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# interzone

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## EDITORIAL

*Interzone* celebrates five years and twenty issues at a time when science fiction is booming both in this country and in North America (see our comments on the current British publishing scene in the "News" column). The generation of new American writers which has emerged in strength during the past five or six years – Greg Bear, William Gibson, Lucius Shepard, Kim Stanley Robinson, Connie Willis, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick, etc. etc. – is probably the most exciting generation since the mid-1960s. These "cyberpunks" and "humanists" (the reference is to Swanwick's article "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns" which appeared in *Asimov's* last year) have dominated the sf field during the first half of the 1980s, and already there are tentative signs that yet another grouping, a late-80s generation, is about to join them in the full sunlight.

Alas, things have not been quite so active in Britain, largely because the UK has only one professional sf magazine – the publication which you hold in your hands. Nevertheless, as Simon Ounsley pointed out last issue, *Interzone* has published some thirty new or little-known writers, many of whom have been British (and "our" Americans – Scott Bradley, Michael Blumlein and Richard Kadrey are prominent among them – may well turn out to be leading members of that late-80s generation referred to above). Among the UK-based writers that *Interzone* has discovered or encouraged are Christopher Burns, Neil Ferguson, Geoff Ryman, Kim Newman, Paul J. McAuley, Lee Montgomerie, Sue Thomason and Peter Garratt. Several of these people have now published books, or are about to do so: for example, Paul McAuley has just sold his novel *Four Hundred Billion Stars* to Del Rey Books for 1988 publication, and no doubt some sensible UK publisher will snap it up soon.

Even so, when one looks at the published record so far, it is hard to discern a clear-cut generation of "Interzone" authors. This may change by the decade's end, however, for in the past few months we have noticed an increase in the number of good manuscripts from completely unknown authors. Young British writers whose stories we have accepted recently include S.M. Baxter, Eric Brown, D.C. Haynes, Barbara Hills, Christina Lake and Charles Stross. Unfortunately, several of them are having to wait a while to see their work in print; which indicates that this magazine must go bimonthly before long. Some of these people could become very good indeed.

Our cover price goes up again with effect from this issue – but the good news is that we are maintaining the old subscription rates until August, and we have at last reached our goal of a 64-page magazine (including cover). If you are not already a subscriber, please become one before 15th August 1987, when the rates are due to go up. Current subscribers may also renew at the old rate of £6 inland, £7 overseas, as long as their money reaches us by 15th August. Thereafter the renewal rate will be £7.50 inland, £8.50 overseas, prices which we hope to be able to maintain for a long time. (Americans please note that the dollar rates will also increase, to \$13 seairmail, \$16 airmail.) We urge prompt renewal, especially from all those whose subscriptions lapse with this issue. Our regular film reviewer, Nick Lowe, should be back with *IZ 21* (Kim Newman kindly consented to fill in for one issue). We also intend to run a feature on the artist Ian Miller, plus the concluding part of Geoff Ryman's new novella, and other good things. Keep with us.

David Pringle

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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 either of the following addresses:

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# Geoff Ryman

## Love Sickness

### Part One

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#### Advances in Medicine

**M**arye lived in fear. She did not know that she was frightened. She only knew that she did not have long to be herself.

She boiled things. She boiled other people's knives and forks before using them. Other people sometimes found this insulting. The knives and forks would be made of resin, and they often melted, curling into unusable shapes.

Whenever Marye went out, she wore gloves, which she boiled when she got back. She would never rub her eyes or clean her ears or pick her nose. In the smelly public omnibuses that, like most of the population, were fuelled by alcohol, Marye would cover her face whenever people coughed or sneezed. People continually coughed or sneezed, summer or winter.

Belief was a disease. Because of advances in medicine, acceptable personalities were viruses that could be caught or administered. They had been released among the population at large. When necessary, they were given directly.

Some of the viruses altered mood, kept people calm and cheerful. Marye did not want to be kept cheerful. Some of the viruses lived in nerve cells beyond the reach of the immune system, forcing new neural pathways in pre-ordained patterns. Retroviruses took over the DNA of brain cells, importing other people's store of facts and imagery.

Marye had spent her infancy in Eastern Europe, where such diseases were endemic. She was immune to some of them. Which ones, she could not be sure.

She tested herself to find out. She tried to steal, reaching for apples on the market stalls. Something made of iron stopped her hand. She could not be violent. The first thought of causing pain or making blood flow wheeled her around with nausea. She hoped that it was something that had come from her, that was part of her and not a virus. There was no way of knowing.

**T**here was, however, one virus to which Marye knew she was immune, one thing she knew was part of herself. There was no ignoring the stirring in her body and her heart for other women. It was a semiological product of late period capitalism. So the Party said. Marye suffered from bad grammar. Bad deep grammar, but grammar nonetheless. This made Marye feel angry. How could she be a product of late period capitalism? What late period capitalism? Where?

That kind of anger was dangerous. Marye knew what that kind of anger had done to her father. It had killed him. He had been given so many viruses that he had died of fever. She knew the Party would one day try to cure her of anger too, and of horror and fear.

Everyone was read in rota by the Party. It was a part of the exercise of everyone's democratic rights. People were read and models made of their personalities. The models then joined the government to be consulted. The government was called the Consensus, and everyone was part of it, or at least the models were. This was called Consensus Politics. It was a product of late period socialism. You never knew when they were going to do it to you. There were too many people to make firm promises. All Marye knew was that she would be read sometime soon. Her bad grammar and her petty crimes would be discovered. And then, as a matter of simple social hygiene, she would be made ill, in order to cure her.

Marye was frightened of dying, like her father, when it happened. After her father's death, Marye's mother had fled with her to England, where things were milder. Then her mother had died, as was not uncommon, and Marye had been left an orphan in a foreign land. There were so many other orphans. She grew up alone in orphanages with a head full of visions and dreams, some of them other people's. She loved the theatre. And so she had become an actress.

She lived in a communal building with other members of her profession, on the South Bank of the River Thames. It was called the Shell. It had once been the marble-clad offices of an oil company. Sometimes parts of the Shell fell off, in giant rectangles.

Marye boiled the communal lavatories. She would creep into them at night with a kettle and fill the wash basins. Once, as a joke, her colleagues had lain in wait for her, to catch her at it.

"I'm just making a cup of tea," she tried to explain, as steam rose from a toilet bowl.

Among her colleagues, she had something of a reputation.

She was a terrible actress, but she could not admit that. There was something unbending in her that refused to mimic other people. In stately loneliness, Marye only really loved herself – herself and theatrical spectacle. She inspected herself and of course found much to criticize. Narcissists are often deeply principled people – they find many things beneath them. It makes them boring and dissatisfied with themselves. It made Marye an unwelcome mystery to people who might have been friends.

There is so much to say about her and her world. She lived in the future – or, rather, a future. People were purple. There were 20 million of them in London alone, and there was not enough for them to eat, and so they had all been given a new disease that flooded their skin with Rhodopsin. Rhodopsin was a human protein that until then had only been found in the eye. In light, it combined carbon and water.

People photosynthesized. They sweetened their blood in the mornings, breakfasting on sunlight, in parks or in the streets. In winter when the sun shone, they leaned against sheltered walls and opened up their clothing in gratitude. Marye would then be made restless with semiology, desperate with grammatical error. She embarrassed herself trying not to stare at the rippled flesh and the swaddlings of black winter clothing thrown back. The people looked like carvings of angels in a baroque church.

The streets were full of horses pulling carts. In summer, men wore only g-strings to catch the light, and they unloaded goods, bellowing to each other like bullfrogs, rolling barrels down ramps into basements. London crumbled, like some august old personage who has outlived her celebrity. It was supported on crutches, scaffolding of bamboo everywhere, shoring up history and stone. Marye did not know that she loved it.

Everywhere, there were signs of mortality. In the mornings, there were corpses on the streets; they had died there quietly in their worn-through shoes. They died of homelessness or hopelessness or simply from forgetting to eat. Cheap booze and sunlight meant they felt no hunger. The bodies were always of people that we would consider young.

Signs of mortality were in the faces of the young, in the edges to their smiles, in the devouring light in their eyes. They were fervid for achievements completed in youth.

The span of human life had been halved. This was not considered to be an advance in medicine. This was considered to be a mistake. A cure had been found for cancer. It worked in many steps and stages, and one of the things it did was to block the function of

the oncogene. The cure was both contagious and desperately wanted by the ill. It escaped before being thoroughly tested. The natural benefits of cancer had not been considered. The reasons why it was normal to develop a cancer cell every ten minutes, or why such a breakdown of the maturation process might be useful, the implications of the immortality of tumours or indeed the existence of the oncogene itself, all seem to have eluded medical thought. Cancer allowed people to grow old. Without it, they died in or around their 35th year.

This had happened just before the Second Revolution. The Party could reasonably claim that it was not their fault. It promised massive funding for Cancer Research, to develop new strains of the disease. It reminded people that Alexander had conquered the world by age 30, and that Einstein had done most of his work on relativity by then. It was a coolish comfort. Think also, the Party said though not too insistently, of the numbers saved from the swelling population, and of the numbers of the old who would not have to be supported by the young.

The Party did what it could to shorten youth. Speech, writing and basic arithmetic were administered a few days after birth. They were painted as cultures onto baby thumbs, to be sucked. At the same time vaccination was given against unwelcome ideologies. Education began in earnest at age three as a course of treatment. It was given orally by parents – if they were still alive – under the supervision of the Health Visitor.

There were the basic doses of the physical and life sciences and of history and politics. Later, there were electives. Arts, music, literature – there were several strains of Jane Austen, for example. You could become ill with all of them, to benefit from different perspectives. It saved a lot of time reading. It gave you knowledge that was not formed by experience and which did not change you in uncontrolled ways. Of this, the Party approved.

**T**he fashion in everything was for history. The fashion in the theatre was for the classics, performed with classical precision. The fashion in actors ran to pale skins that approached pre-Rhodopsin fairness. Marye, who spent a lot of time looking in the mirror, knew that she had the advantage of a complexion that was almost pink. She preserved it. She avoided the sun and carried a parasol.

She mostly went out at night. Actors and the sons and daughters of Party members kept out of the sun, and therefore had to eat. They could afford to eat. Marye sat with them in the cafe of the National Theatre, her hands jammed into her aprons.

She did not approve. There was a new craze. It was called the Vampires of History. Actors and apparatchiks pretended to be the vampire survivors of previous ages. They posed as Lord Byron or Mrs Shelley and they wore appropriate dress. They adopted the persona of Mary Shelley or T.S. Eliot – with fangs – and their virus-stuffed brains meant they could avoid anachronisms. They wore white pancake makeup, with black around the eyes, people who would be dead by age 35, playing at being immortal even at the cost of their souls, confusing history with costumes and creativity with dressing up.

"Who was I, you ask?" Marye responded with gleeful hostility. "Oh, I was a textile factory worker in 19th-century Sheffield. I'm a rather bad vampire because I have no teeth. But I do have eczema and rickets."

She was not popular. She blamed herself. Why, she wondered, do I find so many things unacceptable? Why are there so many people I dislike? She worried herself in the same way a dog worries a doll, in its jaws.

It was during one of her ruthless bouts of self-examination that she asked Cilla, an actress with whom she had achieved a chilly kind of acquaintance, to sum up her, Marye's, character.

"Prissy," said Cilla immediately. She had been waiting for a chance to say it for some time. "Prissy and..." Here she mused for a moment, searching for the right word. "Obsessive." She nodded with decision. Then she said, to make it sweeter, "La, la, la," a nonsense expression used by people as they got older. It meant that everything was the same, everything was a song.

"Prissy," repeated Marye. "And obsessive?"

"Severe," said Cilla, nodding again in agreement with herself.

It was bad enough to suffer from bad grammar, but to be called prissy with it! Oh woman, if only you knew what was in my mind.

"I suppose that does sum it up," said Marye, adding another arrow to her bow of self-recrimination. "Excuse me." She stood up and walked rather unsteadily out into the night.

"You did ask me. Marye? You did ask!" Cilla called after her, with a maximum of dishonesty.

Marye walked onto Hungerford Foot Bridge in utter misery and looked at the river. It churned in the moonlight, muddy and smelling of drains, the eddies made by the bridge choked with garbage, and Marye yearned for some leap, away from herself, away from the world.

And suddenly over Waterloo Bridge, a great black balloon rose up, from its mooring on the river. It made no sound, except for a sound like the sweep of wind over steps. Its cheeks were puffed out, and it propelled itself gently, by blowing. It was borne up in silence, moving with the grace of a cloud to — where? China? Bordeaux? Was it relaying the ozone layer? Marye wanted to go with it. She wanted to be like it, huge and unthinking with nothing to do but be itself, in the open air, with the wind.

She was young. They were all young and soft, and they had no time, and so they hated the silence, the silence in themselves. Some of them were driven to making noise, were kept jumping by something alive inside them. Some of them kept themselves alone, clearing the decks and waiting in silence for something to happen, something worthwhile to say, loathing the silence, not knowing that out of the silence would come all the things that were new and individual to them. The signs of health and the signs of disease were indistinguishable.

For Marye, something would have to happen soon. At nights she sat bolt upright, kept on the edge of her bed by romantic suspense. She wanted a woman, and there was no way to find one. Everyone was read in turn by the Party. Part of their democratic rights. They

were read and given viruses, cured of everything the Consensus didn't like, and one of the things it didn't like was women who loved women. Bad grammar. I love you is bad grammar? Marye thought she was the last of her kind in the world.

Then she met a seven-foot tall, 250-pound woman who was covered from the back of her heels to the tip of her nose in fur.

### Everyday Life in Future Times

Two three-year olds sat in an audience of three-year olds on mattresses on the floor of a darkened hall. Both of them were blond and vermilion-cheeked from the sun, and both wore grey dungarees. They were watching an educational production of *Love's Labour's Lost*.

"Another one of these Anti-anachronism things," sighed one of them, a little girl. Her voice was sulky, light, breathy. She still sounded like a child. "If they're going to go for historical realism, why can't they get it right?"

"I don't know why they bother to send us these plays," said her friend, whose speech already had in it a crackle of adult precision. "We don't need to see them. We know them by heart. And who is that idiot in the floppy boots?"

The idiot was Marye and she heard them. She was playing a constable called Dull. In the original production, of which this was only a recreation, Dull had worn big loose boots. They squelched. It was supposed to be funny. No one was laughing.

Marye had a total of 13 lines. At 16 years old she had 13 lines in a production that was touring orphanages. She detested orphans and orphanages. She had become an actress to get away from them. And with all due respect to Shakespeare, she didn't think much of *Love's Labour's Lost* either. What kind of comedy is it that ends with someone dying and the lovers being parted?

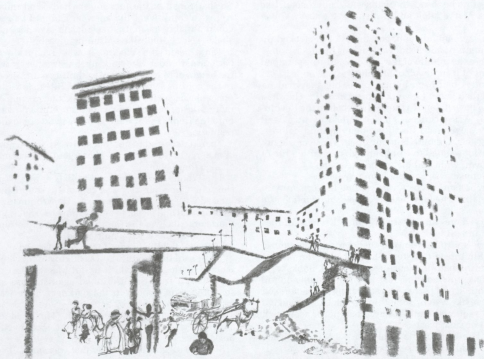
At least she could change the boots.

Marye worked for the National Theatre. It still stood on the South Bank of the Thames, caged in bamboo scaffolding. It was known, affectionately or otherwise, as the Zoo.

The Zoo carefully preserved and catalogued all its costumes. There were procedures if you wanted to change them. You needed your director's approval. But someone told Marye of a place where costumes too old to repair were kept off the catalogue. It was called the Graveyard and was under what had once been Waterloo Station.

Hugging the boots, Marye walked along a wide tunnel that ran underneath the disused train tracks. Leake Street, it was called, though it was nothing like a street. It dripped water on her and still smelled of railways, a dry itchy oily smell. The walls were covered with splattered white tiles and all along them was a series of green doors. Marye tried each door and not one of them would open. To Marye, this was mysterious. What was the point of a door that would not open?

Finally she found one that was open. It was a gate really, larger than the others, and it had been left ajar. It was covered with many different colours of flaking paint, out of which emerged the words "White Horse." From beyond the gates there came the sound of a full



orchestra, playing Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. It was dark beyond the gates. There was no light. There must be a light, thought Marye. What kind of orchestra is it that plays in the dark?

She swung the gate open and stepped inside. She saw disordered ancient costumes hanging from racks. Dim light came in a band through the gate; dim light in a band suddenly narrowed. The great door swung shut behind her with a clunk.

It would not open again. This Marye did not believe. This she had never experienced. Her culture did not need locks. No one ever stole. This ancient gate, however, did lock. Marye pushed it and slammed it and shouted "Hello" at it. It didn't move.

Fine, she thought. I'll starve to death in here and they'll find me fifty years from now, my fingers clawing at the wood. Why the hell have a door like that, why the hell can't they light this place, how the hell am I going to get out of here? Marye felt a sting of frustration in her eyes. She spun around and kicked the door and listened to it shudder. She listened to the music. Some woman was warbling away to *Das Lied von der Erde*. All I need, thought Marye. Yet another piece by Mahler about death. Couldn't the miserable little turncoat write about anything else?

Still, someone was singing in the dark, someone who might know the way out. The music was coming from the diagonally opposite corner of the warehouse. Marye had to fight her way towards it through the racks. There was no aisle between them. The capes, the false chain mail, the nun's habits, swung rottenly on their hangers and were booby-trapped with pins. Good, fine, thought Marye, sucking her finger and

growing savage. I've just injected myself with virus.

She dropped the boots and felt for them in the dark and put her wounded finger in – oh God – a puddle. She stood up, hit her head on the rack, pushed it over in a rage, got her feet tangled up in the clothes, dropped her boots again, snarled, picked them up and took a deep breath.

Marye hated many things, but the thing she hated most was losing her dignity. Trembling very slightly, she began to swing the racks towards her, to make a more orderly progress.

She went on in the darkness until she was lost. She would not now be able to find her way back to the gate. Under her hands she felt the cheap burlap, the frail seams, the loose thread like cobwebs. She felt the scratchiness of sequins in clumps. She knew these clothes, she knew the feel and the smell of them. They had shrivelled up and gone stiff. It was as if all the theatre had died around her. What if there isn't any orchestra? she wondered. Oh come on, Marye, who do you think is playing the music, ghosts?

She began to imagine some very strange things. The music was too loud. Music was never that loud; you could stand in the middle of the orchestra next to the kettle drums and it wouldn't be that loud. And there was a shrill, unnatural tone to it.

Marye scraped her head on a brick. She stepped through an arch and saw a light. A light! Like in a forest. Only the music was louder than before and she could see the texture of the bricks in the far wall. There was no room for an orchestra.

Marye crouched forward, covering her ears, parting the clothes in front of her. The flutes were like knives



slicing into her head, the walls were being beaten like drums. Marye knelt and pulled back a heavy velvet dress.

She saw mounds of paper, heaps of it, stacked up in columns or fallen sideways across the floor. Somewhere in the middle of it was a desk. Sitting slumped in front of it in the alcohol light was a Woolie.

Woolies had been human once, but they had recoded their genes for work in the Antarctic. They had paid to have it done to themselves, before the Revolution. It was sickness. This Woolie was huge and shaggy, covered in fur of varying chestnut colours, staring ahead, mouth hanging open. The eyes did not blink, but seemed to ripple and glisten with a life of their own, wide and black and unseeing.

The music was coming from nowhere.

The monstrous voice was singing in German with a voice like a steam whistle. "...ewig blauen licht die Fernen..."

Everywhere and eternally the distance shines bright and blue.

Marye's viruses knew all the words, all the notes. She didn't need to listen. She looked at the posters of beautiful paintings curling on the wall. Books were open face down on the desk and jammed one on top of the other, and there was a scattering of what looked to Marye like wafers, something to eat. Lace, spangled bits of sequined cloth — Marye had never seen such wealth or such waste.

She knew about the wealth of the Woolies. They lived outside the Consensus, deliberate outlaws, selling Antarctic nickel. This one was massive, burly with huge shoulders. Trouble, Marye decided. The music settled.

"Ewig...Ewig..." throbbled the giant voice. Forever...Forever... Earwigs yourself, thought Marye. The Woolie looked stunned, as if the music were a blow to the head. Finally the song fell silent, and it was as if the entire building sighed with relief.

