Rice easily enough, his hobnailed boots protruding from the end of the bed. I call to the men in dark coats to come and hold him still, for that is what they do best of all. His girl's disguise fades as he struggles. I wonder what revealed the boots. Perhaps his guard was down as he slept. Perhaps he dreamt he was discovered, and so blurred the borders of the dream by bringing on its fulfillment. I smile at this idea as I drive in the stake.

The tales they later tell me are familiar: the girl he killed, the girl whose form he took, had mocked him cruelly. We find her body, the lips and tender parts consumed, in one of the many damp basements, crawling about gnashing its fangs, but very weak. A matchstick would do for a stake. I hope her parents will not be awkward.

The headmistress tries to thank and dismiss me with her chequebook, but the ink of her fountain pen has changed colour, and she cannot sign the cheque with her trembling bony hand. Oh dear. Jack's father will be angry. Jack's mother will be grieved. I hope he was an only child, but the odds are against it.

The dark-coated men, unperturbed, move from bed to bed with their sawn-off projector. Their enemies are different, but sometimes they will pause to come to my aid. They're fighting mind vampires.

**B**reakfast is dismal the next morning, for all the milk had to be thrown out. The heated swimming baths are closed, but a cloying odour escapes from the steam-dampened, padlocked wooden doors.

I ask around the village (of course a village) for word of Jack and his family. Oh, the young vampire lad, they say merrily. He never gave an address, of course. Hardly the thing to do. I mean, would you?

I hunt the old, dark-hidden, overgrown houses as the fortnight slips away from me. Jack's walking in sunlight and feeding so far from the full moon are disturbing. What will his father be like when he decides to strike? Every cellar I breach nearly stops my heart, but they are all empty and peaceful; cool air and silence protest their pure innocence to me as I scour cobwebbed corners with lamplight. I smile at the unfairness: I cannot rejoice that a place is clean, that I smell no evil, that I will face no risks for a few kind minutes, for every safe house is a failure, every moment without threat only postpones the danger I must face in the end. I'd rather not be who I am, but my reputation is the highest.

Bloody pigeons, headless in the snow, unsettle the girls. There are more nightmares, more nightwalks; a warm, damp, unnatural wind blows an hour before dawn. I fortify the windows with steel bars, garlic and crucifixes, but there is always a way in left unprotected, it is inevitable.

Perhaps it is my weariness, but the shadows I cast seem to follow me with increasing reluctance. Indeed they conform to my movements, but I swear that they do so an eyblink too late. My reflections do not move at all; they stare, transfixed, over my shoulder, fascinated by that empty space, hypnotized by its potential occupants.

The headmistress complains, she expected so much more of me. The strain is becoming too much, she sobs. Her weeping blinds her, and when she smells why she falls screaming to the floor.

I continue to search, but I fail for the first time ever to locate their hiding place. They will only face me when they choose to do so, at the very height of their powers.

I leave my room at the inn and sleep in the attic of the dormitory building. From my bed I hear the girls swapping secrets, and through my window drifts the stench of the dark buds which break through the snow.

I dream that I lie naked in the middle of the moonlit fields. My eyes are closed. I feel sharp snow against my back. Footsteps, girls whispering. I recall walking past two students, overhearing: "Oh, much handsomer than Jack!" When they saw me they blushed and turned away. A warm, wet tongue slides across my eyelids, my lips, down my chin and throat, awakening each tiny point of stubble it brushes. Between my ribs, across my stomach, it leaves a snail track of sticky, moistened hair. Soft lips enclose my penis, the warm tongue wraps and caresses it. A young voice: "You didn't! You can't have! With him? Oh, tell us!"



As I shudder and struggle to prolong the pleasure, a phrase enters my mind and jolts me into awareness: "the erect penis is engorged with blood." Engorged. Engorged with blood.

Suddenly I have vision: I see the scene from above. My hands are behind my back, my legs splayed, my back arched. I am utterly naked and defenceless. A glistening streak of red bisects me, and a giant she-vampire clad in black iron armour sucks at me noisily, an animal sound.

My view expands, and despair takes hold of me: ringing us is a circle of her kin, some fifty feet across. Each one bears a poison-tipped sword and a grievance against me for their friends that I've dispatched.

The tongue works frantically, and I understand that she has been forbidden to strike with her fangs until the instant of ejaculation. My concentration falters, and I feel the lips draw back.

Awake, shaving, I cut myself in three places. In the shaving water I find a swollen leech; I slice it open and the water turns black and foul.

A serving girl discovers the headmistress; she has hanged herself in her Sunday best (now who will sign my cheques?) after writing the word with lipstick and rouge upon every surface of her room. The servants leave to cross the ocean, and the teachers run away to marry their sweethearts.

I must defend the girls alone.

As if in an instant, the moon is full.  
The lights of the village go out.

The snow turns to putrid flesh, blood creeps across all floors and up all walls. The girls

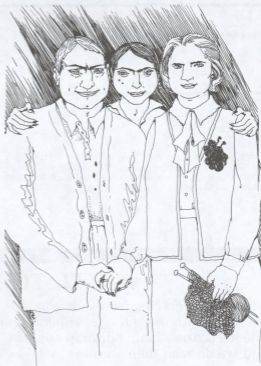
huddle stickily in clots of terror, but I scream at them to master fear, to use fear, to never let it cripple them and conquer them. And they are strong, they do not succumb.

Jack's family come up from the basements, where they have been, no doubt, for months. Four tall brothers, three hissing sisters first. The iron cross, the mallet, the stake: all grow slippery in palms sweating blood. Yet I will defeat them, I will not lose my nerve.

I gather the uneasy students into a single room and ring them with a fence of crucifixes. The Rices are cunning, they taunt me from a distance, speak of the siege they will subject us to which will turn us into cannibals. The school girls plait each other's hair for comfort; the brothers, more handsome than Jack, flirt brazenly with them, drooling out romantic nonsense. One girl's yellow eyes unfocus, and her hand flies to her neck. I am already behind her as her skin blooms with grey. She takes two steps towards her lover, then vomits insect-riddled blood as my stake crashes through her heart from behind. Her friends desert her, and she told them such pretty tales.

I venture out with my own protection and corner them one by one. They are far too proud and foolish to keep together for safety. Two of the brothers grow bored and visit the village tavern. One sister wanders alone through the empty dormitories in search of a new pair of shoes. It doesn't take me long. I feel some hope.