The Woolie moved. It fumbled behind itself without turning, sending a cascade of paper pouring over the edge of the desk. Out from under it emerged a small metal box with switches. The Woolie felt for one of them.

An electronic device.

Pulse weapons and poverty had made domestic electronics a part of history. "Where did you get that?" Marye asked, stepping forward, forgetting herself for once.

Marye had a clock in her mind, a kind of viral calculator. It added up the cost of the metal, the cost of the research, the cost of manufacture, all in terms of labour-hours. The electronic device was the single most expensive thing she had ever seen.

The Woolie squinted at her, as if across the Grand Canyon. Its mouth hung open. Finally it spoke.

"China, I believe," the Woolie said. The voice was high and rasping. The Woolie was a woman. Marye had heard tales of Woolie mothers. They gave birth on the ice, and stood up and went back to work, blasting rocks. The creature spoke again, with a delicious rambling delicacy. "You wouldn't happen to have any alcoholic beverages about your person, would you?"

Marye was by now out of step with the conversation.

She had forgotten the question she had asked and was trying to think what the answer "China, I believe," could possibly mean. Distracted, she gave her head a shake. "No. I don't like poisoning myself."

"Tuh," said the Woolie. It was a chuckle that became a shudder. She stood up. She was nearly twice the height of Marye, and had to shuffle to turn around in the confined space of the arch. With a slow bleakness, she began to ransack her desk. She pushed over more piles of paper and swept a resin tray of wafers onto the floor. The wafers, Marye saw, were made of resin too.

Then it occurred to her that she was being ignored. "I'm sorry to trouble you," Marye said. "I've come to change these boots."

The Woolie lurched around to look at her. "You," she said, "are a ponce." The consonant sounds were incised with a laboured precision. The Woolie turned back around and began to empty drawers, shaking out their contents over the floor. She found something.

"Bastard," the Woolie murmured.

"Are you talking to me?" Marye demanded.

"No," said the Woolie. "I was talking to this empty whisky bottle." She held it up for Marye to see and then tossed it aside. It clinked against glass as it shattered. Somewhere in the darkness there was a mound of broken whisky bottles.

"Did you know," the Woolie said. "This used to be a distillery warehouse. I've made the most exciting discoveries."

She was tugging at a drawer that was stuck. It suddenly came free, sowing its contents about the floor like seed — pens, earrings, more wafers, used handkerchiefs, spools of thread, a shower of loose and rusty needles, and a Georgian silver ear-pick.

Lodged in one corner of the drawer was a full bottle. The Woolie held it up. "God," she said, "is a distiller." She grinned, and her teeth were black and green rotting stumps.

Where did they dig her up? thought Marye.

She was covered in dandruff. Silver flakes of it clung to the tips of her fur all over her body, and she was panting like a dog. A long pink tongue hung out of her mouth, curled and quivering, to cool. She took a great swig of alcohol. "Gaaah!" she exclaimed, as if breathing fire, and wiped her mouth on her arm.

Marye felt a sudden wrench of amusement. She had a vision of the Woolie leading a troglodyte existence in this nest of paper and music.

"Do you live here?" Marye asked.

"It would be better if I did," said the Woolie. Her fur dangled into her eyes, making her blink continually. "This is where I hide instead." She hugged the bottle. "Since you don't like poisoning yourself, perhaps you'd like to look at this."

She passed a thick, broad, bound wad of paper from the desk. Marye needed both hands to accept it from her. The paper was beautiful to touch, heavy and creamy, ochre around the edges. On the cover, printed in large Gothic lettering was its title. *Das Lied von der Erde*. Song of the Earth.

Marye had never seen a musical score. They were a waste of paper, and cellulose was needed to feed the yeasts and hybridomas that were the cultures of the Party. She flicked through it and found it disappointing. Yes, yes, the notes were all there.

"I take it," the Woolie said, "that the reading of music presents you with no difficulties."

"No," said Marye, innocently. Who couldn't read music?

The beast smiled wistfully. "Of course not," she whispered. She reached forward. It was alarming how far she could reach. Gently she coaxed the score out of Marye's hands. "But you haven't learned how to read music. If you haven't learned it, it isn't yours." She took a mouthful of whisky and sloshed it around her teeth like mouthwash. She put the bottle down, and seemed to forget that Marye was there. She turned to the end of the score, all its vast bulk over to one side, threatening to tear the ancient binding in half. The Woolie spat the whisky onto the floor. Then she began to sing.

She sang the end. "...ewig blauen licht die Fernen..."

She's forgotten I'm here, thought Marye.

"Ewig...Ewig..."

The Woolie sang better than the electronic device. Her voice was warm and strong, a fine mezzo, clear but weighty as if pushed from behind by something vast. Marye blinked. The Woolie was singing very well indeed.

There were long periods of silence, when unheard music played. Then Ewig again, each time softer than before, the voice throbbing without going harsh. A technique. Ewig. Unlike the recording, it was not too loud. The Woolie stared in silence for some moments and then looked up.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "Shall I see about your boots?"

"Size six," said Marye feeling small. "Something less floppy."

The Woolie took the pirate boots and shuffled off into the racks. Her feet were bare. The fur on top of them swept across dust and whisky, making streaks on the floor to mark her passage.

Marye didn't know what to think. She felt she had been humbled in some way, and that made her annoyed. She suspected that she deserved it, and that made her worried.

The Woolie was gone for some time. "Who's been pushing over all the racks?" her small voice wondered out of the darkness.

Marye looked at the phantasmagorical waste on the desk and the floor. Books, more books, papers with pawprints across them, old coins. These were real things, the real things that Marye had never seen. She began to feel an ache of jealousy, an ache of nostalgia. This is history, she thought, let the Vampires see this. She picked up a thick black book and opened up its crinkly pages, and realized that it had not been printed. The lettering, in fantastic sweeps and swirls of black ink, had been written by hand.

Penetrating Wagner's Ring, the lettering said with an excess of eloquent strokes.

"Not a fortunate title," murmured Marye, a smile creeping sideways across her face.

It was an exposition of the Ring cycle. There were drawings of all the characters, slightly amateurish in execution. Each one was identified, not by name, but by a series of notes. The last page said only "Conclusion: the Ring cycle is a symphony." It was written in gold.

"That's not right," said Marye. It was not what her viruses told her.

But the clock in her mind told her the labour-hours it must have taken.

"Bugger," said a voice, and a rack of dresses collapsed somewhere in the darkness. Marye hurriedly dropped the book. The Woolie emerged carrying boots.

"Typical of me, somehow, that title," the Woolie said.

She's seen me reading her book, Marye thought, and went rigid with embarrassment.

"I console myself," the Woolie continued, "with the thought that there was a book of piano exercises that really did call itself *Fingering for Your Students*. Here are your boots. Try them for size."

Marye pulled one of them on, feeling awkward. She hopped up and down on one foot and thought she was going to fall over. Her cheeks felt full and flushed.

"Fit?"

"Yes, yes, I think they do," Marye replied. She really couldn't tell. She pulled the boot off again. The Woolie belched roughly. "Excuse me," she said, covering her mouth.

"You sing very well," said Marye, surprising herself. Her viruses told her that the Woolie sang quite as well as anyone at the Zoo.

"Ah," said the Woolie and shrugged. "I suppose I do, yes." She blinked. "Why don't you take this with you."

She gave Marye the Mahler score, yellow and plump.

"You might as well have these too." She slapped on a Shostakovitch and a Prokofiev. "Don't tell anyone they're Russian." Russians were not in favour.

"I can't take them," said Marye. She didn't want them. The Woolie stared back at her dolefully.

"Really. I think I'm blocked from taking them."

She didn't know if that were true. "I think I'm supposed to feel that they belong to everyone." She did know that the scores were too valuable to be given away so lightly. Marye held out the scores back towards her. There was a fruity smell of booze and lanolin.

"Ah," the Woolie said, and blinked, her eyes distant and unfocused. She took the papers, and held them low and level just over the top of the desk before letting them drop.

"What's your name?" Marye asked.

"My name?" said the Woolie, and sniffed and smiled. "Well, let's see if I remember it. Rolfa." She grinned "Wolf woof."

"I'm Marye. Marye Shibush."

"Marye," said the Woolie and bowed. "I have a key. Shall I show you the way out?"

Marye followed her to the gate, feeling flustered. It was ridiculous. As she walked back along Leake Street, her heart was beating as if she had had a narrow escape. She assumed that she and the Woolie would have no reason to meet again.

The boots turned out to be far too small.

### A Dog of a Song

Every morning, every lunchtime, every evening, Joe the Postperson called to see if Marye had any messages.

He was a small, finely boned, shinningly gentle black man and he made Marye feel horrid and mean.

"Good morning, Marye," he would say with a delightful smile and dead exhausted eyes.

"Good morning, Joseph," Marye would reply.

"And how are you today?"

"Very well, Joseph, thank you."

"The weather is looking better."

"Yes, Joseph, I suppose it is."

"Do you have any messages for me, Marye?"

"No thank you, Joseph."

"Well enjoy your day, Marye."

"You too, Joseph."

His mind had been opened up. He remembered everything, was unable to forget anything. He went from door to door passing messages, reminding people that someone wanted his razor back or that rehearsals were at three o'clock. He was a way of saving paper. It seemed that he could only talk in an unvarying string of formulae.

"Good evening, Marye."

"Good evening, Joseph."

That wide enraptured smile as if he were seeing angels.

"Did you have a good day?"

"Yes, Joseph. And you?"

"Oh, very good, Marye, thank you. Do you have any messages for me?"

When his mind was full, it would blank out completely, in a kind of epileptic fit. To avoid lost information, he was cleared at regular intervals.

The day after Marye had visited the Graveyard, Joseph had a message for her. This was an unusual occurrence. Marye did not receive many messages.

"I have a message for you, Marye. From Ms Patel."

"Who? Who is Ms Patel, Joseph?"

"She is the young lady who works in Wardrobe Storage."

Oh. Somehow Marye had not thought of Rolfa as a Ms anything.

"She asks if you would not like to have lunch with her this afternoon. One o'clock by the front steps of the National. Should I tell her that is all right?"

Marye couldn't think of anything worse. The first meeting had left her disturbed, irritated. Why did Rolfa want to have lunch with her? Marye considered saying that she was busy.

But that would be beneath her high standards.

"Tell Ms Patel," said Marye, "that one o'clock will be fine."

Marye found herself considering what to wear. It was summer and the sky was bright. She would need to shelter from the sun. She had two pairs of trousers, one white, one black. She decided to wear the white, with a long-sleeved, high-neck blouse. She also took her gloves and parasol.

Rolf's eyes narrowed when she saw her. "You're not taking that thing, are you?" she said, nodding towards the parasol.

Marye was rather proud of her parasol. It was made of canvas and had thick, brightly coloured stripes and was not at all frilly or mimsy.

"Of course I'm taking it. It's part of my job."

"Bloody hell," murmured Rolfa. "Well, there's nothing for it. Come on." She turned and began to lumber off in the direction of Waterloo Bridge. She was wearing nothing but blue running shorts and a pair of very dirty white cloth shoes. One of them had

a loose sole. It flapped.

Marye stood her ground. "Where are we going?" she asked.

Ponderously, the Woolie turned around. "Flitting off to see some of my chums," she explained. "We are going to a palace of amusement."

Marye felt an eddy of misgiving. "Where?"

"Across the river. It's a pub. Do you drink beer?"

"No," replied Marye.

"Oh, that's a shame. Perhaps they'll make you some tea." Rolfa turned and began to shuffle on ahead. Marye considered simply staying where she was. No, she thought suddenly, I'm not going to let her think I'm afraid of anything. So she followed.

It was a bit like following a brontosaurus. Rolfa's arms hung down by her sides, and her shoulders were hunched, and each shuffling step seemed both small and slow, but the distance covered was deceptively great. Marye sheltered from the sun and found she had nothing to say. Next time she asks, Marye promised herself, I will be busy.

They made their way through the ruins of Fleet Street, now a crowded market. People fried hamburger and onions in woks over charcoal flames. They baked straggly chicken and cabbage in thick lengths of blackened bamboo, which they broke open when ready with bits of rubble. Whole families lived under the stalls, mothers nursing or knitting. Boys sat on street corners, turning the wheels of sewing machines, repairing pyjamas. This is all very well, thought Marye, but what happens in winter when it is cold?

People seemed to find the two of them funny. The way Marye walked as if on slippery ice, her parasol, her gloves, all betrayed her fears and ambition. They made her absurd. She heard the children giggle. Life in orphanages had taught her to hear laughter as the sound of other people's cruelty. Laughter made her fight. She went cold and awkward. Her parasol caught on an awning and showered dust over a stall. The stall sold old plumbing and dusty glassware, the very dog-ends of history rescued from the rubble. The stall-owner laughed gracefully, hand over her heart. She meant that her things were so old that dust could not hurt them. To Marye, the laughter was a mystery, and she walked into the little knobbed points of her parasol. Together she and Rolfa made a halting progress towards the palace of amusement.

It was called the Spread-Eagle and the sign over it showed a man falling on his face. Marye had to step over drunks snoring on the broken pavement outside it. Even semi-consciously, they picked at the lice on their hairy chests. The sun had burned them the colour of bruises.

**I**nside, the Spread-Eagle was dark and cramped and the floor was made of bare, cracked concrete varnished with spit and beer and smears of turd from the street. It was full of skinny, naked men glossy with sweat. The whole place smelled of armpits.

It's like something out of Dante's Inferno, thought Marye.

"Quite jolly once you're sitting down," said Rolfa. "There we are. Oyez! Lu--cy!" Rolfa suddenly shouted and made semaphore-sized signals with her arm.

There was an ugly squawk from the corner and

someone jumped up and had to be restrained. Marye couldn't quite see the people. They sat round a table in front of the glare from a window. They were lost in the light, but there was something horrible about them. Marye's mind blotted them out and she looked away.

"I shall wrestle with the bar staff," said Rolfa. "You go make yourself comfortable over there."

You're not leaving me! thought Marye in panic. Rolfa gave her a gentle push. "Go on," she said.

In a desperate fashion, Marye made her way toward the table and some kind of shelter. Disease, disease, disease, disease, her mind was ringing in terror. She clamped a gloved hand over her mouth, her nose was pointed at the ceiling, she was trying not to breathe. She could feel how slippery the arms and legs were around her. She was anointed with sweat. A man near the bar roared, his mouth full of cheese, and he picked up a jug of beer and poured it over his own head. Marye caught only a light cool spray from it. The drops clattered onto the floor like applause. She found the table, gripped the edges of a chair, and sat.

"Hello, love," said a warm voice next to her ear.

Marye turned to see a terrible head, framed in unnaturally orange curls. The lips were covered with crumbled red cosmetic, there were only a few teeth in the mouth, and the face had gone soft, like over-ripe fruit. It was covered in lines and cracks.

"My name's Lucy, but my friends call me Loose. Ha-ha-ha!" the voice barked.

Marye looked about her. A hunched and beaky man leaned around Lucy to look at her, black freckles over his muscular arms. His eyes were a watery blue and

his face had collapsed into its own hollows and was veiled by a network of lines like a cobweb.

Marye felt her heart catch. They were old. These people were old. This was what age looked like.

"Meow," said the old man.

"You mustn't mind Old Tone," said Lucy. "He hasn't been the same since the war. Have you, love?"

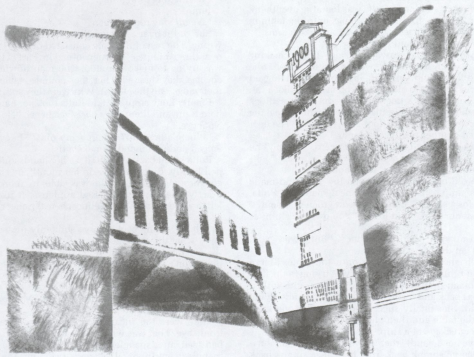
War? What war? Marye wondered. Lucy wore a beige jacket that covered her arms. It was splattered in front and grimy around the cuffs. Her fingers were blackened. Across the table sat an identical couple in identical grubby grey suits, their arms linked. Both of them were completely bald. They looked like leaking balloons. One of them leaned forward and spoke to Marye in a low, sensible, confiding voice. She could not understand a single word.

"OO er oi af ger whuh oi fough veh fink," he said with a concluding nod. He had a tiny, very black moustache painted onto his upper lip.

"That makes sense," said Marye. Then her viruses told her. He was speaking with the accent of a hundred years before.

They were Wrinklies.

**T**he cure for cancer worked in several ways. It blocked oncogenes, it produced proteins that coaxed cancerous cells to maturity and stopped them reproducing. When the cure was let loose in the world, a curious balance was struck in the bodies of those who already had the disease. The cancer did not grow into wild shapes, but took over the body cell by cell in an orderly fashion. What was left was a systematized tumour in the form of a healthy human



being with its memories, its feelings. As long as it was fed and not murdered, it would live. It was immortal.

The Wrinklies looked at Marye in friendly expectation.

"Do...do..Have you come far?" she asked the orange head.

"In my time, love, in my time," Lucy chuckled darkly, and gave a hearty wink.

"And where do you live?" Marye was wondering if the old creature had fleas. She wondered how far they could jump.

"In the laundry," Lucy replied. "The room where they dry the clothes. You know... ." She made a circular motion with a crooked finger that was shiny and blue-grey. "I just slip in there of a night. Lovely and warm it is."

She lived in a public laundry. Marye was appalled. She wondered what it meant for the supposedly clean sheets.

"Don't they give you a place to live?"

"Oh. I suppose they would. Whoever they are these days. I wouldn't be knowing, would I?"

She's crazy, Marye thought, addled with age. No one could help her.

Lucy was bored, and so she became incensed on Marye's behalf. "Oooh, that Rolfa. Honestly, you'd wait all week for a slup out of her. Here." The old creature shoved a concrete mug of beer towards Marye. "Go on, have a lick on me."

Marye gave her head a little shake. "Oh no," she said. The mug had lipstick all around it.

"Go on, love, I don't mind," said Lucy. She patted the top of Marye's clenched fist. Marye thought she was going to be sick. She began to wonder if she could make the door in time.

Then very suddenly, Rolfa was looming over them, streaming beer, lowering the mugs onto the table in front of Marye. Lucy laughed and held out her arms.

"I wanted tea," said Marye.

"Mwom mwom mwom," said Lucy, making motions with her mouth, wanting to be kissed. She looked like a goldfish. Rolfa leaned over and hugged her, and sat next to old Tone, who meowed like a cat. Rolfa barked like a dog, and put him in a headlock under her arm. The old man made gleeful squeaking noises and stamped his foot in merriment. The beer smelled of other people's kidneys.

The leaking balloon leaned forward. "Ghoul," he said. "Ear. Whuh yer wan, ay? Ay?"

I want, thought Marye, to go home.

The old orange head slapped the table and made Marye jump. "Listen. Listen," she demanded. "Rolfa. Time for a song." There was a soft groan of assent.

"It's your turn," said Rolfa. "You owe me a pint as well."

"Oh all right then," said Lucy. "But I warn you, you'll get the full whack."

Then she began to climb onto the table. Marye couldn't think at first what she was trying to do. The old woman simply bent over the table top and worked her legs back and forth, her old crooked hands trying to hold. She finally succeeded in getting one knee onto the table and then clung to it desperately, as if to the wreckage of a ship.

"Give her a hand!" roared Old Tone, suddenly furious. Marye shrank back from his voice, shrank back

from touching the old woman. Rolfa pushed the old woman's skinny behind.

"Whoo-hooo! Ooops!" cried Lucy. Old Tone helped her to her feet. As she stood, Marye realized that she had smelly knees. How, wondered Marye, do you get smelly knees?

Someone passed Rolfa a squeeze box. A few testing notes announced that a song would begin, and the pub fell quiet, and the skinny purple men turned in anticipation.

An old, worn, squeaky melody began, a homely tune, and the men chuckled in recognition. The old woman gave them a wink and a toothless cackle and began to raise her skirts teasingly over slightly scaly thighs. Oh don't, winced Marye. Then Lucy began to sing, in a wheedling, bird-like voice.

"It's a Dog of a Song," she began, her voice straining.