Jack's parents come next, dressed plainly, their fangs concealed. They talk of the terrible loss they have suffered. They slander me in front of the girls, telling them that I killed both Jack and the girl he loved



Illustrations by Margaret Weibank

(how can I refute that?) and that I will kill them all. They urge the girls to expel me from the room for their safety's sake: they need not leave the room themselves, but they must not let me stay or they will all die in agony to satisfy my craving for blood.

In their fervent, pleading seduction they come a few feet closer than wisdom would have decreed, and I spring my trap: a wire net in which two dozen crucifixes are embedded. They crawl and writhe as I smash in the stakes. Their hearts are like granite but I am strong and purposeful and I do not flinch.

I catch my breath. Hunched over the pair of corpses crumbling into dust, I feel a slight vibration through the floor. Before my reason has grasped its meaning I find myself, incredibly, weeping with terror.

I turn to a roar louder than thunder. Jack's father, it seems, smuggled home a friend, ancient and powerful. For a moment I cannot move: enough, surely I've faced enough! Splintering the old stone floor, red chips flying. So fast, and I have hesitated, there is nothing now that I can do. All the girls are gone, down into the very oldest basement, when I skid into what remains of the room. I grab a cross and try to leap into the hole in the floor, but blood spurts from it with such pressure that I cannot even approach it. I roar uselessly curses at the thing which has defeated me, as the red tide sweeps me from the building and dumps me, a helpless insect, upon the rotting snow.

The dark-coated men, unperturbed as always, press their projector to my tired right eye, and their soothing pictures flash into the empty spaces of my mind.

My reputation is the highest, but they're fighting mind vampires.

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**Greg Egan** is an Australian, born in Perth in 1961. He has written several books, including the novel *An Unusual Angle* (Norstrilia Press), and is a maker of amateur films. This is his first appearance in *Interzone*.

## READERS' QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Total responses: 148

### Story Popularity Ratings (issues 13-16 inclusive):

(The "points" in brackets after each story represent the number of favourable mentions minus the number of unfavourable mentions.)

- 1) "The People on the Precipice" by Ian Watson (53)
- 2) "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" by J.G. Ballard (46)
- 3) "The Winter Market" by William Gibson (44)
- 4) "The King of the Hill" by Paul J. McAuley (39)
- 5) "When the Timegate Failed" by Ian Watson (38)
- 6) "The Vivarium" by Garry Kilworth (34)
- 7) "And He Not Busy Being Born" by Brian Stableford (28)
- 8=) "The Protector" by Rachel Pollack (22)
- "The Final Episode" by Shirley Weinland (22)
- 10) "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw-Jaw" by Neil Ferguson (21)
- 11) "If the Driver Vanishes..." by Peter Garratt (20)
- 12=) "The One and Only Tale..." by John Brosnan (19)
- "Patricia's Profession" by Kim Newman (19)
- 14) "His Vegetable Wife" by Pat Murphy (17)
- 15) "Escapist Literature" by Barrington Bayley (11)
- 16) "Finn" by Sue Thomason (6)
- 17) "The Brains of Rats" by Michael Blumlein (5)
- 18) "Rhinstone Manifesto" by Don Webb (2)
- 19) "Caverns" by David Zindell (-6)
- 20) "The Ibis Experiment" by S.W. Widdowson (-11)
- 21) "The Cup is the Wine" by Josephine Saxton (-15)
- 22) "A Multiplication of Lives" by Diana Reed (-20)
- 23) "The Compassionate, the Digital" by Bruce Sterling (-24)

### Artist Popularity Ratings (issues 13-16 inclusive):

(The "points" in brackets have been calculated in the same way as for the stories.)

- 1) Jim Burns (83)
- 2) Pete Lyon (43)
- 3) Les Edwards (33)
- 4) Paul Rickwood (26)
- 5) Kate Simpson (11)
- 6) Nick Theato (8)
- 7) Iain Byers (6)
- 8) Richard Kadrey (3)
- 9) Malcolm Walker (-6)
- 10) D. West (-7)
- 11) Bernard Quinn (-8)
- 12) Gamma (-9)

Thanks to all those who responded. We read all your comments with interest. Some of them have been reproduced in the letters column.

## WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letter column in each issue. Please send your comments, opinions, reactions, to the magazine's main editorial address. We may not be able to reply to all letters, but we do read them and may well be influenced by them.



# Ian Watson

## When Jesus Comes Down the Chimney

---

**N**ow, Jamie, if you don't go to bed when your Daddy tells you to, Jesus won't come down the chimney!

Oh, so you can't even imagine sleeping yet?

Saints! Tell you the whole story of Jesus – and of Santa Claus too? Why, that would take till nine.

Well, maybe . . . (No, I am *not* spoiling the boy!)

You just snuggle up in your chair by the fire there, Jamie, and listen to me. And I'll be carrying you upstairs before you've heard the half of it!

We'd better start with Santa Claus.

We all know how Santa was born in a humble stable amongst the chickens and goats. Most of his countryfolk were poor, and Santa's parents were no exception. No shoes on their feet, no fine cakes in the larder. No larders, often! A lot of those people lived in tents, and it got pretty cold in the winter. Three magicians had hiked a thousand miles to be present when Santa was born. They followed a bright comet in the sky, and brought a magic sack as a gift. You could take whatever you wished for out of this sack. Santa's mother didn't want to stir up jealousy amongst her neighbours, so she hid the sack away. Anyway, her country was being occupied by the Roman army. If the Romans heard of the magic sack she feared they'd take it away for their wild, greedy emperor.

When Santa grew to manhood his mother gave him the magicians' gift and explained all about it. Santa decided then and there that he would like to shower presents on his countryfolk, though he swore that he would never pull anything out of the sack for himself.

So Santa tramped around the land with the sack over his shoulder, giving people whatever their hearts most desired, or what they needed most. He kept his vow about giving nothing to himself. Even so, one widow woman requested a fine red coat trimmed with angora wool then insisted that Santa should wear it, not she. A leper whose feet were rotted and crippled asked for a pair of stout black boots, and forced these

on Santa.

That wasn't all. Such a number of grateful people pressed bread and cheese on Santa, from out of their meagre stocks, not to mention fish and fruit and meat and milk and wine – which he couldn't decently refuse – that within a few years he grew positively stout!

Well, the Roman soldiers finally arrested him. All of those free gifts that poured from Santa's sack were destabilizing a marginal economy. They were weakening the currency. They were causing job refusal in the colonial labour market.