*"Just a Dog of a Song  
Ambling gently along"*

She mimed an amble with her knees. Her fingers, all lumps and shiny patches, tried to trace sprightly patterns through the air. Her old wrinkled face pursed its lips and opened its eyes wide in a caricature of youthful naughtiness.

*"With no ill feelings, no ill will.*

*Just a Dog of a Song"* – the voice rose and quavered.

*"But it doesn't know how to end*

*And it's so hard*

*When you lose a friend"* – for just a note the voice held the clear tone it must once have had.

*"Just a Dog of a Song*

*But..."*

Her head did a funny sideways jump, as if something mechanical had caught in her neck.

*"We all sing along. But..."*

*Jump.*

*"We all sing along. But..."*

She did it over and over like a wind-up doll gone wrong. The rest of the song consisted of only that for over three minutes. The men joined in. Part of the fun was trying to make her stop. The men howled like coyotes, they shouted at her, they pounded tables with their mugs. Did they like it? Why were they smiling?

Finally Lucy stopped, and Rolfa took her hand and held it up, and there were derisive cheers. "No more. No more."

"Where's my pint? Where's my pint?" Lucy challenged and pretended to make a fist.

Rolfa stood back and lifted up her hands and clapped lightly. But somehow, in her mouth, by sucking air through spittle, Rolfa was able to reproduce, exactly, the sound of massed applause. It rose and fell in waves. Marye could almost hear the cheering.

**L**ater, walking back, Marye suddenly understood what the song meant.

Lucy had been imitating a broken record played on a wind-up gramophone. It must have been a shock when the tinny horns replaced the smoothly sliding tapes.

"They were alive before the Blackout," Marye said.

"Yup," said Rolfa.

They were the incandescent people of the electronic age. That was what had become of them. They had seen cities spangled with light, they had laughed in unison, millions all at once watching the same



entertainments all together in an electronic net. They had had to learn how to sing songs and play squeeze boxes during the Blackout and they were now – how old?

"But it doesn't know how to end, and it's so hard when you lose a friend..."

"They were singing about themselves," Marye murmured.

"Yup," said Rolfa, her back towards her. Marye noticed that she was abrupt and walking ahead of her.

"We'll go again," said Marye, to make amends.

"If they'll have you," said Rolfa. "Tuh!" The chuckle, her chuckle that always died and became a shudder. "You looked most of the time like you'd swallowed your bloody parasol."

That's when Marye remembered that she'd left it behind.

"Yup," she said, looking away from the river. She had begun, without realizing it, to imitate Rolfa.

### Love Sickness

**L**ove's *Labour's Lost* had grown so listless that the director had actually called a rehearsal for that afternoon. Actors did not normally need to rehearse.

"Me, an't shall please you," said Marye in her own rather fiercely exact voice. "I am Anthony Dull."

"No, no, no!" wailed the director. His only job was to recreate the great production that the viruses remembered. "Marye, you know how that line is supposed to sound."

Yes, thought Marye, flat, stupid, dull. She had no interest in it. She felt restless and worried though she did not know by what. She did know that she wanted to talk to Rolfa, as if there were some unfinished business between them.

So in the late afternoon, still dressed as Constable Dull, she went to Rolfa's chamber. A new aisle had been cleared through the racks. As Marye walked along it, she heard Rolfa begin to sing, alone in the dark.

She'll stop in a moment, thought Marye. She didn't. The song rose and fell wordlessly. It was embarrassing. How could she go up to Rolfa and say, hello, do you always sing to yourself in the dark?

Marye was about to creep away, when the music sniggered her attention. Her viruses didn't know what it was. Marye rifled through them. It wasn't Wagner or Puccini. What the hell was it? Marye sat down between the racks.

It was Rolfa. Rolfa was making it up as she went along. The stuff was formless, it had no shape, but it was... imposing. Marye was not used to listening to unfamiliar music. It made her feel strange, like in a dream, everything scrambled and weighted with meaning. This music was dark, almost solemn, slow-striding, thoughtful and full, full of purpose, like someone about to climb a mountain.

Rolfa can do this? This wasn't bathtub singing or a drunken wallow. I've got her wrong, thought Marye. This is someone I don't know. Why is she singing it here? Why don't people know about it? Marye tried to memorize the tunes. She tried to repeat them in her mind, but they were all new, they wouldn't sit still, they got tangled up with each other like snakes. And Rolfa kept on singing, producing. What was

carrying her with it?

Rolfa sang for an hour. Finally in the end, her voice faltered and simply stopped. Not worth finishing off. Marye heard a cough and a sniff. Then a small crash. "Oh bugger," said the light rasping voice, and the alcohol light was extinguished. Marye smiled fondly, but with a kind of ache for her. She heard a shuffling in the darkness.

And then a wisp of fur brushed past her, the very tips of it against her cheek, and Marye froze. She waited some minutes more in the dark. "Bloody hell," she murmured. Then she stood up and slipped out of the Wardrobe, arch by arch.

**M**arye went to the room of her friend Cilla. Like Marye, Cilla lived in the Shell, on another floor. Marye knocked on her door. Cilla was wearing a pinny and was frying sausages on a single-riding cooker.

"Oh! 'Lo," said Cilla, surprised to see Marye at all, let alone dressed as a Tudor constable. "I thought you hated that costume."

"I do," said Marye and stepped briskly into Cilla's tiny room. Her sword clanked. "Cilla. Do you have any paper?"

"What?" said Cilla, with an unsteady chuckle. "Paper? Uh. No. What makes you think I've got paper?"

"You're in the *Mikado*, aren't you?"

"*Madam Butterfly*. Same country, different opera."

"Don't they give you paper to take notes or something? I mean, you're in a full production, you've got a good part." Marye was pacing.

Cilla's face was crossed with concern. It was an edgy thing to talk about how much better one actress was doing than another.

"It's not that different," she replied carefully, kindly. "We're still rationed, like everyone else."

"Can you get paper? Do you have any access to supplies?"

"No more than anyone else." Cilla pressed her lips together. "What do you need it for?" she asked quietly.

"I've got to write down some music."

"Oh," said Cilla, feeling absolved now of responsibility. She went back to her sausages. "Becoming a composer now, are we?"

"No, no," said Marye, distracted, trying to keep the music going in her head. "No. It's someone else's."

Cilla seemed to find this unexpected. "Listen. I'm sure whoever it is can just go to supplies and explain, and I'm sure they'll get some. There's going to be a lot more paper available soon, they've got those new beaver bugs..."

Marye shook her head. "It's a Woolie."

Cilla went still. "Really?"

"She's rich, she's got all the paper she needs. But I don't think she wants it written down."

Cilla sat down on her bed. "U-nique," she said, avaricious for news of other people's doings.

"It's beautiful. I don't understand. She just sings it with no one to hear. Why doesn't she want anyone to hear it?" Marye found that she was really quite disturbed.

"You want some sausages? I can't eat them all, I was out in the sun. You want to stay?"

Marye nodded. As the sausages sizzled, she tried

to sing snatches of the music. In her own thin voice they sounded aimless and colourless. As they ate, she told Cilla about the Spread-Eagle and the people in it. Cilla leaned her face on her hand and picked at the food with her fork and said "Go on, go on."

Marye told her about Rolfa, about the dandruff and the whisky and the cloth shoes and the voice, and as she left, Cilla took her arm, as if she needed help to the door.

And Marye stumbled scowling downstairs to her own bed. Scowling, she slowly undressed. It was as if she had suddenly found herself in a different world. She blew out the candle, and squeezed it between her wetted fingers to hear it hiss. She felt the sausages repeat, and she settled down under her one counterpane.

She could hear Rolfa sing. She had a sudden vision of her as Brunnhilde, winged helmet and spear, with fur sprouting out from the edges of the breastplate. Half-asleep, she grinned. Dreamily, she imagined settling down amid the fur, brushing aside the dandruff. It would be soft and warm, and she would stroke it. She imagined Rolfa's head in her lap.

Marx-and-Lenin! she thought and sat upright in bed.

I am sexually attracted to her!

Marye had no shorter form of words. Marye lusted after the huge, baggy body. She wanted to do very specific things with it.

No, no, I can't, Marye thought, and tried to talk herself out of it. She's got green, rotting stumps for teeth, Marye reminded herself. There was no answering revulsion. The pull was too strong.

She's huge and hairy. Yes, replied some wicked part of Marye's mind. Don't I know?

She's got dandruff!

All over, came the reply. Tee-hee. The whole thing was one great hoot.

She probably has bad breath and is full to the brim with viruses.

But it would be like rolling in some great soft rug. It would be like loving a teddy bear.

Then a thought came to Marye. The thought was so transfiguring, that it actually knocked her out of bed. She kicked involuntarily, and her legs got caught up in the counterpane, and she slid off the edge of the mattress face down onto the floor. She gave a kind of convulsive wrench and turned to sit up surrounded by fallen pillows.

The thought was this: Rolfa was immune to the viruses. All Woolies were. Their body temperatures were too high. That was why none of Rolfa's knowledge came from viruses, why she had to learn things afresh. If Rolfa suffered from bad grammar, then like Marye she might not have been cured.

Suddenly Marye was sure in her gut that this was so. She simply knew it. From the way Rolfa walked, from the way she drank, from her air of displacement, from her wariness of hurt, from her strange combination of strength and weakness – from many things that could never be put into words, Marye knew that Rolfa was like her. Marye had finally found a woman.

Oh Marx, oh Lenin, oh dear. Marye's belly felt like a corset that had just been unlaced. Everything was loose and wobbly and undone. Her hands shook, her knees were weak. She stood up and walked around

her room. She barked her shins on the corner of the bed, and bit a fingernail, tearing it off down to the quick, and finally had to go for a walk.

And her dreams took wing.

They would live together, Rolfa and her, and Rolfa would write great music, she would be a genius. Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, they were virtuosos, why not a virtuoso of the voice? And Marye would brush her hair, all of it, and put it up in curls for special occasions, hold her at night, cure the dandruff. They would stay together, they would have each other, and Rolfa would bloom. Marye suddenly felt she understood her, understood why she shuffled, hang-dog, why she drank, why she looked defeated. No one would think a Woolie could sing, no one would ever listen. People thought of Woolies as dogs, they hated them, feared them. Working in Wardrobe! Didn't they have ears? Marye found that she shook with the injustice of it. She wanted to go to her. She would have walked to the Woolie house if she had known where it was. The sense of Rolfa all around her was so strong that she knew, she knew how her body would feel, the bulk and heat and softness of it. She knew how her mouth would taste. Her own heart was singing.

She walked for hours in a soft warm drizzle in dark streets that did not need policing. She walked until she was exhausted, her feet crossing in front of each other with each step, walked until the dull morning began to rise. And still she didn't feel any better, and still she couldn't rest.

She went to the railway arches and collapsed onto the pavement, and waited for Rolfa. The sun came up under an edge of retreating cloud and she felt it on her pale face. She didn't care. She saw Rolfa approaching and stood up, and brushed her clothes and ran her fingers through her short hair, to get rid of the tangles. She waited. Rolfa came up to her.

The fear returned. She didn't know she was afraid. All she knew was that she could not be herself. She would not be able to speak.

"What are you doing here?" Rolfa asked, blinking.

"Oh, Oh," said Marye and flung her arms awkwardly about herself.

"You are in a state. What have you been doing?"

"Oh. I just went out. You're a bad influence on me." Marye's eyes were sparkling, almost swollen with unspoken message.

"I don't think anyone could have a bad influence on you," said Rolfa. "You're immune to it."

"Are we having lunch today?" Marye's voice was wan and hopeful.

Rolfa stood very still, her fur stirring in the light morning wind. "If you like, Little One," she said and gave Marye's head, her hair a very quick stroke, a kind of pat. Then she walked on, down the tunnel.

Marye followed her, thrilled. She's got a pat name for me! She toddled, feeling small and tender.

"Another busy day," said Rolfa sourly, as she swung open the big yellow doors that never needed to be locked. The old clothes did not need to be guarded. "Such a lot to do."

As they walked between the racks in the dark, the silence between them became uneasy. Marye had been wanting a flood of revelation, had reached a peak of joy. Now nothing happened. Rolfa, Rolfa, I know



you are, you must be, Rolfa say something about it, Rolfa give me a sign. But Rolfa had gone dark and silent, like the racks.

She coughed and shuffled, and turned on her alcohol light and seemed to ignore Marye, and simply stared down at her desk, the suddenly shaggy and intolerable mess of it. "Tuh," she said, the shudder-chuckle. And she sat down, slumped, and Marye's heart ached for her. Rolfa picked up a score and held it up, looking at it, questioning as if no longer certain of its worth in life.

Score. Music. Paper. Marye had another brilliant idea.

She jumped up. "I've got to go," she said. "I've got to go now." She did a worried little dance. "I don't want to, I just have to."

"Toilet's over there," said Rolfa and pointed.

"No, no you don't understand. I'll be back. Lunchtime. On the steps. Don't forget?"

Rolfa gave her head a shake, meaning no, she wouldn't forget and a kind of wondering, pale smile was coaxed out of her.

And Marye ran. She had about ten minutes. She ran all the way back to the Shell, up the flights of stairs. She heard a door opening on the landing below her, and spun around, and stumbled back down the steps, legs akimbo. And there he was.

"Joseph!" she gasped.

"Good Morning, Marye. And how are you today?"

"Fine! Fine. I'm great! Joseph! Can you remember music?"

"Do you mean written music, Marye? Or do you mean the actual sound?"

"Both. Both."

"Yes, if it is part of a message. Yes. I can remember." He nodded and smiled with beautiful ivory-coloured teeth.

Marye was still panting, a queasy trail of sweat on her forehead. "Fine. Great. Can you come to Wardrobe at six this evening?"

Joseph's face clouded over. "Oh. I'm sorry, Marye. I don't think I can do that. I must run my other messages then. I must go to everyone in the building, and then deliver messages for them. I'm very sorry, Marye."

"What if I helped?"

Joseph looked blank.

"What if you took one half of the floors and I took the other? You're supposed to come about five, right? So we'll both start about four thirty, run back and forth until six and then go to Wardrobe. Agreed? Agreed? It's very important, Joseph."

He beamed. "All right, Marye. I will help you. That will be very good."

Marye gave a little snarl of delight, and kissed him on his cheek. "That's great." And suddenly she was weary.

"Do you have any messages for me, Marye?"

"Yes. One for Ms Patel. Tell her I'm too tired. I just won't be there for lunch."

Tell her I love her?

"Tell her I'm not as immune as I thought."

And Joseph, for some reason, winked.

**T**hat afternoon, Marye ran from room to room on seven floors of the Shell. She had never known there were so many people living there.

Faces she had only glimpsed suddenly became alive for her. She knew what the insides of their rooms looked like, she knew whether they made their beds, she could smell what they were cooking. They did not want to give her messages.

"Um. I'll wait for Joseph in the morning," many of them said.

"I'm an actress. I've got good memory viruses too."

They might give their heads the slightest of angry shakes. They were angry with Joseph for deserting them, leaving them to this stranger. Marye was embarrassed. She was embarrassed by having to explain herself, she was embarrassed by all this weight of life that was going on without her. The rooms were often full of people lounging together on beds, talking, playing cards, drinking.

She went to Cilla's room and it was full of the Vampires, twenty of them, thirty of them, packed in, talking, agreeing, disagreeing, laughing.

"What are you doing?" Cilla asked, rising to her feet.

"I'm helping Joseph out."

And Marye explained, breathless. Marye the Post-person, someone called her, smiling. How does he know my name? Marye thought. I don't know his.

"Anybody got any messages?" she asked. "I'll take them." She knew then why Joseph always asked. It was nice to be needed.

In the evening she and Joseph hid behind the costumes as Rolfa sang.

"Can you remember? Can you remember it?" she asked him, whispering, desperate.

Joseph smiled and nodded, and put a finger to his lips.

It became routine, for a time.

She and Rolfa would have lunch together every day. Sometimes they ate in the Zoo cafe. Rolfa would always cringe just before going in. She had to duck to get through the doors, but it was more than that. She did not belong. She looked huge on the narrow benches, ridiculous bunched up under the tiny tables, her knees pressing up under them, dragging them with her when she stood up. Her fur hung into the soup, the cups were too small for her to drink from. Watching Rolfa eat was a fascinating spectacle. For Marye, it was like being in the mead hall with Beowulf. Rolfa's appetite and manners were of a previous historical era. She munched and belched and slurped and splattered, looking rather forlorn and helpless, as if there was nothing she could do about it. She would have two or three helpings of chips, which she shovelled into her mouth with thick and greasy fingers. She had to stick her long pink tongue down into cups and lap and lick to get anything out of them. She had to lap to drink anything—her tongue got in the way if she tried to sip like a human being. She leant over her soup bowl like a lion over a stream, glancing furtively about her.

Rolfa ate in an agony of embarrassment. Quiet, folded in on herself, a tight false smile and staring, darting eyes. She licked her plates to get the gravy hoping no one would notice. People stared. They chuckled in disbelief when she came back from the buffet with a third helping of stew or lasagne. The place was steamy, with sunlight pouring through windows. When she wasn't eating, she had to pant, moisture dripping off her long pink tongue.

"Does she eat the plates as well?" Marye heard someone behind them murmur.

They began to have picnics instead on benches by the river. Rolfa would sit crunching her way through the cooked legs of animals, a huge and filthy napkin tied around her neck. She would look quite jolly then, making cracking sounds, and sucking out marrow. Woolies had genetically engineered stomachs and could digest almost anything, so she ate the bones as well. There would be nothing left except crumbs. Then she would drink gallon jugs of yogurt and water. She didn't say much. She was silent because, Marye realized catching the scent of her breath, she was no longer drinking.

Rolfa was the most fascinating irresolution of opposites. She was huge and coy at the same time. Like the orphanage fat girl who everyone bullies, she moved with a fearful, tip-toe precision that meant she invariably knocked something over. She was both gross and coarse, and delicate and refined usually within the same sentence. She talked about art.

She talked about how Elgar changed keys. How he would play a joke, start in one direction, stop and go back again, start and stop again, and suddenly pull the rug out from under you by doing it backwards with the simplicity of a conjurer. "He's the funniest fucking composer who ever lived!" she exclaimed, and laughed, exposing rotten teeth and a rolling mass of half-chewed food.

Elgar? Funny? Marye examined her viruses.

"Oh, Rolfa, you're being original again."

Marye kept trying to smell her, smell Rolfa. The scent was pungent and bit doggy, full of lanolin, and Marye hauled it in through her nostrils, savouring it along with the aromas of the food. She would ask to sample Rolfa's lunch.

"Oooh, fish pie! Oh, please," she'd say. She hated fish pie. What she wanted was a taste of Rolfa on the fork.

I can't believe I'm doing this, she thought, sucking on the cutlery as if it were a lollipop.

She found herself considering whether she could lick Rolfa's plate without anyone noticing. She gave herself a very bad fright indeed when she stole from the cafe a spoon that Rolfa had used.

She reached for it and something iron stopped her, but the pull of Rolfa was stronger, and she touched it. It was still warm from Rolfa's hand. Something taut like wire seemed to snap with a twang and Marye picked the spoon up and slipped it into her pocket.

This is ridiculous, she thought. What am I going to do with it? Keep it unwatched by the kitchen sink? That was exactly what she did with it.

Marye would deliberately walk into Rolfa, to bury her face in the fur. She kept crowding into Rolfa, to feel the inhuman heat of her, to feel the tickle of the fur. Rolfa was highly charged with static. Marye would sometimes get a jolt of electricity from her. When she came near, the little hairs on Marye's arm would stand up.

Rolfa began to get a bit annoyed with being walked into. "We'll have to get you a bigger pavement," she said, mystified.

Once Marye elbowed Rolfa into a rank of bicycles. Five or six of them fell over like dominoes in a row, and Rolfa's fur got caught up between a chain and

chain wheel.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Marye, and knelt to free her. She held the fur, she gripped the calf and it was vast, fleshy and warm like a stomach. She fumbled with the chain which had organic lubrication. Marye's fingers, her nose, and most of Rolfa's lower leg were smeared with a thick moss-green.

"May I enquire, Little One? What are you doing?"  
I'm hugging you, thought Marye. *Do something.*  
"Little... Little One. I'll do it." Rolfa eased her back, gently.