The Romans tied the magic sack over Santa's head. They marched him up to the top of a hill and nailed him to a wooden cross, then jabbed their spears through the sack a couple of times to blind him.

When they took Santa down dead at last they bundled his corpse into the sack, tied it tight, and set an official seal on it. They debated tossing him into the nearby river, but eventually their captain allowed Santa's friends to carry him away to a tomb.

That night the tomb was broken into by robbers who hoped to steal the magic sack . . . and they found the sack lying there empty. It was as if that burlap bag had digested Santa Claus! As if it had spirited him away to the dimension where all free gifts came from.

The robbers were filled with wonder, and didn't want to steal ever again. Instead, they made a pact to spread the word about Santa all over the world and to carry the sack (or snippets from it) wherever they went, as proof. The sack was first carried to Roma, then later to Torino, where most of it remains to this very day.

In later years the descendants of those original robbers promised that one day when everybody in the world had heard of Santa and loved him, the sack would begin to distribute free gifts again. That's why, every Easter, we all receive presents wrapped in sack-cloth, in memory of Santa.

Jesus? Oh yes, I'm coming to him. Of course I am, Jamie! It's Jesus who's important tonight.

Jesus was the leader of those thieves who broke into Santa's tomb. (There's something symmetrical, don't you think, between gifts and robbery? Robbery is the product of a society where there aren't enough gifts to go round—or where there are too many gifts for too few people. What's that? Sym-met-ric-al. It means . . . oh, it doesn't really matter, Jamie darling. Honest!)

Jesus was the ex-thief who carried the sack to Roma where the hysterical greedy emperor lived, guarded by his soldiers with their spears.

When Jesus arrived in Roma he went straight to the Forum. That's a sort of meeting place, like a Senate, but for the common people.

Jesus stood up on a marble block and waved the empty sack and called out – with the help of a translator, from Aramaic into Latin, "Plebeians of Roma, I bring you gifts!" (A plebeian was someone unemployed, living on free bread and enjoying free entry into circuses.)

At first the plebeians who thronged the Forum stared at the sack as eagerly as if they were looking up a girl's skirt.

When they saw that the sack was empty, many of them hooted and jeered. Others lost their temper and chucked pebbles.

But Jesus cried out, "The gifts I bring you are dialectical!" (This was a term which Jesus borrowed from the Greek philosophers.) "Your desires are the thesis. This sack is the antithesis. The synthesis is that you should empty yourselves of false goals, vain dreams, the products of a diseased society. Just you empty all of that false consciousness of yours into this sack! It will hold everything, and reduce everything that is contradictory. In its place you'll discover that gifts ought to be given according to one's needs, not one's desires – but society at present is based on legalized theft, on the alienation of persons from their soil, from their work, even from their own bodies and sexuality!"

With daily repetition Jesus' message began to sink in. Soon a few of the plebeians believed him – and stepped into the sack and out again, as a symbol of their change of heart. Then many.

At last the emperor's curiosity was piqued; for the circus seats remained empty, and the elephants and the trained apes which rode them wept. Also, there was growing unrest among his soldiers at the prospect of yet another colonial war.

The emperor in person led a party of trusted guards to the Forum, intending to spear this Jesus. On the way there the emperor . . . now, we must tell the truth: he was a hysteric but he also cunningly sensed his own political and economic infrastructure ebbing away . . . the emperor experienced a visionary fit. He saw a sack in the sky which swallowed the sun. (Actually, we believe this was a total eclipse.) When he reached the Forum he dismounted from his horse – and stepped into the sack. Soon the empire had totally changed . . . into a republic.

Ah, now you're nodding off.

Let's go quietly, mm? Up up up to bed.

Tonight, night of nights, Jesus will climb down the chimney and take away whatever you think is most

precious to you. Will it be your rocking horse? Or your toy bear? Or just your tin whistle?

Tush. How else could other deserving little children receive fine gifts at Easter time?

Hush. He'll take something from us *all*. Not just you, you dobbin. Maybe I'll lose my spinning wheel tonight. Maybe it'll be my purple velvet dress.

Jesus'll redistribute all our wealth. That's why he's called "the good thief." He brings Santa's empty sack with him down all the chimneys in the whole wide world, and fills it full from every house.

Here we are now, darling. Tuck up tight, and shut those eyes. No peeping, or he mightn't come.

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Ian Watson has written three stories for *Interzone*: "The People on the Precipice" (no.13), "When the Timegate Failed" (no.14) and "Jingling Geordie's Hole" (no.17). The above "microlite fable" is his special contribution to the festive season. His collection *Evil Water and Other Stories* is forthcoming from Gollancz in early 1987.

50th ANNIVERSARY SF CONVENTION

# BECCON 87



## SCIENCE FICTION

Easter Bank Holiday '87 Birmingham.

From Good Friday April 17th to Monday 20th 1987, the convention will consist of at least two separate, concurrent, programme streams. They will feature talks, slide shows, panels, films, games, discussions, quizzes, with book and art auctions. In addition there is going to be a special bookroom, artshow and other non-programme items and facilities.

For details send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: BECCON 87, 191 The Heights, Northolt, Middlesex, UB5 4BU (allow 20 days for reply).

## BACK ISSUES

All back issues except No.5 are still available from 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR, UK. They are £1.75 each, but readers who buy three or more issues may have them at £1.50 each. (£2.00 each overseas, or £1.75 each for three.) Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to *Interzone*. Contents of back issues:

- 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 Flash! 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. **OUT OF PRINT**
- 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 Montgomery; "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 Montgomery; "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 Tambourine Software..." by Michael Bishop; "Little Ilya and Spider and 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 Vitriconium" by M. John Harrison; "Instructions for Exiting This Building..." by Pamela Zoline.
- 13: "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" by J.G. Ballard; "The People on the Precipice" by Ian Watson; Interview with William Gibson; "If the Driver Vanishes..." by Peter T. Garratt; "Escapist Literature" by Barrington J. Bayley; "Rhinestone Manifesto" by Don Webb; "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw" by Neil Ferguson.
- 14: "When the Timegate Failed" by Ian Watson; Interview with Clive Barker; "The Compassionate, the Digital" by Bruce Sterling; "Finn" by Sue Thomason; "Patricia's Profession" by Kim Newman; "The King of the Hill" by Paul J. McAuley; "The New SF" by Vincent Omniaveritas; "Caverns" by David Zindell.
- 15: "The Winter Market" by William Gibson; Interview with Bruce Sterling; "The One and Only Tale..." by John Brogan; "The Vivarium" by Garry Kilworth; "A Multiplication of Lives" by Diana Reed; "Goodbye - and Thanks for the SF" by Allen A. Lucas; "The Ibis Experiment" by S.W. Widdowson.
- 16: "And He Not Busy Being Born..." by Brian Stableford; art feature by Jim Jones; "The Protector" by Rachel Pollack; "Sex Change Operation Shock" by Gwyneth Jones; "The Brains of Rats" by Michael Blumlein; "His Vegetable Wife" by Pat Murphy; "The Cup is the Wine" by Josephine Saxton; Interview with Iain Banks; "The Final Episode" by Shirley Weiland.
- 17: "Freeze-frame" by Gregory Benford; "Jingling Geordie's Hole" by Ian Watson; Interview with John Shirley; "Soundspinner" by D.C. Haynes; "Hard Work" by Thomas M. Disch; Interview with Gene Wolfe; "Future Fish" by Barbara Hills; "Adam Found" by Simon Ounsley.

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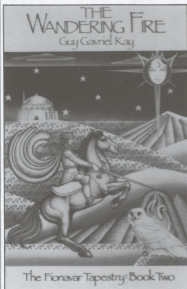
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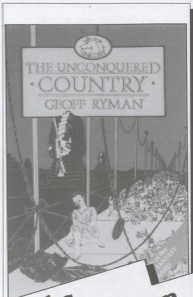
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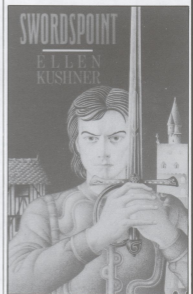
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**G**ene Anderson, protagonist of Damon Knight's *The Man in the Tree* (Penguin, £2.95) is a giant, a possessor of amazing psychic powers and a constant irritation to the reader in search of a coherent story. Exigencies of plot force him to be chased through half the book by a vindictive policeman, helplessly watch his lover die, and be unable to spare a sandwich for a starving child. And yet: at all other times he is able to produce endless streams of goodies from alternate universes, heal droves of terminal patients, and wipe out enemies with a reflex flick of his mind. He spends six chapters studying art, with very little relevance to subsequent developments. Not needing the money, and with better things to do, he spends six more chapters exhibiting himself in a carnival sideshow.

The text only makes sense when read as the cryptic and probably unconscious biography of a science-fiction writer. Then one immediately recognizes the elements: the tormented childhood of the misfit with access to other realities growing up in postwar, smalltown, backwoods America, the persecuted adolescence of the artist striving to perfect his technique, the humiliations of the person of unusual talent and stature driven to display himself as a freak, his eventual discovery of solace in the community of the weird and deformed, the swindlers and the showmen who inhabit that brash and garish underworld.

The straightforward narrative breaks off in the Sixties and resumes in the Eighties as a portentous procession of solemn lectures and awed conversations. Gene ("born") Anderson ("son of man") is now very big, very rich, increasingly doom-ridden and disgruntled with America, and surrounded by sycophants who regard him as the Messiah. Secluded in his immense and luxurious mansion, he and his clique conceive a plan to rid the world of consumerism, materialism and élitism, utilizing a combination of charisma, inborn gifts, conjuring tricks and PR. Still a science fiction writer; a well-known type and an awful warning.

**"T**he rosy picture he paints," sneers one of Anderson's rare detractors, "is one of villagers baking their own bread, milking their own cows and patching their own pants." It is precisely the scene that the prodigious, rich, revered yet still enlightened Ursula Le Guin depicts in her latest work, a festschrift of tributes to the glories of post-materialistic rural self-sufficiency; and a book apparently designed in anticipation of its own self-engendered cult.

**Always Coming Home** (Gollancz, £10.95) is a thick bundle of songs, poems, folktales, narratives, maps,

recipes, glossaries, exegeses and occasional flustered interjects from the author, styling herself Pandora since what she is offering is Hope. It is illustrated with fussy drawings of natural objects and authentically hand-crafted artefacts, none of them unfamiliar, and is accompanied by a cassette of music (available separately, price £5.95).

The whole package presents a detailed description in their own words of life among the singing, dancing, drinking Kesh people, living in the heart of California wine country millenia after twentieth-century America and all its works have faded from human memory. It is a life of isolation, manual labour, tiresome ritual and endless feyly earthy folklore of a most questionable kind for post-technological sophisticates who supposedly have a grasp of theoretical physics beyond our ken, and access to a self-evolved global computer network which they are generally too mystical to consult. It is a Utopia ("an Up Yours to the people who ride snowmobiles, make nuclear weapons and run prison camps") only for those who are so saturated with guilt, nostalgia, technophobia and repressed consumerist longings that they will bake bread, milk cows, patch pants and sing heya heya all day for the sake of the log-burning steam trains, hand-crafted washing machines and abundant community spirit. A Have-Your-Cake-And-Eat-It for the people who hanker after an idealized past when it was all green fields, things were built to last, the neighbours could be trusted and adolescents knew their place.

"The difficulty of translation from a language that doesn't yet exist is considerable, but there is no need to exaggerate it," writes the author in her opening note – but when confronted with a body of literature as remorselessly Zennish as the Valley texts, one suspects the translator of having misconstrued, failed to communicate or even suppressed certain things in the interests of wish-fulfillment. It reads like the naive fantasies of amateur anthropologists, romancing Shangri-La out of the ruins of the deserted village, still strewn with beautiful pots, baskets and fetishes, the day after the inhabitants have packed their pin-ups

and pocket calculators and gone to live in the squalid shanty town around the NATO missile base or Union Carbide factory.

**M**eanwhile, down on the Heavenly Grain Collective, a frustrated would-be astrophysicist seethes quietly in the paddy fields: a victim of racial discrimination and technological poverty in a post-holocaust USA under the benign guardianship of China... Fredrik Pohl's *Black Star Rising* (Gollancz, £9.95) begins well, as Pettyman Castor gradually gets his chances to escape to the city, the university and eventually the Space Programme, collecting on the way an ideological policewoman for a sweetheart, and an employer with eleven brains, one of them belonging to his erstwhile mother-in-law. Unfortunately half a bookful of gentle satire and acute characterization is jettisoned when Castor is finally blasted into space to encounter a lost colony of unreconstructed Real Americans; a race so relentlessly raucous and fatuous as to lose all touch with reality.