"Sorry. Sorry," said Marye and hopped backwards. Oh God, how embarrassing. What was she doing? Oh Rolfa, Rolfa, please notice, please say something, please do something. *I can't say it!*

At night it was worse. Marye was feverish with love, unsettled, as if Rolfa were in the bed next to her, as if the miles that separated them were nothing, as if she could reach out and feel the fur. It was like holding a ghost.

Sometimes there was terror. Sometimes the terror would return.

Disease! She had forgotten about the diseases!

And she would sit upright in panic and think of her dirty hands that had crammed food into her mouth and rubbed her eyes, of how dirty her mouth was, of all the risks, pointless risks she had taken. She would get up. She would shower, even though the water in the middle of the night would be freezing cold. She boiled kettles and filled the sink with boiling water, and boiled all her plates and her curling plastic forks. She put salt into boiling water and let it cool for just a moment, puffing at it and then gargling, feeling the

salt wither the inside of her cheeks. She would scrub her hands and suddenly cover her face and weep, from lack of sleep, from being stretched too far.

I will give her up. I won't see her. This is getting silly. And the next day they would have lunch.

And each day, like milk in a pan about to boil over, Marye would nearly say, "I love you."

Or she would reach for Rolfa, to caress her in a way that would leave no doubt, come so near to the point of doing it that she could feel her arms, or the shadow of her arms, move out and hold her.

But she didn't do it.

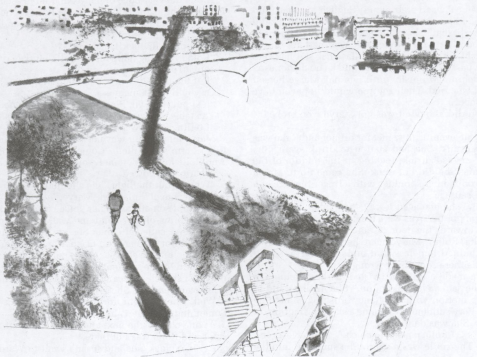
Gradually a new idea began to seep in, so slowly that Marye never knew when she first had it. This idea was also transfiguring.

Rolfa did not need to be cured. Yes, she was immune to the viruses; her behaviour was her own; and Marye had given her a thousand unmistakable signs, she thought, of how she felt; and Rolfa had not responded. Rolfa did not appear to be interested. The great hulking innocent probably had no idea of what had been happening.

They were not going to be lovers. Marye had been wrong. Rolfa's grammar was undoubtedly strange, but not bad, not bad, no.

When Marye was most alone, in the middle of rehearsals for *Love's Labour's Lost*, she found herself coming to a glum acceptance of that. She sat on the periphery and watched the other actors sleepwalking through their parts.

A young boy with a false beard was playing Berowne. He spent the whole of one afternoon glaring. Something had happened to him. Marye knew of it vaguely,





something about a girl. That day he did not play Berowne. He played himself, carried away by the words. "I who have been love's whip," he said bitterly, spit leaping out of his mouth.

Listening to him, Marye found that she was angry. "That wimped, whining, purblind, wayward boy This Signor Junior, this giant-dwarf, Dan Cupid." Marye listened. They were all listening, as the boy-actor stood rigid, glowering. Marye's hands had curled into fists.

"A whitely wanton with a velvet brow,  
With two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes."  
The hatred in it, the violence in it, made Marye jump. Who was speaking? The boy, Berowne, Shakespeare?

"And so I sigh for her, to watch for her,  
To pray for her! Go to, it is a plague."  
It is, thought Marye, and I wish I were cured of it. "Stop," said the director. He was thirty-five years old, and there were creases in the flesh around his eyes. He sat very still, looking at the boy-actor. "You know how that's supposed to sound, George," he said. He sat a moment longer. "I give up," he said, and stood up. "Say it how you want to George, if it makes you feel better."

But it does, thought Marye, it does make me feel better. It's meant to hurt, it's meant to bite, it's meant to mean something to us too. We have to act it.

"All of you," said the director, looking worn, "do it how you want to." Then he turned and walked up the aisle, leaving them.

"Go home, I guess," shrugged the blandly cheerful fellow who was playing the King. Berowne still glowered.

"Your way was better," Marye told him. He only nodded.

Outside it was a drab, cloudy English summer afternoon. So fine, she and Rolfa would be friends. Could she accept that? She could accept that. It happens to everyone. Perhaps when she was certain of the friendship, she would tell Rolfa what she had felt, just in passing, so that there would be no dishonesty. Friendship and music, until one day Marye herself would be cured. Their routine would not even have to change.

But it did, though it was not Marye who broke it.

One evening they met for dinner and Rolfa was drunk. She had started to drink again. She arrived drunk, reeking in the middle of the Zoo cafe. She did not duck. She came up to Marye and prodded her shoulder with a finger the size of a salami sausage.

"Out," she managed to say. "Outside." Under the fringe of fur, her eyes were baleful. She walked backwards towards the door. "Come on."

"Rolf? Rolf?" Marye heard herself, heard her own voice drained, hopeless, frail, and she hated the sound of it. "Is there something wrong?"

Rolfa made a kind of twisted, barking yelp. "Oh no," she said. "No, no, no, no." She made a kind of waving motion with her hand, brushing something away. Very suddenly it became a slapping motion, in the air. She was dangerous.

"Let's..." Rolfa paused to belch. "...go have a good time." The smile was a snarl. She spun off, into the

night.  
I don't like this, thought Marye and followed. It was not love that made her follow but concern.

They went to another horrible pub across the river, but it was at night this time, and there seemed to be no one there who Rolfa knew. She rolled her way like a millstone towards the bar, through the men who stopped laughing as she passed, towering over them, jostling them. The men looked small and hard and weasly. The place was as disordered as anything in Britain ever got. The plaster walls were bulging and cracked and stained in streaks. There were harsh alcohol lamps that stank. Marye looked at Rolfa, at her back. Then she felt one of the weasels pressing up against her. He wore skimpy trunks and a sleeveless body-warmer that smelled of sweat and beer.

"Bow wow," he said. His forehead glistened with sweat. He's got a virus, Marye thought. But which one?

"You like dogs?" he asked.  
"No. I don't like dogs," said Marye warily, meaning that she did not like him. He had friends all around them, and they were all sweating. Some of them shook with fever.

Marye did not have time to consider what disease it was they had.

There was a flurry, a scattering nearby, and Marye turned to see Rolfa wading towards her, towards them, her shoulder shrugging from side to side, and Marye thought: she's going to hit one of them.

That's what she thought until Rolfa picked up a table. Not a large table, but a small, light one made of bamboo. Concrete mugs rolled off it, beer fell in a gush, men shouted protest, and the table rose up, hit a lamp, and broke it.

Along the very edge of her teeth, Marye seemed to feel something, the thing that made Rolfa rot her own teeth to nothing, and she held up her hands and shouted, "Rolf! Stop!"

Rolfa paused, blearily staring.  
"Rolf! Nothing happened." Rolfa blinked, looked sheepish, defeated, confused.

"Put the table down, Rolfa," said Marye.  
Or you'll kill someone.

"Just put it down. Please? Nothing happened."  
The table was very gently lowered. Rolfa patted it, as if telling it she was sorry.

Marye pushed her way between the men, and took Rolfa's arm and pulled. "Come on, Rolfa. Come on." And Rolfa followed, tamely, out into the night again. The barman followed.

"What about the light?" he shouted.  
"Don't push!" pleaded Marye, holding up her hands, and something in her voice convinced him.

Rolfa threw off her hand and walked towards the river. Marye called after her. She ran, to catch up, but Rolfa did not turn around or answer. She marched, with long lunging strides. It was dark, there were no lights, and Marye suddenly found she was alone with only just sufficient idea of where she was to find the river again, and the Shell.

Well, she thought forlornly. Well. That's that. Something, she knew, had finished.

At one o'clock the next afternoon, she went to the steps and Rolfa was not there.

At six o'clock, she and Joseph went to Wardrobe,



and there was only silence. They waited hidden like mice for the singing to begin. Then they edged their way towards the desk, and peeked out through the costumes.

Papers had been torn or crushed into balls. The musical scores had been ripped in half along their bindings, and the pages scattered. The electronic device was in a corner, the panel broken open; wafers were all over the floor, their resin tray was squashed and twisted; book covers had no pages in them.

Marye knelt and picked up what was left of the Wagner notebook. She tried to put its crinkly pages back in order and found spit between them. She wiped her cheeks and gathered up the things. "Joseph," she said, her voice going thin. "Help me back with all of this?"

They piled up the musical scores, and the wafers, and carried them back like honoured dead to Marye's room at the Shell. "Tell her I have them. Tell her she can have them back when she wants them," Marye said to Joseph.

And she went to bed, wondering at the maze of rooms that were the palace of someone else's life, and she read the score of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and she heard Rolfa sing it.

"That's mine," she whispered. She found she was hugging the heavy cream paper.

In the morning, she was shaken awake by Joseph, who was smiling and excited. "Ms Shibush! Ms Shibush! Oh! Look what I have for you!" he exclaimed. And then he whispered. "From Ms Patel." He passed her a fold of paper.

An envelope. Marye carefully lifted up the flap and

pulled out a thick white card. It was edged in gold. Joseph waited smiling.

The card was engraved. In beautifully flowing copperplate script, there was a message on it.

"Do you feel able to tell me what it says?" Joseph asked shyly.

"It's an invitation," said Marye. "An invitation to dinner at eight o'clock tomorrow evening." She passed him the card. "With Rolfa's family."

#### Antarctica

**T**he London Woolies lived together in one street in Kensington. It was a Nash terrace, painted cream, with black wooden doors.

Marye was too short to reach the door knocker. She tried jumping and missed and decided to avoid any further risk to her dignity. She pounded on the door with the heel of her hand.

There were shouts and thumpings and suddenly the door was thrown open by a naked Woolie teenager. All her fur the length of her body was in braids. There was a blast of icy air from inside. The girl took one hardened look at Marye and yelled. "Rolf--a! Your little friend's here." Then she walked away, leaving the door open.

It was bitterly cold inside. All the walls between the houses had been knocked down to make one enormous, barren room that ran the length of the street. A large male Woolie in a metal mask was squatting over a machine, welding a join. Marye had time to notice that the floor was covered in fur.

"Shut the door!" the Woolie girl shouted. There was angry thumping, the girl stalked past Marye and

flung the door shut. "It makes our hair fall out, you little Squidge," she snarled. "Rolfa! Slump your fat tush down here!"

The room was full of unopened bamboo packing cases. Woolie teenagers lounged on them, watching a screen. It was video! It was showing an old movie! Marye couldn't help but stare in wonder. There was a flash and a mechanical scream, and Marye saw someone torn to pieces before her very eyes. Why on earth, she wondered, have a video and then use it to see something like that?

"What are you staring at?" said another Woolie, a boy, his voice cracking on the edge of puberty like an egg.

"Nothing," said Marye.

"She's never seen a video," said the girl and rolled her eyes. Some of the Woolies were grooming each other, brushing their pelts or braiding them. It was their moulting season, too hot to go outside. They were sullen and dangerous with boredom. Marye hugged herself and tried to stand her emotional ground, but she was still feeling sick from having seen a human being rent into stringy chunks. She began to shiver from the cold. That's frost, she saw in dismay, that's frost on the inside of the windows.

Rolfa appeared at the top of the staircase. She was trying to wear a dress, and looked like an unsteady column of crumpled satin. She began her descent, clutching the handrail, stumbling, swaying. Her feet kept catching on the inside of her hem, making frantic motions within it like trapped rabbits.

Rolfa, lift the dress up, Marye willed, silently.

Rolfa's hair had been brushed back out of her eyes and was held up by two pink resin butterfly clips that looked like lopsided ears. Braving the distance between the staircase and Marye, Rolfa held out something soft and black. It was a fur.

"We usually dine upstairs," Rolfa said, as if to a stranger.

"Thank you," said Marye for the fur, and wrapped it around herself, her teeth chattering.

"Follow me," said Rolfa and began the ascent. She stood once more on the hem of her dress, and had to hold out a hand to catch herself.

"Rolfa," whispered Marye. "Up. Hold it up."

There was a collapse of laughter from the cousins behind them.

There was something majestic about the way Rolfa ignored them. She bent over and lifted up her dress from the bottom, exposing her knees, and climbed the stairs.

There were chandeliers overhead. They blazed with light. There was a chug-chugging noise in the background. A private generator. There were paintings, extravagances of flowers or empty street scenes at dusk. But no people. Thick wires trailed alongside the carpet on the stairs, and from somewhere came the singing of a circular saw. The cold sunk into Marye's bones.

"Want to wash your hands?" Rolfa asked, quickly.

"I think they'd freeze if I did," replied Marye, watching her breath rise as vapour. I wonder, she thought, if my eyebrows are frosted.

"In here," said Rolfa. Her voice was higher and softer than usual, very precise but barely audible as if there was no force of breath or personality behind it. Marye

was shown into a room that made her gasp.

Capitalism, she said to herself. I am seeing what capitalism was.

There was a polished mahogany table. Little rough wooden boots had been nailed to the bottom of each leg to make it tall enough for Woolies. There were more real paintings on the walls, another showerburst of light overhead deflected through crystal. There was an enormous covered dish made of silver on the middle of the table. It was twice as long as Marye was tall. There were silver knives, silver forks, silver candlesticks, matching mahogany chairs and, in the corner, a tin rubbish bin. Even in the cold, it stank of fish. Marye thought: what if we're all still working for them?

A door swung open and a Woolie female walked in backwards. She wore a billowing orange dress and carried a kind of porcelain cistern in front of her, a vat of food.

"Hiya, Squidge," she said to Marye. The tone was not unfriendly. She put the cistern on the table and reached into the bodice of her dress. "You want some mits?"

"Oh yes please," said Marye all in a rush.

"Thought you might," said the Woolie and rumbled her lip in Rolfa's direction. "Here you go." She threw a brown ball of wool at Marye. Fingers trembling, Marye unwound it. They were gloves designed for counting money in Antarctic blizzards. There were no tips to the fingers. They looked utterly indigent, as if they'd been half-eaten by mice.

"This is my sister, Zoe," said Rolfa.

"You're Marye," said Zoe. Marye was too cold to answer. Zoe left, shaking her head as if it wasn't Marye's fault that she'd been brought there. As she went out another sister came in.

She was even bigger, and her cheeks were flexed with the effort of keeping down a grin. She looked at Marye and Rolfa, nearly dropped two tubs of food on the table, and ran out. From behind the swinging door, there came a shriek of laughter. It was followed by spurts and whisperings.

"That's Angela," said Rolfa.

Marye sat down. The table was on a level with her chin. The two sisters re-entered, a matching pair, batting their long black eyelashes at each other over the top of fluttering Japanese fans. They lowered themselves gracefully onto chairs, spreading napkins over their laps. Zoe's hair was wrapped around a hoop to make a glossy, flowing arch around the back of her head. Navajo style, Marye's viruses told her. "I like your hair," she said.

"Do you?" beamed Zoe, lowering her fan. She batted her eyelashes. "Do you like my moustache as well?"

Then Marye saw that her moustache had also been wrapped around hoops, one at each end.

"I used to have the same trouble with mine," Marye replied, with a flash of instinct.

The eyelashes stopped batting.

"Only," said Marye with a sigh, "now I shave-mine off."

There was a click behind Marye and a kind of surly grunt. Marye turned to see a short Woolie. He was rotund and bristling like a hedgehog, his cheeks puffed out as if enraged. He was punching keys on a small device that made a whizzing sound and printed out

a result on paper. He climbed up onto an especially high chair, tore off a piece of paper, and attached it to his fur with a hair-grip. He was decorated with bits of paper like a Xmas tree.

"We gonna eat?" he asked, and went back to punching keys.

"Yes, of course, Papa," said Angela, standing up. She lifted off the lid of the giant dish with a kind of malicious flair. It rang.

They were going to eat a seal, a whole roast seal. Its eyes had gone white and it was surrounded by a moat of amber fat.

Rolf's father reached forward and began to thumb out one of its eyes.

"Papa!" exclaimed Angela. "Please, Remember our guest."

"You want an eye, Squidge?" the father asked Marye.

"Yes please," said Marye, crisply. He passed it to her on a plate. It rolled. Her eyes stonily on Angela, Marye popped it into her mouth. It's a grape, she told herself, it's just a grape. It crunched as she chewed it.

"Of course, we're on our best behaviour because of you, Ms Smashpuss," said Angela, as she began to carve the seal. "Usually we tear the hot carcass to pieces with our bare paws." With deft aplomb, she lowered a section of seal filet onto Marye's plate without letting fall a drop of grease.

"Some wine, Ms Shambosh? We make it ourselves out of leftovers. I do hope you like it."

"Oh don't mind me," said Marye. "I'll drink anything."

"If you're friends with Rolf," said Zoe, sounding serious, "you probably have to."

Angela went on serving. "Ma chere," she said to her sister. "You have let slip your nap-kin." She sliced the word in half, like an orange, as a joke. They were making fun, of Rolf, of Squidges, of the way they thought Squidges thought of them. You are merry gals, Marye thought. But that is no reason to let you get away with anything.

"Do try not to blow your nose on it this time, ma petite. Do you know, Ms Fishfuss, the last time she let slip her nap-kin, she picked it up and blew her nose on it, and it turned out to be the hem of my dress."

"Well," said Marye, sipping the wine. "Better than wiping her arse on it."

"You girls want to carry on like that, you can leave the table," said the father.

The serious business of eating commenced. It was noisy and prolonged. Handfuls of boiled seaweed were shovelled onto plates and into mouths. There was a side salad of whole raw mackerel. Rolf's father held one by the tail and lowered it into his mouth, steadily crunching. Seal paws were another great delicacy.

"Don't eat the toenails, Zoe," said Angela. "What will Ms Shitbush think of us?"

"You seem to be having some trouble with my name," said Marye, giving up trying to cut her seal. She had to hold her hands up almost over her head to reach it. "My last name is Shibus. My family are from Eastern Europe, but the name itself is Lebanese. I believe your name is originally Asian, too, isn't it."

A silence as icy as the room descended.

Rolf said nothing. She ate with a pained, exaggerated good manners that made Marye want to throw the seal cutlet at her. Rolf kept her eyes down, and wordlessly passed the salt when asked, as slowly as a rusty hinge. Rolf! Join in! Say something! React!

The father sniffed and proprietorially brushed some seaweed off the table and into his cupped hand. He then threw it over his shoulder.

"So you work in Toy Town, too, do you Squidge?"

"Were you talking to me?" Marye demanded.

"I wasn't talking to the seal."

"My name is Marye. Perhaps no one told you that."

"OK. Maria. You work with my daughter."

"At the National Theatre of Southern Britain, yes."

"All that tra-la-la crap."

Marye paused to consider. "Yes."

"They're never going to let her sing."

Marye paused again. "Perhaps not," she agreed.

The father raised his voice. "You hear that? Hey, Rolf. Look at yourself sometime. You're covered in fur."

Rolf slowly reached for her wine and sipped it thoughtfully. Just like at the Zoo, thought Marye. Even here you don't have a home.

"Your daughter is one of the best singers at the National Theatre." Marye spoke warily. "She could also become a very fine composer." She looked at Rolf's face for any sign of surprise. The face remained a mask. "If she ever got any help or training or encouragement..." Marye broke off. She's had to do it by herself. She's had to do it all alone.

"Is that true?" asked Zoe, leaning forward.

Marye's eyes seemed to swell like small balloons about to burst. She nodded.

"Can you tell me why she's such a fat slob?" her father asked.

"Because her father is," replied Marye.

"At least I'm not baby-sitting tutus. They don't pay her for that job. She's a volunteer. She hangs around. She thinks something's going to happen, some angel's going to descend. She's wasted enough time. End of this summer, she goes to the Antarctic."

"Antarctic. The South Pole?" Marye was rendered stupid by shock. "Why?"

"Because," said the father, his voice going wheedling and sarcastic. "That is where we make our money."

Marye found that she was smiling, smiling with the absurdity of it, and with anger. "What is Rolf going to do in the Antarctic?"

"Work," said the father. "We're not like you people. We owe each other things. With us, a woman does the same job as a man or we kick her butt until she does. She's going to Antarctica before the New Year," said the father, with a kind of chuckle, "or I tear her head off."