Only Samuel R. Delany leaves America alone. *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand* (Grafton, £2.95) is a lovely book, as ornamental and prolix as its title, set in the remote future in the six thousand and odd worlds of the inhabited galaxy watched over by the web and torn apart by the conflict between the Family and the Sygn. The backdrop is almost too large and luminous for the drama unfurling in front of it, even though that drama encompasses the devastation of an entire planet and the meeting and parting of two ideal erotic partners: a synapse-jammed former slave recomunicated with reality through the rings of a dictator, and the industrial diplomat through whose professionally sensitive consciousness the narrative is channelled. But this volume, complete in itself and already almost as long as a trilogy, is only the first half of a diptych, with further doses of conflict, intrigue, romance and revelation massing in the wings for the second act. It is also a bargain not to be missed in this first UK edition, a paperback original with a beautiful cover: well over five hundred words for a penny.

## Book Reviews, 1 Lee Montgomerie



every one of them hand-picked by an expert.

Elsewhere in the world, there is intelligent life with other things on its mind. **The Penguin World Omnibus of Science Fiction**, edited by Brian Aldiss and Sam Lundwall (Penguin, £3.50), is the most international anthology I have ever encountered: stories from twenty-six countries on six continents, only a minority of them originally written in English. The inclusion of a plodding school essay from Ghana can only be accounted for by courtesy or completism, but the rest of the stories are all acceptable, frequently exceptional, occasionally brilliant; and the general ambience is one of refreshing cool irony.

Equally cool and ironic is Stanislaw Lem in **One Human Minute** (Andre Deutsch, £7.95), a slim volume which brings together two of this author's most offbeat and enduring obsessions: the lecture on statistical flux and the excessively thorough review of the non-existent book. Even in the next century, serious studies of evolution and military development will probably be a minority taste, but I foresee stupendous popular success for the work described in the title piece – a book that presents a tabulated breakdown of the sum total of human activity in any given minute; and in the process generates so pessimistic a picture of our species that one gratefully despairs of Messiahs.

## BOOK REVIEWS, 2

### John Clute

Unless you cancel the alarm on your digital watch, it will ring at the same time each day. This is also the case with Ian Watson. Here is the next novel, regular as clockwork, to prove it. **Queenmagic, Kingmagic** (Gollancz, £9.95) may indeed suffer to some extent from Watson's consuming rage to produce (something like twenty books in thirteen years), and might have benefited from an ampler denouement, but there's no denying the pleasure one can derive from seeing one more raffish Watson muscling into the world right on schedule, doing its raffish Watson thing with almost all the vigour one could hope for.

Although it is certainly a chess novel of sorts, **Queenmagic, Kingmagic** is not a chess novel like your usual chess novel, for in the typical example of this subgenre the game – its rules, its physical layout, the character and powers of its players – serves as a subtext to be deciphered – even at times a game actually to be played – as one progresses through the surface narrative. In Watson's jaunty slangy slightly hyperactive

jeu, on the other hand, there seems to be no subtext at all, certainly no underlying game whose decipherment is essential to the understanding of the tale. In this it is not much like *Through the Looking Glass*, or Brunner's *The Squares of the City* (1964) or even Nabokov's *The Defense* (trans. 1964). In Qm, Km, the world, which closely resembles a toy Lithuania or Hungary, is expressly constructed according to the requirements of a metacosmic chess match the nature and rules of which everyone in the novel understands. There is no secret. Can there be a tale?

Yes. If the world is a game of chess, conducted between white Bellograd and black totalitarian Chorny, and if the world ends whenever a game is won, how the young pawn Pedino can hope to survive Chorny's imminent victory makes up a forcedly rollicking storyline full of knight-moves and reality-shifts. There is a strong Nabokovian feel to the tale, but not the Nabokov of *The Defense*, whose Russian text dates from his early years; it is, rather, Ada (1969) which comes to mind on jouncing licketysplit through Pedino's fragile domain – because both books posit a universe decadently contingent upon a Creator's playful whim, a universe of the mind's eye, arch, deliquescent, delicious, haunting. Both books exhibit a turn of mind that weds, in a very European manner, fabulation and a chilling cognitive harshness. And both books sea-change Eastern Europe. And they are both autumnal. Watson's is of course the lesser effort, though a rather gladder one; and perhaps that is sufficient praise, thus to ally his slimline cocksnookery with some of the virtues and some of the flaws of the greater game, the greater fantastic toe.

In her second novel this year, Gwyneth Jones becomes her old alter ego Ann Halam for a bit and gives us in **King Death's Garden** (Orchard Books, £6.95) a ghost story in traditional English vein. Jones uses Halam for children's books, but though the protagonist here is a young boy just entering adolescence, there is a chaste chill gravity to the tale, and a melancholy of hauntedness, that very much reminds one of the adult stories of Walter de la Mare, whose *Henry Brocken* is (not at all inadvertently, one suspects) quoted in the epigraph.

Maurice is an asthmatic, clever, lonely prig who feels that his parents – off in the Middle East trying to earn a living in the Thatcher era – have abandoned him. Stuck with an otherworldly great-aunt in Brighton, he soon becomes fascinated by the eponymous cemetery next door, and by the girl Moth who seems to live there. He begins to have dreams in which the Brighton of previous centuries comes through. Moth is of course

a ghost – an indentured manifestation of the genius loci – and Maurice comes closer and closer to a similar immurement. At the last moment he pulls free of the prison, and seems on the road to growing up. It is a classic theme, and Jones treats it with all the respect it merits. Her Brighton has been lived in. Nor is De le Mare, whose most haunting moments were almost always suburban, a dead hand on her page.