"I think that's the worst thing I've ever heard," said Marye.

"You're a socialist," shrugged the father. "And if you weren't, they'd make you one. Me, I do what I want, when I want to do it. Nobody infects my mind. So you call us, what, 'an intelligent, related species.' Tu! If you ask me, we're the only human beings left. You call us that, it means we don't have to follow your laws, and everybody's happy. Now that daughter of mine is saying, I want to sing!" He made a florid gesture, and imitated her voice. "Make me a Squidge."

The raised hand became a fist that slammed the table. "Like hell. Legal definitions. That's what I'm talking about. Do you really think we're going to let that clown over there mess with that?"

"No," said Marye, almost inaudibly, and shook her head. Rolfa sat eating, silent and embarrassed with her eyes on her plate. Well, Rolfa, thought Marye. Do you have anything to say? I can't stop them, Rolfa. If you let them do it to you, I can't stop them.

"It's like going to school for us," said Angela. "It's something everybody does. Maybe meet a nice man." She was trying to sound bright and encouraging. The father finished his figures. There was a whizz of paper.

Rolfa, you are a great lump. Marye felt betrayed. The meat in her mouth went round and round. Why am I eating this? I don't need to eat. She spat the seal cutlet out onto her plate. That's what I think of you all.

"I can get you an omelette," offered Zoe.

I don't need to talk either. Marye shook her head. She drank. The wine was sour and sharp, which seemed appropriate. May you all freeze in hell. Why am I sitting here?

Marye finished her wine, throwing it back down her gullet, and stood up. Rolfa finally moved, turning suddenly toward her.

"It's all right! You don't need to move," said Marye. She looked at the family. "Enjoy your meal," she told them, and left. As she went down the stairs, she began to run. She ran to the door and threw off the coat. The carpet had crystals of ice along its fibres. Who needs winter? Marye pulled open the front door and left it hanging, and plunged into human temperatures, the warm blanket of summer air. She still had on the indigent gloves.

She walked, mind raging, so angry she couldn't think. The tragedy loomed around her, so vast that it seemed part of the iron railings, and the classical Kensington porticos, and chimneys against the sky, part of the other people who passed her, hunched and hesitant, as if the pavements were too narrow. She walked round and round in circles through the unfamiliar streets.

She found herself back in front of the Woolie house, all creamy, icy-blue in the summer night. Something broke.

"Rolfa!" she shouted. "Rolfa! Rolfa!" Her voice went shrill and she picked up an edge of pavement and hurled it towards the house.

"I'm here," said a voice. "Ssssh."

A shape, a shadow of a head through an open window on an upper floor. Rolfa had been sitting all alone in the dark.

Marye waited in the silence, in the moonlight, hugging herself. She stamped her feet with impatience and to get the blood flowing in her icy toes. Then there was a quiet clunk, and Rolfa stepped out the front door, carrying something, a blanket. She was back in her shorts and cloth shoes.

She came sideways, wary, as if on broken plates, cringing. Frightened of me, frightened of everybody. When Rolfa was close, Marye hit her.

"You let them! You let everybody. You're going to let them do it and you don't have the right. You going to spend your time breaking rocks? What a bloody stupid waste!"

Rolfa looked back at her forlornly, and Marye heard the sound of wind in the trees.

"Don't just stand there."

More silence, and applause from the leaves.

"Do something!" Marye's hands were raised around her head, fingers spread like claws.

Rolfa hugged her. Marye was suddenly enfolded in long, soft, warm arms, and she was pressed against Rolfa's stomach. "Sssh, Little One, ssssh," she said.

The edges of Marye's vision were going black and grainy. I'm going to faint, thought Marye. She meant it as a joke, to make it ridiculous, so it wouldn't happen. Then her knees gave way. I really am going to faint, she thought. Real people don't faint.

"Ooovvvvgot ta sssip owwn," she said. She was trying to say she had to sit down. Suddenly she felt herself lifted up. Her stomach felt weighted down and she thought she was going to vomit. She saw the moon dip and dive about the sky like a swallow, and she felt herself being laid out on the grass. She settled into it and went utterly still.

"Little Ones shouldn't drink too much," said Rolfa.

Marye wished that her clothing were undone. She wanted to put the very tips of her fingers onto the palm of Rolfa's hand. She couldn't find it. All she felt was grass. Then there was darkness.

Had Rolfa kissed the top of her head? Had she run her fingers through Marye's hair?

## Low Comedy

**W**hen Marye awoke, she was cured. She had had enough.

She was lying on dew-soaked grass in a small crescent park under a blanket that Rolfa must have wrapped around her. She sat up. Her back was stiff and there was a comprehensive pain in the bones of her head, all around her eyes and temples.

She no longer wanted Rolfa. The very thought of her smell, of her teeth, now made Marye feel a bit ill. The thought of them had become associated with pain. Sick with love, Marye had now become sick of it.

Nothing like a course of aversion therapy, she thought and was ambushed by a wet, explosive sneeze.

She got up and limped home, feeling stale and flat-footed. She felt ill in the omnibus. Climbing up her stairs, she had to stop to catch her breath. Oh Marx-and-Lenin, she remembered. I've got a performance of *Love's Labour's* this morning. I've missed it. She felt relieved. Missing a performance was the right thing to do. She was even sure that no one would notice she wasn't there.

She opened the door to her room and saw a stranger sitting on the bed. Wrong room. She stepped backwards and started to close the door and saw that the number on it was correct: 42. She opened the door again. There was her counterpane on the bed, there was her accustomed view out of the window and there, on her counterpane, was a huge, doe-eyed female with black hair and black eyes and beautiful nut-brown skin. Not Rhodopsin. The woman wore a cheap white blouse and blue trousers, and she sat nursing what looked like a heap of dirty felt.

Then Marye saw that there was stubble all over the woman's bare arms and shoulders, and criss-cross cuts from a razor.



"I've done a bunk," said a familiar voice, forlornly.  
 "Rofa?" Marye asked in dismayed disbelief.  
 "I shaved. They don't know where I am." Shorn of  
 her pelt, Rofa had an odd face. It was fleshy and  
 somehow chinless, with a very small, thin mouth that  
 seemed too deeply indented between nose and chin.  
 But the black and liquid eyes were the same.  
 "Can I stay?" Rofa asked.

To be concluded next issue

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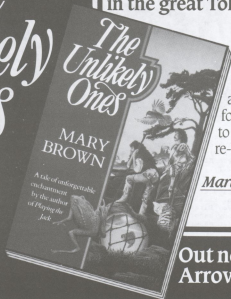
Geoff Ryman was born in Canada, in 1951, and has lived in Britain for over a decade. Although he published his first short story in *New Worlds Quarterly* in 1976, it was not until the 1980s that he began to write in earnest. He swiftly established a reputation as one of our most exciting new writers with his novella "The Unconquered Country" (*Interzone 7*; book version published by Unwin), his novel *The Warrior Who Carried Life* (Unwin), and his long short story "O Happy Day!" (*Interzone: The 1st Anthology*, Dent).

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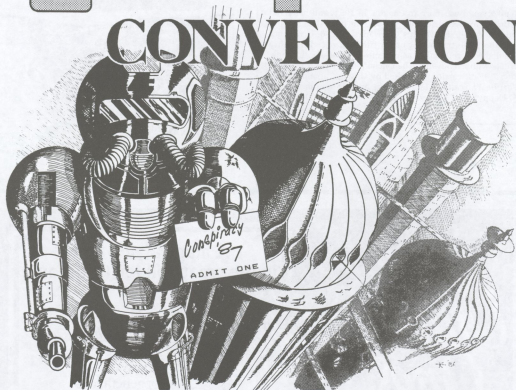
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# Rudy Rucker

## Interview by Richard Kadrey

Rudolf von Bitter Rucker is the author of seven science fiction novels, one book of short stories, a book of poetry and four non-fiction books dealing with such trivialities as Infinity, geometry and relativity and the Fourth Dimension. The great, great, great grandson of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, Rucker won the first Philip K. Dick award for his novel *Software* (Ace 1982 in the US; Penguin 1985 in the UK). In the mid-nineteen-seventies, while making his first forays into science fiction, he lectured on the philosophy of mathematics at Heidelberg and Oxford. With his wife, Sylvia, and their three children, he moved from Lynchburg, Virginia, to California to take a job teaching computer science at San José State University. He likes to play the Ramones just below the threshold of pain and has recently purchased his first surfboard. He is also the leading practitioner of what he calls "Transrealism," a style of fiction in which the writer "writes about immediate perceptions in a fantastic way."

### Didn't you write your first book while on a math grant in Heidelberg?

No, I wrote *White Light* and *Software* in Heidelberg. I wrote my first book in the summer of '75. That was *Spacetime Donuts*. I went to see the Rolling Stones play at Buffalo and got really psyched. I went home and said, what am I going to do this summer? I'm going to write a science fiction novel. At that point, you don't really know if you can write that many pages. But after a while, you just add another chapter and think, I'm actually writing a science fiction novel. I'm actually doing it; and it feels so good.

### Did you work from an outline?

I just started walling. If you do an outline, your conscious mind is doing it, and you're spending a week to do it. But when you're going to work on a book for six months, you're going to be putting so much more power into it. All you're doing when you make an outline is making a prediction of what you think you'll do. The thing is, if a day's or a week's work can predict your



Photo by Sylvia Rucker

behaviour for six months then that would mean you were very simple. There's a theorem in computer science that a computer is actually not able to predict its behaviour. However, if computer B is bigger than computer A, then computer B can predict what computer A will do. But B can't predict what B itself will do. As a writer, you can say, I'll wait six months. That's how I'll predict what I'll do. It will take me six months to figure out what I'm going to do in six months. I'm also too lazy to do it.

In my article on Transrealism, I compare writing to drawing a maze, something I like to do when I'm at the beach. I get a stick and draw a large maze in the sand, and the children like to run around in it. But the way you do that, you have to have a start and a finish. Then you have to keep coming back. You get stuck in a corner, so you have to go back and make a hole in the wall and put a tunnel in there. And you can do that with a book.

When I write, I have some mechanisms I'm interested in exploring. Or I'll want to start a strange situation, and it's like continually trying to cover my

ass. When I started writing *Software* I thought it was going to be about time travel and I was going to call it *Yes and No*. That's one of the difficulties of writing the way I do. You reach this point where the book comes to a grinding halt. It's off the rails. Then you have to go back and figure out what's going on.

### I understand that you just finished a sequel to *Software*.

Yeah, it's called *Wetware*, and it's really about race. The way I write about race is to talk about robots. If people could get androids to work, they would want them to dress up and act like good "darkies." In fact in *Wetware* there's some robots that have to be bartenders. Of course, the robots don't like it anymore than a black person would.

Sta-Hi (one of the protagonists of *Software*) is back. He's older, but a little sadder. He's straight now. He doesn't get high anymore. If he can help it. I really had a good time going this book.

When I was writing *Wetware*, it was very ironic. I was writing it on the word processor and I really had to finish it. I had to move. *Software* ends very

abruptly because I had to leave Heidelberg and go back to America. And Wetware ends abruptly because I had to leave Lynchburg and move to California. That way I'll always do another volume. I'm going to do *Limpware* next. From soft, to wet to limp. People keep expecting for it get hard, but I put it off. I'd like to do like twenty of them. *Senileware*; *Noware*.

**Spacetime Donuts is dedicated to (Kurt) Gödel, Mick Jagger and 1972. Can you explain the reason these people and this date are significant to you?**

Gödel is my main man. He was my guru. 1972 was this year in my life when I was getting high a lot and I was studying to take my orals for my PhD in Mathematics. And our son was born that year, our second child. For me the Sixties peaked in '72. I felt enlightened most of the time. Also, all these wells were breaking down. I had never understood much of anything. I had never thought of myself as intelligent, and I kept studying all this math and suddenly I understood addition. I

understood what addition really is.

That was the year I had the big vision of my life. It's described in *Spacetime Donuts*. I was up in this tree and I had this big flash that zero and infinity were the same thing.

Also, I think it was funny to mention Jagger and Gödel. I doubt if either one's ever heard of the book.

**Have you been able to support yourself and your family by writing?**

Yeah, we did four years that way. I got off to a running start. When I quit teaching, I got the Phil Dick Award and then thanks to the award, I got a two-book hardback deal with Bluejay. The first book of the contract was *Master of Space and Time*, because I had already finished it. I wrote that in six weeks. It was one of those gifts from god. *The Secret of Life*, though, took me a year to write. It was harder. It was autobiographical. I wrote an initial version of it called *All the Visions*. I'm a great admirer of Jack Kerouac. I wanted to do a book like *On the Road*. *On the Road* was written on a roll of paper, so I got some paper for a copying machine and I just ran it through my IBM. When I was done, it was ninety feet long. I had to cut it apart so I could xerox it to send to publishers. It starts the same way as *Secret of Life*. It's just stream-of-consciousness; it's everything I could remember. Basically, I was asking myself "Is this all there is?", "Is life worth living?" and "Can I ever be happy?". "What is the secret of life?" Then I had the sly notion of turning it into a science fiction novel. All the *Visions* was not sf. I wanted Houghton-Mifflin to publish it like this, but they said "No." The way I found out about

it — they had mailed it back to me and our dog, Arf, had dragged the manila envelope into the side yard and ripped the package open. I found it a few days later. It was chewed up and lying in the dirt with a rubber band around it. I thought, Jesus, talk about a rejection. Then I thought, What the fuck, I'll turn it into a goddam science fiction book. And it worked, because it was a great way to do a science fiction novel. To use the UFO alien as a symbol of being alienated. And that's why I really like to do science fiction. I call that "Transrealism." I wrote an essay once called "The Transrealist Manifesto." I'd rather be known as a Transrealist than as a cyberpunk.

It was a calculated decision, when I decided to start saying I was a cyberpunk. I had already been doing that kind of stuff. Even *Spacetime Donuts* is a cyberpunk book. It's about computers; the people are punks and druggers; and I did it listening to Patti Smith and the New York Dolls. This is like '75, and punk was just starting. I was very out of the science fiction mainstream at the time. All I knew was, I hadn't

seen anything I could read. I had never seen *New Worlds*. I had never even heard the words "New Wave." When I finished *Spacetime Donuts*, I told some guy in the English department of the school where I was working. He said, "Well, how can you just write science fiction?" And I said: "But this is New Wave science fiction." And he said: "Rudy, the New Wave ended a couple of years ago." And I didn't know what he was talking about.

Right now, I'm thinking about doing a book on assembly language. The way I generally work is, I'll do some real hard science idea, and then I'll get so comfortable with it, I can start rapping off it. So it really would be a good idea to do a text book on assembly language. And then write a great sf book about it. That's a criticism you sometimes hear about William Gibson, that he really doesn't really know very much about computers. That he doesn't get into the heart of it. I think it's a stupid argument. I like Neuromancer. Everybody's just looking for a way to put Bill down because he's so good. He's the best.

**Do you have a philosophy of writing that propels you along?**

I won the Phil Dick Award the year Phillip K. Dick died. I dedicated *Wetware* to him. I got this great quote from Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and I didn't tag it because everybody knows where it's from. The quote is really simple, the last line of the essay: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." That's what it is to be a writer. You roll this huge, accumulating mass of paper to the top of this mountain and you let

it go, and sheee! And so what? You walk down and you start again. Camus' theory is that Sisyphus is happy because what else is there to do? Camus calls him the "proletarian of the gods," which is a nice concept. Sisyphus is definitely the god of writers.


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# Brian Stableford

## Sexual Chemistry

There are some names which are more difficult to wear than others. Shufflebottoms, Bastards and Pricks start life with a handicap from which they may never recover, and one can easily understand why those born into families which have innocently borne since time immemorial such surnames as Hitler and Quisling often surrender such birthrights in favour of Smith or Villanova. People who refuse to change embarrassing names are frequently forced into an attitude of defensive stubbornness, brazenly and pridefully staring out the mockery of the world. For some people, an unfortunate surname can be a challenge as well as a curse, and life for them becomes a field of conflict in which heroism requires them to acquit themselves well.

One might be forgiven for thinking that Casanova is a less problematic name than many. It is by no means vulgar and has not the slightest genocidal connotation. It is a name that some people might be glad to have, conferring a mystique which they could wittily exploit. It is nevertheless a label which can be parent to a host of embarrassments and miseries, especially when worn by a gawky schoolboy in an inner city comprehensive, which was where the Giovanni Casanova who had been born on 14 February 1982 first became fully aware of its burdensome nature.

Giovanni's father, Marcantonio Casanova, had always been fond of the name, and seemed well enough equipped by fate to wear it well. He was not a tall man, but he had a handsome face and dark, flashing eyes that definitely had potential in the heart-melting area. He had made no serious attempt to live up to the name, though, accepting it as a nice joke that he had found contentment in placid monogamy. His grandparents had come to Britain in the 1930s, refugees from Mussolini's Italy, and had settled in Manchester at the height of the Depression. Marcantonio therefore came from a long line of impoverished intellectuals prevented by social circumstance from achieving their real potential. Much the same might

be said of Giovanni's mother, who was born Jenny Spencer into that kind of respectable working-class family which would make every effort to set their sons on the road of upward social mobility, though the acme of achievement for a daughter was to be a hairdresser at 16, a wife at 17 and a mother at 18, all of which expectations Jenny fulfilled with casual ease.

The whims of genetic and environmental fortune combined to give these humble parents a uniquely gifted son, for Giovanni soon showed evidence of a marvellous intelligence beyond even the latent potentialities of his parents. Nature's bounty was, however, restricted entirely to qualities of mind; in terms of looks and physique Giovanni was a non-starter. He was undersized, out of proportion, and had an awful complexion. A bout of measles in infancy added insult to injury by leaving his eyesight terribly impaired; astigmatism and chronic myopia combined to necessitate spectacles which robbed his dark eyes of any opportunity they ever had to flash heart-meltingly, and made him look rather cross-eyed. His voice was high-pitched, and never broke properly when he belatedly reached puberty. His hair insisted on growing into an appalling black tangle, and he began to go thin on top when he was barely seventeen. As thousands of thoughtless people were to remark to his face, and thousands more were to think silently to themselves, he certainly didn't look like a Casanova.

The class culture of England had proved remarkably resilient in the face of the erodent egalitarianism of the twentieth century, and bourgeois morality never did filter down to the poorer streets of Northern England, even when the old slums were demolished and new ones erected with indoor toilets and inbuilt social alienation. Where Giovanni spent his formative years very few girls preserved their virginity past the age of fourteen, and almost every boy without a CSE to his name had done sufficient



research to write a PhD thesis on screwing by the time he was eighteen. This tide of covert sexual activity, however, left Giovanni Casanova high and dry. He was acutely conscious of the flood of eroticism which seethed all around him, and wished devoutly to be carried away by it, but to no avail. Other ugly boys, who seemed to him equally unprepossessing, managed one by one to leap the first and most difficult hurdle, and subsequently gained marvellously in confidence and expertise, but Giovanni was not of their number. His unattractiveness made things difficult, but his name added just sufficiently to his difficulties to make his task impossible, because it made even the girls who might have felt sorry for him laugh at him instead. Even the most feeble-minded of teenage girls could appreciate that there was something essentially rib-tickling about saying "no" to a Casanova.

Giovanni started out on his journey through adolescence bogged down by self-consciousness. By the time he was sixteen he was filled with self-loathing and incipient paranoia, and was doomed to a long career as a social misfit. He was so withdrawn, having suffered such agonies from his failures, that he had completely given up talking to members of the female sex, except when absolutely forced by necessity. His sanity was saved, though, because he found a haven of retreat: the world of scientific knowledge, whose certainties contrasted so sharply with the treacherous vicissitudes of the social world. Even his teachers thought of him as a slightly unsavoury freak, but they recognized that in intellectual terms he was a potential superstar. He compiled the most impressive scholarly record that his very moderate school had ever produced, and went triumphantly to university to study biochemistry in October 2000.

Biochemistry was the glamour science in those days, when every year that passed produced new biotechnological miracles from the laboratories of the genetic engineers. Giovanni was entranced by the infinite possibilities of the applied science, and set out to master the crafts of gene-mapping, protein design and plasmid construction. In everyday life he seemed extremely clumsy and slow of wit, but he was a very different character in the privacy of a laboratory, when he could manage the most delicate operation with absolute control, and where he had such a perfect intuition and understanding of what he was doing that he soon left his educators far behind.

**I**n this new environment, where intelligence was held in reasonably high esteem by female students, Giovanni tried tentatively to come out of his shell. He began talking to girls again, albeit with ponderous caution and unease. He helped other students with their work, and tried once or twice to move on from assistance to seduction. There was a black-haired Isabel who seemed to think him an interesting conversationalist, and a freckled Mary who even cooked a couple of meals for him because she thought he was neglecting himself, but they politely declined to enter into more intimate relationships with him. They could not think of him in such a light, and though they were prepared to consider him a friend of sorts the boys they welcomed into their beds were of a very different type. Giovanni tried hard not to resent this, and to see their point of view; he certainly did not

blame them, but it only made him more disappointed with himself, and even more sharply aware of the mockery in his name.

Transforming bacteria by plasmid engineering was passé long before Giovanni's graduation, and he felt that the engineering of plants, though it certainly offered great opportunities for ingenuity and creativity, was not quite adventurous enough for him. He knew that his talents were sufficiently extraordinary to require something a little more daring, and so he channelled his efforts in the direction of animal engineering. His doctoral research was devoted to the development of artificial cytogene systems which could be transplanted into animal cells without requiring disruption of the nucleus or incorporation into the chromosomal system; these made it practicable to transform specific cells in the tissues of mature metazoans, avoiding all the practical and ethical problems which still surrounded work on zygotes and embryos.

Giovanni planned to apply this research eventually to various projects in medical science. He produced in his imagination half a dozen strategies for conquering cancer, and a few exotic methods of combating the effects of aging. Had he stayed in pure research, based in a university, this was undoubtedly what he would have done, but the early years of the new millennium were a period of economic boom, when big biotechnology companies were headhunting talent with a rare ruthlessness. Giovanni never applied for a job or made any inquiry about industrial opportunities, but found potential employers begging to interview him in the comfort of his own home or at any place he cared to name. They sent beautiful and impeccably-manicured personnel officers to woo him with their tutored smiles and their talk of six-figure salaries. One or two seemed so desperate to net him that they were almost willing to bribe him with sexual favours, but they always stopped short of this ultimate tactic, much to his chagrin.

He was so fiercely dedicated to his work, and had such noble ideals, that he hesitated for a long time before selling out, but the temptations were too much for him in the end. He sold himself to the highest bidder – Cytotech, Inc. – and joined the brain drain to sunny California, being careful to leave most of his bank accounts in convenient European tax shelters so that he could be a millionaire before he was thirty. He had the impression that even the most ill-favoured of millionaires could easily play the part of Casanova, and he could hardly wait.

**C**ytotech was heavily involved in medical research, but its dynamic company president, Marmaduke Melmoth, had different plans for this most extraordinary of hirelings. He invited Giovanni to his mansion in Beverley Hills, and gave him the most fabulous meal that the young man had ever seen, and then he told Giovanni where it was at.

"The future," said Melmoth, sipping his pink champagne, "is in aphrodisiacs. Cancer cures we can only sell to people with cancer. Life-extension is great, but it isn't worth a damn unless people can enjoy extended life. To hell with better mousetraps – what this world wants is better beaver-traps. You make me a red-hot pheromone, and I'll make you a billionaire."

Giovanni explained to Melmoth that there could be no such thing as a powerful human pheromone. Many insects, he pointed out, perceive their environment almost entirely in olfactory terms, so that it makes sense for female insects with limited periods of fertility to signal their readiness with a smelly secretion which – if produced in sufficient quantities – could draw every male insect from miles around. Humans, by contrast, make very little use of their sense of smell, and their females are unafflicted by short and vital phases of fertility which must at all costs be exploited for the continued survival of the species.

"All this I know," Melmoth assured him. "And the fact that you thought to tell me about it reveals to me that you have an attitude problem. Let me give you some advice, son. It's easy to find people who'll tell me what isn't possible and can't be done. For that I can hire morons. I hire geniuses to say 'if that won't work, what will?' Do you get my drift?"

Giovanni was genuinely impressed by this observation, though it was hardly original. He realized that his remarks really had been symptomatic of an attitude problem, which had manifested itself all-too-powerfully in his personal life. He went to his laboratory determined to produce for Mr Melmoth something that would stand in for the impossible pheromone, and determined to produce for himself some sexual encounters that would put him on course for a career as an authentic Casanova. It was simply, he decided, a matter of strategy.

In fact, Giovanni was now in a position where he had more than a little prestige and influence. Although he was notionally starting at the bottom at Cytotech, there was no doubting that he would go far – that he was a man to be respected no matter how unlovely his appearance might be. Thus advantaged, he had little difficulty in losing his virginity at last, with a seventeen year old blonde lab assistant called Helen. This was a great relief, but he was all too well aware of the fact that it represented no considerable triumph. It was a fumbling affair, throughout which he was trembling with anxiety and embarrassment; he felt that his everyday clumsiness and awkwardness, though he could leave them behind in his laboratory work, were concentrated to grotesque extremes in his sexual technique.

Pretty Helen, who was not herself overburdened with experience or sophistication, uttered not a word of complaint and made no reference to his surname, but Giovanni found himself quite convinced that in the privacy of her thoughts she was crying out "Casanova! Casanova!" and laughing hysterically at the irony of it. He dared not ask her to his bed again, and tended to shun her in the workplace. Deciding that he needed more practice, he visited three whores whose telephone numbers he found scrawled on the walls of the payphones in the main lobby, and though he avoided thereby the embarrassment of knowing that they knew his name he found it appallingly difficult to improve his performance. If anything, he thought, he was getting worse instead of better, becoming steadily more ludicrous in his own eyes. Clearly this was what Melmoth would have called an attitude problem, but Giovanni now knew that simply calling it by that name would no more solve it than calling him Casanova had made him into an avatar

of his famous namesake. Self-disgust made him give up visiting prostitutes, and he could not bring himself to try to continue his relationship with Helen; he became convinced that celibacy was much to be preferred to continual humiliation.

In his work, however, he was making great strides. Taking Melmoth's advice to heart, he asked himself what would constitute, in human terms, an alternative to pheromones. The dominant human sense is sight, so the effective human analogue of an insect pheromone is an attractive appearance, but this has so long been taken for granted that it sustains a vast cosmetics industry dedicated to helping members of the desired sex to enhance their charms. Giovanni felt that there was relatively little scope in this area for his expertise, so he turned his attention instead to the sense of touch.

He eventually decided that what was needed was something that would make the touch of the would-be seducer irresistible to the target of his (or her) affections: a love-potion of the finger-tips. If he could find a psychotropic protein which could be absorbed quickly through the skin, so that the touch of the donor could become associated with subsequent waves of pleasurable sensation, then it should be fairly easy to achieve an operant conditioning of the desired one.

Giovanni brought all his artistry in protein-design to bear on the production of a psychotropic which would call forth strong feelings of euphoria, tenderness, affection and lust. This was not easy – understanding of this kind of psychochemistry was then at a very primitive level – but he was the man for the job. Having found the ideal protein, he then encoded it in the DNA of an artificial cytogene which was tailored for incorporation in subepidermal cells, whose operation was triggered by sexual arousal. The protein itself could then be delivered to the surface of the skin via the sweat-glands.

When the time came to explain this ingenious mechanism to Marmaduke Melmoth, the company president was not immediately enthused.

"Hell's bells, boy," he said. "Why not just put the stuff in bottles and let people smear it on their fingers?"

Giovanni explained that his new psychotropic protein, like the vast majority of such entities, was so awesomely delicate that it could not be kept in solution, and would rapidly denature outside the protective environment of a living cell. In any case, the whole point was that the object of desire could only obtain this particular fix from the touch of the would-be seducer. If it was to be used for conditioning, then its sources must be very carefully limited. This was not a technology for mass distribution, but something for the favoured few, who must use it with the utmost discretion.

"Oh shit," said Melmoth, in disgust. "How are we going to make billions out of a product like that?"

Giovanni suggested that he sell it only to the very rich, at an exorbitant price.

"If we're going to do it that way," Melmoth told him, "we're going to have to be absolutely sure that it works, and that there's not the ghost of an unfortunate

side-effect. You work for customers like that, they have to get satisfaction."

Giovanni agreed that this was a vital necessity. He set up a series of exhaustive and highly secret clinical trials, and did not tell Melmoth that he had already started exploring the effects and potentials of the tissue-transformation. In the great tradition of scientific self-sacrifice, he had volunteered to be his own guinea-pig.

To say that the method worked would be a feeble understatement. Giovanni found that he only had to look at an attractive girl, and conjure up in his imagination fantasies of sexual communion, to produce the special sweat that put magic at his fingertips. Once he was sufficiently worked up, the merest touch sufficed to set the psychochemical seduction in train, and it required only the simplest strategy to achieve the required conditioning. Girls learned very quickly – albeit subconsciously – to associate his touch with the most tender and exciting emotions. They quickly overcame their natural revulsion and began to think that although not conventionally attractive he was really rather fascinating.

Within three weeks, four female laboratory assistants, two word-processing operatives, three receptionists, one industrial relations consultant and a traffic warden were deep in the throes of infatuation. He was on top of the world, and gloried in the victory of becoming a self-made Casanova. The dignity of celibacy was cast casually aside. Women were desperate now to get him into bed, and he obliged them with pleasure. He even managed to overcome some of the limitations of his awkwardness, and was soon troubled no longer by premature ejaculation.

But in the sense of satisfaction did not last. It took only three weeks more for him to become thoroughly disgusted with himself all over again. It was not so much that he had cheated his partners into their passionate desire (though that did weigh somewhat upon his conscience); the real problem was that he felt he was not giving them full value in return. However disappointing any particular session of love-making might be, each and every victim continued to love him vehemently, but he could see how disappointed they were, in him and in themselves. They loved him, but their love only made them unhappy. This was partly because they realized that they were all competing with one another for his attentions, but it was more because those attentions were so inherently unsatisfying.

Giovanni could now present to the world the image of a genuine Casanova. He was talked about, in wondering tones. He was envied. But in his own eyes, he remained in every sense a despicable fraud. It was not he that was beloved, but some organic goo that he had concocted in a test-tube; and the women who were its victims were condemned to the desperations of jealousy, the disappointments of third-rate sex, and the miseries of helplessness. Giovanni had not the stomach to be a wholesale heartbreaker; he was too familiar with misery and desperation to take pleasure from inflicting it on others – not at any rate, women that he liked and admired.

By the time the royalties began to roll in, when Melmoth's discreet marketing of the discovery to the world's richest men began to pay dividends, Giovanni

was again deep in depression and cynicism. Others, he felt sure, would be able to exploit his invention to the full, as the means to illimitable pleasure, but not he. Casanova the fool had simply confirmed his own wretchedness. His cup of bitterness overflowed.

It was, as ever, Melmoth who brought it home to him that he was suffering still from an attitude problem.

"Look, Joe," said Melmoth. "We got a few little problems. Nothing you can't sort out, I'm sure, but it's kinda necessary to keeping the customers happy and the cash coming in. The way we're playing this we have a restricted market, and a lot of the guys are getting on a bit. It's all very well to offer them a way of getting the slots in the sack, but what they really need is something to get the peg in the slot. You ever hear of this stuff called Spanish fly?"

"Giovanni explained that *Cantharides* was a beetle rather than a fly; that it was a powerful poison; and that it probably wasn't terribly satisfying to have a painfully rigid and itchy erection for hours on end.

"So do it better," said Melmoth, with that mastery of the art of delegation which had made him rich.

So Giovanni gave the matter some consideration, and decided that it was probably feasible to devise a biochemical mechanism which would make it possible for a man to win conscious control over his erections: to produce them at will, sustain them as long as might be required, and generate orgasms in any desired quantity. This would require a couple of new hormones which Mother Nature had not thought to provide, a secondary system of trigger hormones for feedback control, and a cytogene for transforming the cells of the pituitary gland. Even when the biochemistry was in place, people would have to learn to use the new system, and that would require a training programme, perhaps with computer-assisted biofeedback back-up.

He set to work, patiently bringing his dreamchild to perfection.

Naturally, he had to test the system to make sure it was worth going ahead with clinical trials. Once the genetic transplants had taken, he spent a couple of hours a night in solitary practice. It took him only a week to gain complete conscious control of his new abilities, but he had started with the advantage of understanding, so he mapped out a training programme for the punters that would take a fortnight.

Once again, he was filled with optimism about his own personal problems. No longer would he have to worry about flaws in his technique; he could now be confident that any girl who was caused to fall in love with him would receive full measure of sexual satisfaction in return. Now, he was in a much better position to emulate his famous namesake.

But Giovanni was no longer a callow youth, and his optimism about the future was not based entirely on his biotechnological augmentation. He had undergone a more dramatic change of attitude, and had decided that the Casanova he needed to copy was not the ancient Giovanni but his father Marcantonio. He had decided that the answer lay in monogamy, and he wanted to get married. He was now in his mid-thirties, and it seemed to him that what he needed



was a partner of his own age: a mature and level-headed woman who could bring order and stability into his life. These arguments led him to fall in love with his accountant, a thirty-three year old divorcee named Denise. He had ample opportunity to make the fingertip contacts necessary to make her besotted with him, because his fortune was steadily increasing and there were always new opportunities in tax avoidance for them to discuss over dinner. Giovanni took the whole affair very carefully and – he thought – smoothly, and graciously allowed Denise the pleasure of seducing him on their third *real* date. He still felt rather clumsy and a little anxious, but she seemed quite delighted with his powers of endurance.

His parents were glad when he told them the news. His father cried with delight at the thought that the name of Casanova would now be transmitted to a further generation, and his mother (who believed that getting married was a kind of certificate of belonging to the human race) was euphorically sentimental for months.

Denise gave up work when she became pregnant, mere weeks after the honeymoon, and left to others the job of taking care of the spring tide of cash which began to pour into Giovanni's bank accounts as his new discovery was discreetly marketed by the ingenious Melmoth.

Giovanni loved Denise very much, and became more and more devoted to her as the months of her pregnancy elapsed. When she gave birth to a baby girl, named Jennifer after his mother, he felt that he had discovered heaven on earth.

Unfortunately, this peak in his experience was soon

passed. Denise got post-natal depression, and began to find her energetic sex life something of a bore. She was still hooked, unknowingly, on the produce of Giovanni's tender fingertips, but her emotional responses became perversely confused, and her feelings of love and affection generated floods of tears.

Giovanni was overwrought, and knew not what to do. He was slowly consumed by a new wave of guilt. Whatever was the matter, he was responsible for it. He had made Denise love him, and had avoided feeling like a cheat only because he was convinced that she was reaping all the rewards that she could possibly have attained from a love that grew spontaneously in her heart. Now things were going wrong. Giovanni saw himself as her betrayer and her destroyer.

When he became anguished and miserable, Denise blamed herself, and became even more confused and even more unhappy. They fed on one another's despair, and became wretched together. This intolerable situation led inexorably toward the one awful mistake that Giovanni was bound eventually to make.

He told her everything.

From every possible point of view, this was a disastrous move. When she heard how he had tied her finest and most intimate feelings to chemical puppet-strings her love for him underwent a purely psychosomatic transformation into bitter and resentful hatred. She left him forthwith, taking the infant Jenny with her, and sued for divorce. She also filed a suit for thirty million dollars compensation for his biochemical interference with her affections. In so doing, of course, she made headline news of the enterprises which Marmaduke Melmoth had kept so care-

fully secret, and released a tempest of controversy.

The impact of this news can easily be imagined. The world of the 2020s was supposedly one in which the women of the overdeveloped countries had won complete equality with their menfolk. The feminists of the day looked back with satisfaction at centuries of fierce fighting against legal and attitudinal discrimination; their heroines had battled successfully against sexism in the workplace, sexism in education, sexism in the language and sexism in the psyche. Though progress had brought them to the brink of their particular Millennium, they still had a heightened consciousness of the difficulties which had beset their quest, and a hair-trigger paranoia about any threat to their achievements. The discovery that for nearly twenty years the world's richest men had been covertly buying biotechnologies specifically designed for the manipulation and sexual oppression of womankind constituted a scandal such as the world of sexual politics had never known.

Giovanni Casanova, who had so far lived his life in secure obscurity, a contentedly unsung genius, found himself suddenly notorious. His name – that hideous curse of a name – suddenly became the progenitor of jokes and gibes displayed in screeching headlines, broadcast to every corner of the globe, found as frequently in news bulletins as tawdry comedy shows. Overnight, the new Casanova became a modern folk-devil: the man who had put the cause of sexual emancipation back three hundred years.

The divorce broke his mother's heart, and her sufferings were compounded when Marcantonio Casanova died suddenly of heart failure. She hinted to Giovanni in a reckless moment that his father had died of shame, and Giovanni took this so much to heart that he seriously contemplated suicide.

Denise, the victim of Giovanni's obscene machinations, achieved a temporary sainthood in the eyes of the world. Melmoth, who had played Mephistopheles to Giovanni's Faust, was demonized alongside him. Thousands of women filed copycat lawsuits against their rich paramours, against Giovanni, and against Cytotech. Giovanni got sacks of hate-mail from tens of thousands of women who believed (usually without any foundation in fact) that his magic had been used to steal their souls.

As storms usually do, though, this storm soon began to lose its fury. Marmaduke Melmoth began to use his many resources to tell the world that the real issue was simply a little attitude problem.

Melmoth was able to point out that there was nothing inherently sexist about Giovanni's first discovery. He was able to prove that he had several female clients, who had been happily using the seductive sweat to attract young men. He argued – with some justice – that the cosmetics industry had for centuries been offering men and women methods of enhancing their sexual attractiveness, and that there had always been a powerful demand for aphrodisiacs. Giovanni's only crime, he suggested, was to have produced an aphrodisiac which worked, and which was absolutely safe, to replace thousands of products of fake witchcraft and medical quackery which were at best useless and at worst harmful. He argued that although Giovanni's second discovery was, indeed,

applicable only to male physiology, its utility and its benefits were by no means confined to the male sex.

This rhetoric was backed up by some bold promises, which saved Cytotech's image and turned all the publicity to the company's advantage. Melmoth guaranteed that Giovanni's first discovery would now become much cheaper, so that the tissue-transformation would be available even to those of moderate means, and to men and women equally. He also announced that Giovanni had already begun work on an entire spectrum of new artificial hormones, which would give to women as well as to men vast new opportunities in the conscious generation and control of bodily pleasure.

These promises quickly displaced the scandal from the headlines. Cytotech's publicity machine did such a comprehensive job of image-building that Giovanni became a hero instead of a folk-devil. The moral panic died, the lawsuits collapsed, and the hate-mail dried up. Denise got her divorce, though, and custody of little Jenny. She did not get her thirty million dollars compensation, but she was awarded sufficient alimony to keep her in relative luxury for the rest of her life. Giovanni was awarded the Nobel Prize for Biochemistry, but this did little to soothe his disappointment even though it apparently helped his mother to recover from her broken heart and be proud of him again.

Giovanni launched himself obsessively into the work required to make good on Melmoth's promises. He became a virtual recluse, putting in such long hours at the laboratory that his staff and co-workers began to fear for his health and sanity. As he neared forty his mental faculties were in decline, but the increase in his knowledge and wisdom offset the loss of mental agility, and it is arguable that it was in this phase of his career that his genius was most powerful and most fertile. He did indeed develop a new spectrum of hormones and enkephalins, which in combination gave people who underwent the relevant tissue-transformations far greater conscious control over the physiology of pleasure. As recipients gradually learned what they could do with their new biochemistry, and mastered its arts and skills, they became able to induce in themselves – without any necessary assistance at all – orgasms and kindred sensations more thrilling, more blissful and more luxurious than the poor human nature crudely hewn by the hackwork of natural selection had ever provided to anyone.

Giovanni created, almost single-handed, a vast new panorama of masturbatory enterprise.