Keith Roberts cannot write a word without signing on. He is unmistakable; his southern England could not be taken for another's, nor could the melancholy solitude of his typical protagonists, many of whom appear variously disguised in his new collection, **The Lordly Ones** (Gollancz, £8.95). All the same, not everything in the book comes from his top drawer. The whole of "Diva" is gauche and wooden, and the story is terribly long. "Ariadne Potts" almost goes the distance with the same lumbering manic-depressive levity, until its last few pages touch masterfully home again. "The Castle on the Hoop" quietly but not entirely coherently returns to the vein of *Kaeti and Company* – in the process reminding one of the slantwise insinuating verisimilitude of his ongoing portrait of London, similar to but rather more humane than that found in Peter Ackroyd's later *Hawksmoor* (1985). "The Comfort Station" is brilliant and cold and wrenching, as is its companion piece, "The Lordly Ones," though the latter tale just slightly sentimentalizes the subnormal lavatory attendant who stays by his post while England falls. (If someone had had the nerve to tell him to cut the bathetic penultimate sentence from this story, Roberts might have given us something almost word-perfect.) "Sphairistike" (I'm not sure if that spelling yet exists as an English word, but it means a tennis match) is a melodrama which should not work but, with considerable force and great sadness, transfigures plot into augury of the human condition. None of the stories could take place anywhere but England (except the awful "Diva"). It is an England inhabited by its past, an England whose inhabitants wear solitude and melancholy like the Cloak of Nessus. Roberts is their scribe.

Gordon R. Dickson has not stopped. **The Forever Man** (Ace, \$16.95) inaugurates a new American hardcover list with a lumbering romp that would have worked very neatly at half the length – the length, say, of the longer half of an old Ace Double – but which sinks indissolubly into pulp long before its 375 pages have been wrestled to a shut. Take it that tough spacepilot Jim Wanders, transmogrified Laumer-like into becoming the dispassionate sentence of a warship armed



Cover by Jim Burns for Greg Bear's ambitious new sf epic (Gollancz, £10.95)

to the teeth, saves Earth, the non-human ant-like Laagi, and the Tinkerbells who dance to the music of the spheres. Take it that he also saves the girl (who psychically piggy-backs his disembodied hegira in search of all the answers, all of which he finds) from herself. It's just about 200 pages too much of a perfectly good thing.

## REVIEWS IN BRIEF

**Trillion-Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction** by Brian W. Aldiss with David Wingrove (Gollancz, £15 hc, £9.95 pb)

**Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers, Second Edition** ed. Curtis C. Smith (St James Press, no price shown [available from Andromeda Bookshop at £42.50, postage included, as advertised on page 47 of IZ 16])

These two massive books tell us almost everything we could possibly want to know about the state of English-language sf, A.D. 1986. The Aldiss is a heavily rewritten and hugely expanded version of his *Billion-Year Spree* (1973). It's a marvellous read, lively, all-encompassing and very nearly 100% accurate. Given the book's generosity of spirit (particularly where some of the newer writers are con-

cerned), it's a pity that Mr Aldiss felt it necessary to be grudging towards Britain's only extant sf magazine – he remarks in passing that “Only *Interzone*, a pallid successor to *New Worlds*, biased towards the metafictional aspect of SF, played host to new writing” during the 1980s. Most readers ceased comparing this magazine to *New Worlds* quite some time ago. In every other respect, though, the Aldiss/Wingrove volume is bang up to date, and most welcome. Curtis C. Smith's 933-page hardcover book is less sound as criticism, but it contains an enormous amount of detailed biographical and bibliographical information. It attempts to list all books by some 650 sf authors, ranging from Robert Abernathy and Douglas Adams to George Zelazny and Roger Zelazny, with appendices on “Foreign-Language Writers” and “Major Fantasy Writers.” By and large the book succeeds in its aims, although it is a pity that this extensively revised second edition should repeat some of the organizational errors of the first edition (1981). Chief among these is St James Press's insistence that the list of each author's works should be divided into “Science Fiction Publications” and “Other Publications.” This splitting of the oeuvre leads to some idiocies: for instance, the entry on Moorcock places *The Brothel in Rosenstrasse* and *The Laughter of Carthage* under the “SF” heading,

while it puts all the *Eternal Champion* books into the “Other” category. In what sense are the foregoing historical novels more science-fictional than, say, the “Runestaff” series with its far-future setting? But I don't want to complain too much, for I have already found this volume very useful (as is the same publisher's even more massive *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers, Second Edition* ed. John M. Reilly, which was released a few months earlier).

**The City and the Stars** by Arthur C. Clarke; **The Door Into Summer** by Robert A. Heinlein; **Wolfbane** by Frederick Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth; and **The Reproductive System** by John Sladek (Gollancz, £2.95 each)

This is the second quartet of titles in Gollancz's admirable “Classic SF” series. They are attractive large-format paperbacks and extremely good value. I am particularly pleased to see Sladek's very funny first novel back in print – he remains a sadly underrated author. The edition of *Wolfbane* reprinted here is Pohl's recent revision of the well-known novel which was written just before Kornbluth's death in 1958.

(David Pringle)

**Sword of the Lamb** by M.K. Wren (NEL, £2.95)

Book One of “The Legacy of the

Phoenix." Oz space soap. Glitzy verbiage: a Return to Eden to Dune's Dynasty. The same old messianic board-room glossy formula. I couldn't take this epic of social revolution more seriously if it was set in a pan-galactic Albert Square. Unenthralling.

**The Isle of Glass** by Judith Tarr (Bantam Press, £8.95)

Volume One of "The Hound and the Falcon." 12th-century fantasy. Super-powered Welsh changeling gets involved (well, almost) with Richard Coeur de Lion. A touch of the old K/S syndrome here, with lashings of lashings for gorgeous elven hero; and tender rescue scenes. But will they go all the way? I view burgeoning het love-interest as a distinct cop-out. Erudite tosh: Tarr at least knows her background. A readable jerkin-ripper.

(Gwyneth Jones)

**Heart of the Comet** by Gregory Benford and David Brin (Bantam Press, £9.95) I didn't notice what was going on until about page 200, when I woke up from what seemed to be a typical 1980s US sf story - ecology, sex, nasty governments versus nice corporations, electricity/diseases/ice/food from space - to realize that I'd just read a passage in which a handsome spaceman, a mad scientist, a beautiful woman and an intelligent robot fight off voracious green and purple slime, in a cave on Halley's comet, with ray guns! This is the sort of book they don't write any more. Zap! Pow! Whoopee! I loved it.

**Limits** by Larry Niven (Futura, £2.50) Several shorts from Niven, including collaborations with Jerry Pournelle, Dian Girard and Steve Barnes. As usual, clever and competent. The Niven-and-Pournelle story is indistinguishable from Pournelle on his own. OK for reading on the train.

**Jormungand** by Nigel Frith (Unwin, £2.50)

The tale of the Norse god Frey, partly retold and partly invented in the same vein as the author's earlier *Asgard*. I find it impossible to get involved in this slow-moving mixture of current colloquialism and dated Hollywood swashbuckling.