For once, Giovanni's progress was the object of constant attention and constant debate. Cynics claimed that his work was hateful, because it would utterly destroy romance, devalue human feelings, obliterate sincere affection, and mechanize ecstasy. Critics argued that the value and mystique of sexual relationships was fatally compromised by his transformations. Pessimists prophesied that if his new projects were to be brought to a successful conclusion, sexual intercourse might become a thing of the past, displaced from the arena of human experience by voluptuous self-abuse. Fortunately, these pessimists were unable to argue that this might lead to the end of the



human race, because discoveries made by other biotechnologists had permitted the development of artificial wombs more efficient than real ones, so that sexual intercourse was no longer necessary for reproduction, which could be managed more competently *in vitro*. The cynics and the pessimists were therefore disregarded by the majority, who were hungry for joy, and eager to enter a promised land of illimitable delight.

As always, Giovanni was the first to try out his new discoveries; the pioneer spirit which forced him to seek out new solutions to his personal troubles was as strong as ever, and the prospect of combining celibacy with ecstasy appealed very much to his eremitic frame of mind.

In the early days of his experimentation, while he was still exploring the potential of his new hormonal instruments of self-control, he was rather pleased with the ways in which he could evoke rapture to illuminate his loneliness, but he quickly realized that this was no easy answer to his problems. Eight hundred thousand years of masturbation had not sufficed to blunt the human race's appetite for sexual intercourse, and Giovanni quickly found that the reason for this failure had nothing to do with the quality of the sensations produced. The cynics and pessimists were quite wrong; sexual intercourse could not and never would be made redundant by any mere enhancement of onanistic gratifications. Sex was more than pleasure; it was closeness, intimate involvement with another, empathy, compassion, and an outflowing of good feeling which needed a recipient. Giovanni had found in the brief happiness of his marriage that sex was, in all the complex literal and metaphorical senses of the phrase, *making love*. However wonderful his new biochemical systems were, they were not doing that, and were no substitute for it.

So Giovanni ceased to live as a recluse. He came back into the social world, with his attitude adjusted yet again, determined to make new relationships. After all, he still had the magic at his fingertips – or so he thought. He looked around; saw a grey-eyed journalist called Greta, a Junoesque plant physiologist name Jacqueline, and sweetly-smiling insurance salesperson named Morella, and went to work with his seductive touch.

As the world had changed while he had lived apart from it. None of the three women yielded to his advances. It was not that he had lost his magic touch, but that Cytotech's marketing had given it to far too many others. When the relevant tissue-transformations had been the secret advantage of a favoured few, they had used it with care and discretion, but now that aphrodisiac sweat was commonplace, any reasonably attractive woman was likely to encounter it several times a week. They were continually sated with the feelings that it evoked, and could no longer be conditioned to associate the sensation with the touch of a particular person. Greta, Jacqueline and Morella were quite conscious of what was happening when he touched them, and though they thanked him for the compliment, they were each one utterly unimpressed.

Giovanni realized that promiscuity was fast des-

troying the aphrodisiac value of his first discovery. His quick mind made him sensitive to all kinds of possibilities that might be opened up by the more general release of this particular ability, and he began to look in the news for evidence of sweeping social change.

The logic of the situation was soon clear to him. As users found their seductive touch less effective, they tended to use it more and more frequently, thus spreading satiation even further and destroying all prospect of the desired result. In addition, people were no longer using the device simply for the purpose of sexual conquest. Many men and women had been taken by the ambition to make *everybody* love them, in the hope of securing thereby the social and economic success that the original purchasers of the technology already had. In consequence, the world was suffering from a positive epidemic of good feeling. This plague did not set the entire world to making love, but it did set the entire world to making friends. The most unlikely people could be seen to be relaxing into the comfort of infinite benevolence.

Giovanni monitored the headlines very carefully, and realized before it became generally known that he had wrought a more profound change in human affairs than he had intended or supposed.

Wars stopped. Terrorism declined. Violent crime became steadily rarer. Oddly enough, these trends passed largely unnoticed. The world did not really wake up to the significance of it all until the contest to settle the heavyweight boxing championship of the world was stopped in the third round when the weeping combatants realized that they could not bear to throw another punch, and left the ring together with their arms around one another's shoulders.

Because of these upheavals, the clinical trials of Giovanni's new hormones and enkephalins attracted rather less attention than they might have, but their outstanding success was still a matter for world celebration. In 2036 Giovanni was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize to set beside his earlier award, and there was some discussion about making it the last prize of its kind, given that the world no longer seemed to require peacemakers. Giovanni became once again the darling of the world's media. He was billed as a modern Prometheus, sometimes even as a modern Dionysus, who had brought into the world of men a divine fire more precious than any vulgar power-source.

Giovanni was still embarrassed by these periodic waves of media exposure. He still felt very self-conscious about his physical appearance, and every time he saw his own picture on news-screen or in a videomag he blushed with the thought that half a billion viewers were probably saying to themselves: "He doesn't look like a Casanova!" He was probably being oversensitive, because it was *his* face and *his* achievements which were now called to the mind of the man in the street by the mere mention of his name, and that ancient namesake had been almost eclipsed in the public consciousness. In addition, he no longer seemed to the unbiased eye to be as unprepossessing as he once had been. He was now graciously bald, and bare pate was by no means as freakish as the tangled black hair that once sprouted there. He still wore spectacles for his myopia, but corneal surgery had corrected his astigmatism, and his eyes now

looked kind and soft behind the lenses, not at all distorted. His complexion was still poor, but his skin had been roughened and toughened by age and exposure to the elements, and its appearance was no longer offensive. His paleness and frailness could now be seen as appealing rather than appalling.

He had been startled the first time that he discovered that a woman was using his own aphrodisiac technology upon him, and had quickly jumped to the conclusion that she must be one of those people who used it on everyone, but he had gradually become accustomed to the idea that he really was admired and desired. In time, the secretion of aphrodisiac sweat became subject to a new etiquette, whereby indiscriminate use was held to be in bad taste, and also to be unnecessary as it could be taken for granted that everyone could love one another without its aid. Politeness came to demand that a sophisticated and civilized person would use the secretion occasionally and discreetly, to signal a delicate expression of erotic interest with no offence to be taken if there was no response. As this new code of behaviour evolved, Giovanni was surprised to find himself a frequent target for seduction, and for a while he revelled in sexual success. Many of the younger women, of course, were interested primarily in his wealth and status, but he did not mind that – he could, after all, claim responsibility for his status and wealth, which he had won by effort. Anyway, he loved them all; he loved everybody, and everybody loved him. It was that kind of world, now.

In this way, Giovanni Casanova succeeded at last in adapting to his name. He lived up to the reputation of his august namesake for a year or two, and then decided that the attractions of the lifestyle were overrated. He gladdened his mother's heart by marrying again, and this time he chose a woman who was very like the earliest memories which he had of his mother. His new bride was named Janine, she had been born in Manchester, and she was embarked on a career in cosmetic cytogenetic tissue-transformation (which was the nearest thing to hairdressing that the world of 2043 could offer). She was much younger than he, but did not mind the age difference in the least.

Giovanni and Janine favoured one another constantly with the most delicate psychochemical strokings, and learned to play the most beautiful duets with all the hormonal instruments of Giovanni's invention, but they had also a special feeling for one another – and eventually for their children – which went beyond mere chemistry and physiology: an affection which was entirely a triumph of the will. This was a treasure which, they both believed, could never have come out of one of Giovanni's test tubes.

With all this going for them, they lived happily ever after.

And so did everybody else.

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**Brian Stableford** was born in 1948 and now works as a lecturer in sociology at Reading University. He is the author of an astonishing number of books, both fiction and non-fiction – from *Cradle of the Sun* (1969) to *Scientific Romance in Britain* (1985) – and has contributed sf reviews to almost every issue of *Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction*. Although he wrote a few short stories during the 1970s, it is only lately that he has begun to produce short sf in quantity (he has sold a story to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and we have another one in hand for *IZ*).

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# NEWS

Our new book, *Interzone: The 2nd Anthology*, is forthcoming as a hard-cover volume from **Simon and Schuster** Ltd in August 1987. It will contain stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Scott Bradford, Thomas M. Disch, Neil Ferguson, Garry Kilworth, Rachel Pollack, Ian Watson and seven others. Simon & Schuster are a new publishing venture on this side of the Atlantic, although their name has long been established in America. The Editorial Director for fiction at the London-based company is Robyn Sisman, who previously worked for J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd (publishers, in 1985, of *Interzone: The 1st Anthology*). She also intends to produce a collection of Theodore Sturgeon's best stories later this year.

But Simon & Schuster are not the only British publishing house now taking an active interest in science fiction and fantasy. New publishers are springing up, and older ones are turning afresh to sf – to such an extent that one is tempted to say "it's boom time again, folks." Eight or ten years ago if your sf world was rejected by Gollancz you immediately turned to such publishers as Faber & Faber, Sidgwick & Jackson, Dennis Dobson, or – at the very bottom of the heap – Robert Hale. But the latter four all withdrew from the field by the early 1980s, and several lean years followed. Thanks to the nous of their new sf editor, Malcolm Edwards, **Victor Gollancz** Ltd consolidated their position as Britain's leading publishers of science fiction (and have recently expanded their sf production by starting a softcover list of "Classic SF" titles, to be followed by a new mass-market paperback line this spring). However, Gollancz now have much stiffer competition.

Among the new houses is **Headline** Book Publishing, whose sf and fantasy list is being selected by Jo Fletcher (her name should be well known to members of the British Fantasy Society). Among the recently merged and revitalized companies are **Unwin Hyman** Ltd (a fusion of Allen & Unwin and Bell & Hyman), where the fiction editor is Jane Johnson; and **Century Hutchinson** (editor Ann Suster), who are now publishing both hardcover and mass-market paperback sf (the latter under their Arrow Books imprint). **New English Library**, now merged with Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, have a recently-appointed sf editor, Kathy Gale, who wishes to make NEL a leader

in the field once more. Meanwhile, **Penguin Books**, long in the doldrums as far as sf is concerned, have shown marked signs of improvement recently – especially with the launch of their large-format "Classic SF" series (not to be confused with Gollancz's series of the same title).

Other steady producers include **Grafton Books** (formerly Granada, now part of the Collins empire), where the resident sf expert is Nick Austin; and **Macdonald/Futura**, where Richard Evans has much of the say in selecting sf and fantasy. Then there's **Women's Press**, whose all-female sf list has already been well publicized in *Interzone*; Transworld Publishers, who include **Bantam Press** and **Corgi Books**; and **Associated Book Publishers**, who include **Methuen** Paperbacks. All in all, it's a very active scene, with book editors competing keenly for the best science fiction. We hope that a little of this "prosperity" rubs off on *IZ* (and on the writers we have discovered).

Small press news: Gordon Benson Jr of **Galactic Central Publications**, PO Box 40494, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196, USA, has sent us his latest pair of bibliographies. These small green pamphlets, which he sells for \$2 apiece, are devoted to complete, detailed listings of the works of Philip K. Dick and Philip Jose Farmer. They're right up to date, and excellent value for money. The latest issue of the French paperback magazine, **Science Fiction**, is entirely devoted to Phil Dick. Its 244 pages contain material by Thomas M. Disch, K.W. Jeter, Michael Swanwick and many others. *Science Fiction 7/8* is edited by Daniel Riche, and is available from Editions Denoel, 19 Rue de l'Universite, 75007 Paris, France.

**PulpSmith** is a digest-sized American magazine which publishes general fiction. The latest issue we have seen (Vol. 6 No. 4, Winter '87) is devoted to "fantasy & sci-fi", with stories by Frank Belknap Long, Jay Rothbell, David Bunch, Ardath Mayhaz, Manly Wade Wellman and others. The magazine is in receipt of a National Endowment for the Arts grant (so *Interzone* is not the only one to subsist partially on public money!), and is edited by Harry Smith and Thomas Tolnay. **PulpSmith** is available from The Generalist Association Inc., 5 Beckman St., New York, NY 10038, USA.

The tiny fanzine **REM** has amusing stuff by Bruce Sterling and Walter Jon

Williams in its April 1987 issue. It is produced by the expatriate Charles Platt, who is now into desk-top publishing. There is a passing reference to this magazine in the "Orson Buggy" column: "*Interzone* has long had an identity problem – a British magazine in which the best stories have often been contributed by Americans, an avant-garde science-fiction magazine in an era where the avant-garde is either dead or assimilated. Very little in *Interzone* could not appear in *Omni* or *Asimov's*, so it's good to see Ian Watson's 'Jingling Geordie's Hole' (issue 17), a thoroughly British story about the awful consequences of schoolboy buggery. Genuinely unprintable in any U.S. magazine, and thoroughly disquieting up to its rather formulaic ending." Charles Platt has changed address: he is now at 594 Broadway, Room 1208, New York, NY 10012, USA.

Finally, back to book-publishing news. Les Escott has founded **Morrigan Publications** (a sort of off-shoot Kerosina Books, the small press which has had considerable success with its novels by Keith Roberts and Richard Cowper – see the adverts elsewhere in this issue). Morrigan's first title is *Death Arms* by the American sf writer K.W. Jeter. We hope to run an interview with the interesting Mr Jeter in a future *IZ*.

**STOP PRESS:** J.G. Ballard has delivered his new novel, *The Day of Creation*, to Gollancz. From early reports, we gather that it's not sf or fantasy, but a contemporary novel set in Africa. This, his first new book since *Empire of the Sun* (1984), should be published in September 1987.

## Terry Carr

Malcolm Edwards writes:

Terry Carr, one of America's leading science fiction editors and anthologists, died on 7th April at the early age of 50. He had suffered for some years from diabetes and a congestive heart condition, though he always appeared cheerful and indeed healthy.

In the closely knit sf community Terry Carr was one of the best-liked and most respected figures. He will be sadly missed.

# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Kim Newman

The Atomic Cinema is thriving currently: with ice-cool commie Pierce Brosnan assembling a small atom bomb in Milton Keynes in *The Fourth Protocol*, much as Valerie Singleton and Peter Purves used to make rocketships out of Squeezy bottles on *Blue Peter* in the 60s; half the used-up comedians in the English-speaking world press-ganged into the service of Whoops Apocalypse!, a would-be comic rerun of *The Bedford Incident* that perversely eliminates all the things in the original TV series that threatened to be funny and replaces them with Rik Mayall saying "fuck" and jokes about sailors having their goolies cut off; Erland Josephson praying away WW III and burning his house down in Tarkovsky's Ingmar Bergman gloom-alike *The Sacrifice*; leaky barrels of nuclear waste producing gloopy mutants in a matched pair of teen monster comedy splatter movies, *The Toxic Avenger* and *Glass of Nuke 'Em High* ("they believed in the three Rs, readin', writin' and radiation!") from Troma, a US low budget outfit whose main achievement is that they make Charles Band's Empire Pictures look like a class act; and David Bowie moaning yet another dreary title song for *When the Wind Blows*, an interminably talky cartoon which should prove a godsend for CND-inclined parents who want to offer their children some biodegradable and ideologically sound substitute when they beg to be allowed to see *Transformers - The Movie*.

But the most interesting of the current crop of Bomb movies is the resolutely backward-looking *Desert Bloom*, a coming-of-age film set in Las Vegas against the background of the first peace-time A-Bomb tests. 13-year-old Rose (Annabeth Gish) puts up with an AEC employee mother (JoBeth Williams) who has an aphorism for every occasion ("a girl who gets all wrapped up in herself makes a very small package") and a drunken stepfather (Jon Voight) suffering from WW II-induced traumas of the type the cinema usually only allows Vietnam veterans. Along comes Auntie Starr (Ellen Barkin), impossibly voluptuous in high heels

and Monroe-style red dresses, needing to spend 42 days in Nevada in order to qualify for her divorce, and soon family affairs are coming to a crisis which forces Rose to run away into the desert on the very night the Big Blast is due. Directed for American Public Television by Eugene Corr, and scripted out of a series of improvisation workshops, *Desert Bloom* is sometimes rosy technically (lots of boom mike shots), but manages to avoid the pitfalls of two potentially embarrassing genres by setting the family melodrama business against the background of retro-aware nuke jokiness.

One dreads that the film will close with a roll-call of all the Nevadans who have subsequently died of Bomb-related leukaemia, or an American Graffiti "Where Are They Now" announcement showing Rose leading an anti-nuclear protest march, but *Desert Bloom* refreshingly (unlike *When the Wind Blows*) lets the audience draw its own conclusions. Nevertheless, there is plenty of Atomic Cafe-style detail about air raid drills with schoolyards full of children prostrating themselves as the siren goes off, marketing ploys like Voight renaming his garage "Jack's Atomic Gas Station," and the blitheness with which Williams throws a party to commemorate her sister's divorce and the A-Bomb test. After the guests have stirred at dawn to watch the mushroom cloud rise over the desert, a radio announcer cuts in on the soundtrack with "good morning, survivors!"

Meanwhile, back in the remake/sequel/series/homage territory, we have the big budget likes of *The Fly*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and *The Voyage Home: Star Trek IV*. Of this batch, David Cronenberg's *The Fly* is the most successful, partially because it has learned the lesson of last year's *Invaders From Mars*: in remaking a cult classic that may not actually be all that good, it is probably an idea to ignore the original altogether and go your own way. Like the 1958 movie, directed by nonentity Kurt Neumann from a script by then-nobody James Clavell from a short story by George

Langelaan that appeared in that s-f/horror haven, *Playboy*, Cronenberg's picture is about a scientist who invents a matter transporter and makes the mistake of testing it on himself when there happens to be a fly in the works. Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum), unlike Andre Delambre (David Hedison), emerges looking and feeling fine, and then gradually turns into a monster because his genes have been scrambled. For a while, Seth doesn't seem all that bothered by his fate: he can do gymnastics in his laboratory, make athletic love to his girlfriend (Geena Davis) and, in a scene whose effectiveness is rumoured to be responsible for the box-office failure of Sylvester Stallone's *Over the Top*, wrench an arm-wrestler's hand off the bone. Then the make-up takes over, and Seth goes the way of *The Incredible Melting Man* by falling apart while developing super-strength, the ability to walk on the ceiling and an absolutely disgusting means of digestion.

*The Fly* is going to upset a lot of people: it's the first big-budget genre movie since *The Exorcist* that is as extreme as the lower-profile end of the market. It's not as strong as many of Cronenberg's earlier horrors (we see Seth's ear fall off, but not his genitals), and certainly hasn't got the sickness quotient of Romero's *Day of the Dead*, but it is going to be seen by a lot of people who would give the usual splatter movie a miss, and Jeff Goldblum is the first monster since Frederic March as Mr Hyde to be a serious Oscar contender. The remarkable thing about the film, in fact, is that it has emerged as such an uncompromised work. Given that it's an expensive remake of a kitsch monster movie, *The Fly* is genuinely innovative: a chamber piece that makes do without plot complications (it has basically three characters and one major set), melodramatic contrivances, or (a maggot-ridden dream sequence aside) contrived thrills to keep up the pacing. Cronenberg and Goldblum allow themselves to rabbit on about the new flesh and the purposes of disease, but the film can also side with Davis, who just stands back horrified at her lover's declaration that

he wants to become the first insect politician, but still decides to stick by him even though he has a condition that makes AIDS, cancer and leprosy look like minor allergies. Although expensive, and a far more concerted attempt to take the commercial high ground, *The Fly* is actually a smaller film than many of Cronenberg's earlier, messier works (films like *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Scanners* and *Videodrome* spit out ideas nine to the dozen). Like *The Brood*, it concentrates on personal angst rather than societal psychosis, and perhaps it is this reduction of scope that makes the film slightly less satisfying, less rewarding than the best of Cronenberg. One viewing will get you all you want out of *The Fly*, but you'll never get to the bottom of *Videodrome*.