**Yorath the Wolf** by Cherry Wilder (Unwin, £2.95)

Book 2 of "The Rulers of Hylor." Unobjectionable fantasy, just like all the rest (wizard, prophecy, lots of young men, one gets the girl, one gets killed, one gets to be king...) except that there isn't a map! Could this start a trend?

**The Doings of Raffles Haw** by A. Conan Doyle and **Olympian Nights** by John Kendrick Bangs (Greenhill Press, £7.95 each [?]) Reprints of popular turn-of-the-century

novels. The Doyle is a melodramatic tale of a reclusive scientist whose riches are derived from a not-too-hard-to-guess secret. Pleasant, but not up to Sherlock Holmes or *The Lost World*. The Bangs is essentially a collection of rather dull jokes which don't quite come off, a cross between a clean Carry On film and a respectful edition of *Spitting Image*. It seems that the forgotten works of remembered authors are sometimes forgotten for good reasons.

**The Shaping of Middle Earth: Book 4 of the History of Middle Earth** by J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Unwin, no price shown)

Not a history of Middle Earth, but a history of Tolkien's making of Middle Earth, containing *The Silmarillion* as it was in 1937 (about a quarter of the length of the final version), associated maps, time charts, glossary, and a 4,000 word synopsis of the work that might have been sent to a publisher, together with lots of notes and speculations with Christopher Tolkien. If you want a story don't read this book. If you're the sort of person who gets off on reading the Shorter O.E.D. or the A-Z of London, you'll enjoy it. I am, and I do.

**The Sultan's Turret** by Seamus Cullen (Futura, £2.50)

Sequel to *A Noose of Light*. Unfortunately, despite its interesting period setting - Spain before the Spanish finished conquering it, a prosperous and tolerant place compared with the rest of Western Europe in the middle ages, and comparatively unknown to an English-reading public - this rather disorganized novel, dominated by fantasies of demons with large pricks attacking young girls, is disappointing. A pity really.

(Ken Brown)

**Heart's Blood** by Jane Yolen (Futura, £2.50)

Yolen's short stories in *F & SF* marked her as a writer to watch, but this is a disappointment. Warmblooded dragons telepathically "link" with their trainers - yes, just like McCaffrey except they don't get the consummation of riding their charges. Too conscientiously told, the burden of explanation loaded upon her characters stops them or the story ever coming to life. Good intentions similarly pull the punches of the would-be political plot of rebels, spies and the Federation. Sequel to *Dragon's Blood*, further volumes of this "richly detailed" saga promised.

(Judith Hanna)

## ALSO RECEIVED

**The Postman** by David Brin (Bantam Press, £9.95). Interesting, ambitious, but over-praised post-nuclear-war novel.

**Sirens: The Second Book of Illustrations** by Chris Achilleos, text by Nigel Suckling (Dragon's World/Paper Tiger, £12.95 hc, £7.95 pb). Colourful picture book from a very competent but somewhat coarse fantasy artist.

**The Celestial Steam Locomotive and Gods of the Greataway** by Michael Coney (Futura, £2.95 and £2.50). Together these constitute "The Song of Earth" - inventive, lively, far-future sf.

**Best SF of the Year 15 ed.** Terry Carr (Gollancz, £3.95). An anthology well up to Carr's usual standard, with good stories by Silverberg, Waldrop, Crowley, Bishop, Tiptree and others. One story should be familiar to IZ readers: Watson's "People of the Precipice."

**A Dream of Kinship and A Tapestry of Time** by Richard Cowper (Futura, £2.50 each). Volumes 2 and 3 of the "White Bird of Kinship" trilogy, of which *The Road to Corlay* was the first. Well-written sf/fantasy.

**Burning Chrome** by William Gibson (Gollancz, £8.95). A first collection which contains everything the author has ever written in shorter form. Highly recommended.

**Helliconia Winter** by Brian Aldiss (Grafton, £2.95). Now that the third volume of Aldiss's trilogy is out in paperback we can begin to re-assess the whole thing at leisure. Clearly a major work.

**Humpty Dumpty in Oakland** by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz, £9.95). Another fine non-sf novel which dates from around the same time as the author's *In Milton Lumky Territory* (also published by Gollancz).

**Footfall** by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (Sphere, £3.95). Galumphing sf; the hardcover was reviewed in IZ 15.

**Trumps of Doom and Unicorn Variations** by Roger Zelazny (Sphere, £2.50 each). A new "Amber" novel and a reissued short-story collection by this talented but variable author.

**Isle of the Dead and To Die In Italbar** by Roger Zelazny (Methuen, £2.50 each). Reprints of minor Zelazny novels from circa 1970.

**The Light Fantastic** by Terry Pratchett (Corgi, £1.95). Sequel to *The Colour of Magic* - very silly fantasy.

**Bio of a Space Tyrant, Volume 4: Executive and With a Tangled Skein** by Piers Anthony (Grafton, £2.95 each). More from the bewilderingly prolific Mr Anthony: the first is sf, the second – which is Book Three of "Incarnations of Immortality" – is fantasy.

**The Merchants' War** by Frederik Pohl (Futura, £2.50). Long-delayed sequel to *The Space Merchants*, and perhaps too much of a good thing.

**Cast a Cold Eye** by Alan Ryan (Sphere, £2.50). Irish ghost story.

**Second Nature** by Cherry Wilder (Unwin, £3.50). First British publication of this competent sf novel.

**The War for Eternity** by Christopher Rowley (Arrow, £2.95). "Brilliant epic of interstellar war..."

**Dayworld** by Philip José Farmer (Grafton, £2.50). Sf novel, over-expanded from rather a good short story, "The-Sliced-Crosswise-Only-On-Tuesday-World."

**Voyage to the City of the Dead** by Alan Dean Foster (NEL, £2.25). Fairly impenetrable sf novel.

**Tailchaser's Song** by Tad Williams (Futura, £2.95). "What Adams did for rabbits, Mr Williams more than accomplishes for cats..."

**Wolves at the Door** by Tabitha King (Grafton, £2.95). A shocker by Mrs Stephen King.

## LETTERS

Dear Editors:

I was much taken by your reviewer's recreation of Kaeti in your last issue. Kaeti herself was also most impressed. She said she was pleased to see folk realized she was still alive and well, and that at this rate she might one day achieve something of the notoriety of Mike Moorcock's magnificent Cathy Cornelius. She said she was delighted to feel she'd been able to help in some small way, but did make a couple of small points that she said might be of use for future reference. She said that although she is sardonic by nature she is seldom actually rude; she has certainly never told anybody to "eff off," not in print at least. She also said that

although many odd things run in her family, short tongues are not one of them; she has never in her life transposed a "th" sound for a "v." She apparently feels very strongly about this.

For my part I feel that sound though Ms Montgomerie's views certainly are, she has perhaps slightly mistaken Kaeti's nature at one point. Kaeti, like her great predecessor, does have the freedom of the twentieth century; so the occasional deliberate archaism would seem to be in order. Also, East Enders in my experience are generally conservative, usually with a small "c" but not infrequently with a majuscule. The green and orange sweater to which your reviewer alludes was actually spotted adorning a more than usually comely barmaid in the George in Southwark during the actual writing of the book.

With many thanks for a most engaging article, and all good wishes for the future of *Interzone*.

**Keith Roberts**  
Wiltshire

Dear Editors:

Congratulations on the revamped *Interzone* which now seems more like a complete magazine than any of the

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previous issues. The superb colour covers on issues 14 upwards have certainly helped (and hopefully attracted more readers) and the more varied contents are welcome – film reviews and interviews help to reinforce the fact that Interzone does not exist in a vacuum.

**Kevin Menzies**  
Gloucestershire

Dear Editors:

The book reviews and departments generally are a problem. I turn to them first, always, but this is because they give instant doses of sense-of-wonder which reach me without the fatigue of reading an entire story. That's a bad habit for IZ to be encouraging. I'd prefer brief appetite-whetters rather than intense discussions which remove any need to read the works being discussed. I think, addicted as I am to the departments, I would rather you cut them down and gave us more words of fiction.

Or do you feel the ambience they generate is too important a factor in reader-loyalty to be lost?

**David Redd**  
Dyfed

Simon Ounsley responds: The answer is yes. Of the previous two letters, Kevin Menzies' is the most typical of the responses to our questionnaire. Some readers prefer the reviews to the interviews and vice versa, and many would like to see us publish more fiction, but the overall message seems to be that our recently expanded non-fiction content is a Good Thing. For those readers like David Redd, too dazzled by the bright city street department stores to embark on the difficult path of the fiction itself, we can only suggest a course of silent meditation to encourage self-discipline. Alternatively, perhaps we can supply special editions of IZ with all the non-fiction features ripped out – at additional cost, of course.

Dear Editors:

Perhaps the interviews with famous writers could be replaced by short features on some of the long established authors. Brief reviews of the better works would enable those of us who missed the original editions to avoid ploughing through endless mediocre works in search of the true classics. For those who have already read the works, the comparison between the reviews and their memories may prove interesting. Your letters page will probably indicate if any of the reviews are particularly incongruous with the majority opinion.

**Mark Gannon**  
Kent

S.O.: IZ has always tried to be forward

rather than backward-looking, but several other readers echoed Mark Gannon's suggestion. What do the rest of you think? Would brief retrospective features be popular?

Dear Editors:

My only advice to you is not to pay too much attention to readers' opinion polls, at least at the expense of your own editorial judgement. I was a bit disturbed by Simon Ounsley's comment on the last questionnaire (IZ 14), that IZ was "now disinclined to accept stories about famous people." The comment hit me as a marketing survey sort of response. I mean, the comment was based on the showing of only two stories. That's hardly a fair statistical sample. Are you sure the "famous person" element caused the stories' poor showings? Did any readers actually state that they didn't like stories based on famous people, or was the conclusion based only on the numerical results?

Besides, what am I supposed to do now with my Princess Fergie UFO kidnap manuscript?

**Martha A. Hood**  
California

S.O.: That comment in IZ 14 was intended to be a little facetious but it did reflect the fact that we ourselves were getting rather bored with "famous person" stories. And yes, vast quantities of our readers also made that specific complaint. But don't worry about your "Fergy" story, Martha, there are plenty of newspapers here in Britain who would be only too happy to run it on their front pages.

Dear Editors:

I tend to agree with Allen A. Lucas (IZ 15) and believe that there are many American readers just as fed up with the current orientation in American sci-fi as most British readers. We prefer the work of Borges, Cortezar, Dick, Ballard, Watson and Aldiss. We too desire to see works of near-future fiction on earth and grow weary of stories whose perspective is looking back on this planet as though it was space junk we've discarded on our way to becoming divine, immortal cyborgs floating in an artificial environment. We reject the militancy of recent American work in the field and openly chastise the publishing industry for its mass marketing acceptance of work by anti-intellectual, technocratic, gadget-mongering Yang reductionists over the intuitive, imaginative, psycho-physical journeys of Yin synthesists. Not even the heroes of hard sf, like Arthur C. Clarke, can avoid the simple truth that the science in sf can never be cleanly severed from the religious/transcendental impulse which enlightens its

greatest themes.  
**David Memmott**  
Oregon

Dear Editors:

All the attempts to define sf seemed wrong except for Phil Stephensen-Payne's (IZ 16), which is partly why Allen Lucas totally failed to convince me that sf is rubbish. To me, sf is simply any story not set in the real world or some documented past time. That means that Star Wars is sf, even though it gives what I consider to be quality writing (e.g. Ballard, Aldiss, Disch, etc.) a bad name. There is a load of rubbish published in the sf field – but how many more books by Jackie Collins (Hollywood Wives etc.) are sold each year than by Tolstoy? All fields of fiction are dominated by popular rubbish, not just sf.

**Conrad Hall**  
Manchester

Dear Editors:

I still find reading IZ a bit like chewing and swallowing soapsuds, but sf in general looks better than it did four years ago and there is no doubt you had a role in that.

**Bruce Sterling**  
Texas

S.O.: It would be nice to think that Bruce Sterling is right, though most of the upcoming sf writers at the moment do seem to be American rather than British. Maybe we need some writers over here who are capable of super-human activities like chewing soapsuds. Look out for our All New Star issue next time – maybe you'll find some.

---

**M. JOHN HARRISON**  
Continued from p.32

think you make it up, or you can patch it together quite deliberately from cultural elements, bits of literature. You see I'm a very allusive writer anyway, very self-referential, but also referential to other forms of writing, other writers. Then the difference is that Viriconium tends to be patchworked together from other books in the sense that it is literary patching, whereas the documentary novel is a patching of documentary observations. I'm not naive enough to believe that means I can actually describe reality.



**BRIAN W.  
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