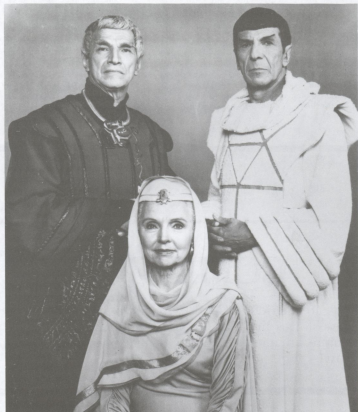
**Little Shop of Horrors** is the film of the successful Broadway musical based on Roger Corman and Charles Griffith's legendary 1960 quickie about the nerd and the man-eating plant (in itself an uncredited adaption of John Collier's short story "Green Thoughts"). The first film was reputedly thrown together over a weekend "because it was raining and we couldn't play tennis," and has become an often-revived cult classic (although it is a touch less good than the same team's *A Bucket of Blood*). The remake offers many pleasures: a definitive dumb blonde-with-aspirations performance from Ellen Greene, who played in the original production of the show; most of Alan Menken and Howard Ashman's terrific 60s-flavoured score; an excellent, large set capturing the beauty in squalor of New York's Skid Row; an endearingly Muppetish killer plant; and Steve Martin's showstopping presence as a sadistic dentist ("I thrill when I drill a bicuspid/Even though people say that I'm maladjusted"). However, somewhere in the process of adaptation, the elements that make Corman's ruthless little comedy work have been lost. In the original, Seymour the jerk is forced to play the most basic American success scenario imaginable by killing in order to improve his position in the world; here, the hero (Rick Moranis) is an innocent who is never actually implicated in his plant's hungry murder binges, and the finale (reshot after preview audiences nixed the show's downbeat finish) allows him to reap the fruits of the monster's rampages without so much as a guilty conscience. Without Corman's off-key moralizing and backdoor political content, *The Little Shop of Horrors* is splashy, pleasant, dawdling and rather forgettable.

**The Voyage Home**, as it is officially called in its credits (with *Star Trek IV* as subtitle), is announced as "A

Leonard Nimoy Film," but is far less egomaniacal than the last installment in the saga of this bunch of over-the-hill TV actors and their attempts to get back to 1966 when they first signed up for the *Enterprise*. The movie has to spend a full quarter of its running time tying up plot threads left over from the last two movies before it can get to its own story—in which William Shatner and co. must travel back to 1980's San Francisco and save some whales in order to prevent the Earth of the future being trashed by a space probe from that unidentified place beyond Gene Roddenberry's imagination whence several similar devices have appeared from time to time in earlier TV episodes and films. With some script contribution by Nicholas Meyer, who helmed *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, *The Voyage Home* is an improvement over the dreary narcissism of Nimoy's *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (which consisted mainly of the director's friends saying what a great guy he was), and some of the byplay between the out-of-time series regulars and the modern world is amusing, as when Kirk adopts the language he has learned from Harold

Robbins and Jacqueline Susann ("ah yes," comments Spock, "the giants") to blend into the 20th Century. However, the cast's advancing years and still-inherent lack of acting ability (the accents of James Doohan and Walter Koenig are as terrible now as they were 20 years ago) remains a major drawback, as does a storyline awash with contrivances, awkward plot patches, dead spots and liberal eco-blather. The finale echoes those of recent long-delayed sequels like *Psycho II* and *The Color of Money* by taking us back to where we came in: in this case, with Kirk demoted to Captain and given charge of a restored *Enterprise* in order to be packed off on another "five-year-mission" to get him out of everybody's way again.

**A**lan Parker's *Angel Heart*, adapted from William Hjortsberg's *Falling Angel*, is one of those near-misses that is immeasurably more infuriating than an outright disaster. Set in 1955, it follows rumbled private eye Mickey Rourke through a rainsoaked, garbage-filled New York and a voodoo-haunted, oppressive New Orleans at the behest of sinister Louis Cyphre (geddit?) as he



Mark Lennard, Jane Wyatt and Leonard Nimoy in 'The Voyage Home'



searches for a missing big band singer who has welshed on a deal. It's a film noir/horror movie, but Parker is so intent on the details – repeated close-ups of whirring propeller fans, tap-dancers on rainy streets, uniformly dingy settings – that he misses out totally on any sense of narrative drive. There are plenty of very bloody corpses and the finale throws up a surprise ending that was equally guessable in the novel but handled without quite so much clumsy exposition, but Parker (who also scripts) shows no enthusiasm for narrative drive at all. Rourke's Harry Angel spends over half the film just loitering in the rain waiting for the solution to dawn on him, and by the time one of the supporting characters gets fed up enough to tell him who the mysterious Johnny Favourite really is the audience has long since lost interest.

However, there is an intriguingly sinister bit of background detail in the effective performance of Robert DeNiro as Louis Cyphre, with neat talons, long hair and ill-advised contact lenses. Everybody knows by now that DeNiro approaches each role with almost fanatical devotion: learning to play the clarinet for New York, New York, studying to give a mass and perform rites for his role as a priest in *True Confessions*, hanging out with total scum for *Taxi Driver*, and not only learning to box but undergoing surgery to give him the right beaten-up body for *Raging Bull*. So, given that he is here playing the Prince of Darkness, the Father of All Evil, the Fount of Depravity, just what did he do to prepare for the role? And whose heart did he use?

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# Michael Swanwick

## Foresight

**H**e died. They killed John Fox in the unlit parking lot behind an abandoned Safeway on the outskirts of the Altoona Reclamation Area. There were four of them, tall and slender in Italian suits. Two knelt on his arms, and another held his legs while the fourth injected a cardioparalytic into his heart.

He whited out for an instant as his head hit the tarmac, and when he came to, the pavement was gritty under his cheek, and he could see a flattened section of rusted tailpipe, the styrofoam sleeve from a Coke bottle, and a galaxy of broken glass. A cigarette coal tumbled inches from his face, a tiny midnight sun. It was the cheery reddish-orange of Halloween pumpkins and midwinter bonfires. The wind puffed it away. Crickets chirped in the tangle of deadwood, chickweed and thistle at the verge of the lot.

There was a momentary thrill of horror as he looked down the narrowing tunnel of his life at the instant of approaching death. So near, and beyond it... blackness, mystery. It might be that all men die alike, but it was still awful to die in ignorance. "Why are you doing this?" he cried.

The three with the stiff, robotlike expressions of predeterminists, went about their business as if he were about to say nothing – but the fourth smiled sadly, even fondly. He paused, the needle-case halfway out of his inner jacket pocket. "Who can say? The past is unknowable, and the future is fixed – only in the present moment can we act with grace. You are about to die well. Let that comfort you." He made a short, formal bow.

They were Chinese, all of them, corporate assassins from Neue Telefunken's Taiwanese division. They stepped from their stretch Cadillac smoothly, calmly. They knew he was about to die as well as he did. Their faces were white triangles, and they had shadows in place of their eyes. One rolled down his

window to flick away his cigarette. The coal was knocked free.

Fox leaned against his car, trying to compose himself. All that was important now, as his assassin would soon say, was to die well. The Camaro was a ruin – a hole had been punched through the engine block by an illegal, but quite effective, Israeli combat laser.

The long, midnight-black limo whispered to a halt just ten yards behind him.

**A**n hour before, Fox sat naked on a chair beside an unmade hotel bed, alone. His trousers, belt still in the loops, lay at his feet, but he made no move to pick them up. He smoked a Marlboro slowly, thinking about his death. The killers must be on their way already. They probably had some kind of tracer on his car, because he wasn't going to notice anyone following him when he left. Then again – they were going to find him. They might not need a mechanism; maybe Fate would simply bring them to him when the time came.

The woman left. She picked up her handbag.

Lying on the bed, Fox watched her dress. Her suit was expensive: grey wool, cut-for-success, with a little corporate jacket and a single string of pearls so luminous they glowed on her neck. She wore an imported German *fikt-nicht* skirt, and authoritative midheight heels. But under that were a black lace bra, silk panties so sheer that her pubic triangle showed through, and a frilly garter belt to hold up those smoke-grey boardroom stockings. It was both luscious and impersonal watching this stranger dress, like viewing an erotic movie. He wondered who she was. A pickup? She wasn't a hooker – not with those clothes, that expensive three-colour gold wedding band. (There was no ring on his hand, so probably he wasn't her husband.) Those were intimate underthings. Maybe they had meant a lot to each other. No one could tell.

The woman pulled her lingerie on quickly, dis-

comforted by his presence but too proud to ask him not to look. She wouldn't meet his eyes. Fox found her embarrassment and tension arousing. She was obviously wondering who he was, how deeply involved they were. Possibly she was thinking forward to her husband finding out. Her breasts were large and lovely. He'd left bite-marks on one; the marks were red and angry, and when she put on the bra, it didn't cover them all.

They made love. There were occasional awkwardnesses, for they no longer knew each other's bodies or tastes. But his coming death, the knowledge that this was his last time with a woman, made Fox hot and desperate. The woman too – though he had no idea why. Maybe it would be a long time after this before her next good session in bed. When she took her clothes off, she paused briefly to give him the chance to look away politely. He didn't.

"We might as well get on with this," she said, touching the top button of her pewter silk blouse. She was blushing. "Since we're going to do it anyway."

"No," he had just said. "Whatever we do, let's not do it because we have to. For this one present moment, we're free to do whatever we wish. If we don't act that way, we might just as well be zombies."

He thought forward to his assassin, and wished he knew the man's name.

"Go with God then, Fox," Gingrich said. There were tears in his eyes.

A moment before he had asked, "You won't tell me how you're going to die?" and Fox had replied, "What would be the point?" It was time he left for his last meeting with Carolyn.

Gingrich's apartment had multicoloured Aztec-cut carpeting, uncluttered walls, and a bachelor's fussy tidiness. Solemn music soothed the ear, and holographic abstracts played against the gently curving beige ceiling. It was new construction, a rarity in these days. There were few enough luxuries to go around, with nine-tenths of the world in virtual chaos and anarchy.

"I can't imagine how I ever got this job," Gingrich said. He ran a hand over his round, hairless head. "I'm too soft. It hurts me to see one of my boys walk out to die."

Unmoved, Fox had said nothing. A moment before Gingrich sighed and said, "You've got a good record, Fox – I'll read your files after you leave. A very good record, I – well, never mind. This is the last time we'll talk, and I still have to give you your recruitment pitch."

"Go ahead," Fox had said.

"John, there was a time – not too long ago, we think – when consciousness was... different. Memory extended not just a few seconds into the past, but all the way back to birth. And, if you can believe the records from that period, they could not remember any of their future. Not an instant." He shook his head. "Almost unimaginable. You know, it'll be said that life is like climbing a very long stairway, able to see from your feet to that closed door at the top, while the steps you've left behind crumble to nothing. I think life then must have been like climbing that same stairway backwards, able to see all the past, but none of what was about to happen to you." He'd paused

for effect. "Then came the Event." Before this, he went on to describe the chaos that had followed the change of consciousness – if that was what the Event had been – and the rise of the Reclamation Authority, as would be reconstructed by scholars forty years hence. Then he had explained what the Authority had expected of Fox, what it had given him in return. Fox listened mechanically, his thoughts on Carolyn Mies. She was a hot number, whoever she was, and he liked her style. The speech was for the benefit of his earlier, younger self, and he presumed he'd have thought it over long before. If not – well, it was too late now.

An hour before, Gingrich greeted him with a slap on the shoulder and a firm handclasp. He ushered Fox into the apartment.

Standing in the hallway, overseen by a dozen mechanicals, Fox made a face. He disliked his superior's false camaraderie, that forced, jowly heartiness. A battered Sony bodycounter strapped to the wall by the door clicked softly. A Chase-Geigy gene-sniffer hummed to itself. Cameras telemetered his image in infrared, visual and ultraviolet to Central Accountability. He wouldn't let Gingrich see how he felt, though. It must be rough on the poor bastard, sending old friends out to die, and then knowing that he had as good as killed total strangers.

The night before, he and Carolyn met in a hotel built a century before the chaos. The building was old and shadowy, drenched in mystery and forgotten time. It was a good hour's drive from Pittsburgh, deep in dreamlogic Pennsylvania, and then the desk clerk was a thin, pinched man with wire-rims and the dusty-glass eyes of a predeterminist. He moved like an automaton – stiffly, impersonally – never quite focusing on Fox.

Fox paid with a large bill. Carolyn was already waiting in the car.

It was all so mechanical. What would happen if he yanked the bill back from the clerk? Probably the man's hand would close about empty air, transport nothing to the register, dole out change, slam the money drawer shut. I won't pay, he thought in sudden rebellion. I'll resist. But of course he would forget his resolve an instant after he made it.

The room was Victorian in proportion, small with high walls. The ceiling was moulded plaster – fruit clusters, vine, cornucopias, all gone soft and vague from uncounted coats of paint. The wallpaper had been rubbed all but transparent by generations of feather-light touches, the pattern gone and indistinct shapes threatening to emerge from beneath. The thick wood door fit clumsily in its frame, and its brass knob was pitted with corrosion.

Carolyn's beeper lay neatly atop her folded clothing. They stood by the window, lights out, watching.

Directly across the street was a dark Rite-Aid. The Reclamation Authority had restored electricity as a prelude to opening a local office, and the red neon DRUGS sign sputtered and hissed. To one side of the Rite-Aid was a burned-out Florsheim's, and to the other, a Seven-Eleven. Cold white light flared from the Seven-Eleven, and occasionally people wandered in and out.

"No responsibility, no guilt, no conscience," Carolyn concluded.

"I suppose that, in our different ways, this is what each of us is fighting," Fox said.

A bonfire had been built in the middle of the street, and the locals were drawn to its light. A line of middle-class respectables had set up folding chairs at the flickering edge of light. A heavy woman with the jaw of a snapping turtle knitted.

Beside the fire a woman was pulling the train. She looked young because she was skinny and beautiful because she was naked and her hair was long and blond, but a closer look revealed her as old and plain. The men standing in line for her looked considerably less interested than did the spectators.

Beside the turtle woman an old man in John Deere cap, plaid shirt and grey chinos belted above the waist, stood, unzipped and casually urinated. Nobody turned to look. The watchers gasped, and then a woman ran out of the darkness, seized one of the men in line and with a sudden wrench tumbled him into the fire. He leaped up, frantically beating down the flames in his hair. Fox saw that the hair was previously charred.

A nondescript man walked up to the fire, shook his head, walked away. He returned, shook his head, walked away again. And again. Once started, he was incapable of stopping, caught in a behaviour-loop by his own sense of futility.

"Grotesque," Carolyn said. She nudged Fox, pointing off to the side. The desk clerk stood in the shadows, watching. There was a gleam of life in those taxidermy eyes, a sour, lascivious smile on those thin lips.

As they moved to the window, Fox wondered at his meeting Carolyn two nights in a row. Could her husband be away? Or had he – horrible possibility, but by now Fox barely knew the woman – agreed to this, as part of some mousetrap operation, some elaborate plot to snare him?

As if reading his mind, Carolyn had said, "Helmut is a zombie. It doesn't matter if he finds out – he won't do anything because he's not going to do anything. He just does whatever he knows he's going to do."

A dark flash of doubt had hit Fox. "That's all we do too – really. It's not as if we can change anything that's going to happen. So what's the difference between us and him?"

She'd laughed then, and said, "Intent."

The sheets were a sticky, crumpled mass hanging off the foot of the bed. Sometime during their hours of sex, the mattress had been all but kicked bare. Between bouts, their talk was as urgent and passionate as their lovemaking. By the time they first got intimate they were already half in love.

Taking off his shirt, Fox had said, "I know that you're going to turn me over to your assassins tomorrow."

"Oh yes?" She did not meet his eyes.

"I wrote myself a letter a year ago. When we first met. With a note to read it tomorrow morning." He talked rapidly, anxious to get it said while he still felt for her. "It says to tell you that it's all right, that I understand. That if I'd had a choice, I'd still have done everything we did."

"Only a year?" she'd said wistfully.

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**SCIENCE FICTION**

Checking in, with Carolyn waiting impatiently by the ancient Otis elevator – the black iron-work doors open, the interior walnut-panelled and erotically snug – he had a brief conversation with the desk clerk. “The Reclamation will be coming through here soon,” he said. “I imagine you’re excited about the changes that are coming.”

“No, I’m not,” the man had snapped. His eyes still focused somewhere beyond Fox. A hand touched the register. “You’ve been here off-and-on some dozen times, all with the same woman. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Well I do. I write it down. I write down what happens on the street every night too. When they bring in their machines, their location meters, their policemen and their orders, that’ll all end. The only pleasure those fuckers leave me will be reading the goddamned book.”

On the way in, Fox realized that the man was angry because he was losing his position. Soon, he would be obeying orders. Then he would no longer be the detached observer and recorder, the omnipotent voyeur. He would no longer be God.

The Porsche eased out of the parking garage. Car-counters tagged it and automatically flashed holographic directional arrows onto his windshield. Fox followed their directions exactly. He assumed there was some good reason for their orders.

He was at a training seminar in the old Koppers Building. Behind the conference table, the mirror glass towers and soaring crenelations of PPG Place dominated the horizon. Most of the trainees were old, factory managers and economic analysts, about to ease into retirement and the senility of fatalism. But there was also a twenty-five-year-old, a victim of an impending industrial accident.

The table fed him a program. The only interesting item was number eight. Technology Creep Through Temporal Backfeed. He was sorry to have forgotten that. He also got a machine printout of his activities in the past week. Fox saw that he’d left the surveillance-net areas five times. There was a computer generated reprimand at the bottom of the page. It probably would’ve been stronger, he surmised, had he stayed in town. One thing he disliked about the new order was its latent puritanism; lust was too dreamlogic for the system to condone.

Gingrich closed with a little speech: “What was the collapse itself like – the time when the flow of memory abruptly and totally changed in nature and direction? Scholars will be able to tell us surprisingly little. The Event is like a black hole in history, surrounded by impenetrable mystery. It cannot even be dated. Records from that period are confusing and contradictory. Most likely the Event was a natural occurrence – we know so little about time or consciousness, it seems highly dubious the disaster was man-made.”

While Gingrich preceded in a historical vein, Fox doodled on his notepad: long spiralling stairways that led nowhere and ended in whiteness. He tried to imagine experience and memory both running forward. He didn’t think it would change much. Water would still run downhill. Modern times probably differed very little from ancient. Conversations were held backwards, but that was only a social convention,

a polite means of those speaking retaining some understanding of what they were saying as the conversation unravelled beneath them.

“Our struggle is not entirely against the blind forces of ignorance and confusion, though,” Gingrich concluded. “Speaking in complete confidence, many of the multinational corporations would like nothing better than to grab control of big chunks of real estate and create corporate states – the way they will in Italy and Japan. In addition to the work of reconstruction, we are engaged in an extended covert war for control of North America.”

“Who’s going to win?” someone has asked.

“We are.” Gingrich squared up his notes even with the edge of the table. He wasn’t going to glance at them once, so far. “Ultimately. Before I retire. But it’ll be nip-and-tuck there for a time to come. We’re lucky to have leverage over one of the major multinationals. Soon they’ll be as good as in our pockets.”

Oddly enough, Gingrich was looking directly at Fox when he said this. And smiling.

In the preceding months, Fox grew closer to Carolyn. They met more and more frequently, and he learned more than he wanted to know about Helmut Mies. Until finally, their first time in the dream-logic hotel with the mad desk clerk, he had put the question to her directly, and Carolyn told him, “I married Helmut to get control of Telefunken-Amerika. I held eight percent of the stock and a seat on the board, and it was the only way to go any higher.”

Just before that she began to cry. “No, I married him because I was going to. I hate the fat son of a bitch. It’s like fucking a robot. What do I care about Telefunken-Amerika? Hell, it’s only a regional, an out-colony of the real thing. Do you know what’s going to happen to me?”

“No I don’t,” he’d said quietly.

“I’m going to grow extremely old and bitter, and I’ll have nominal control over Telefunken-Amerika and I won’t give a shit. It’s your people who will be making the decisions anyway. When you’re gone, all I have to look forward to is going predetermined and then senile.

One of Gingrich’s clever young men came and took the stacks of floppies away, hands cupped protectively about each load. The office was as fastidiously neat as Gingrich’s apartment would be, with clear work surfaces and not so much as a spent staple on the cream shag rug. The heavy cranberry drapes were kept shut.

Gingrich unloaded the ostrich-hide briefcase slowly, examining the label of each floppy disk and piling them into short stacks. “This is beautiful,” he chortled. “John, I don’t believe you have any idea what you’ve got here.”

In the coming year, Fox would learn to respect his boss, and even to like the man – though he suspected they had never actually been friends. “Samuel,” he had said, “I don’t want to ask her for these. Can you understand that? I love the woman, and if I could change one act of my life, it would be to not ask her to do this tomorrow.” He slammed his fist into his leg, hard, with the knuckles down, and savoured the pain.



Awkwardly, Gingrich put a hand on Fox's shoulder. It rested there like an inanimate object – a banana, or a box of cornmeal. Before a long silence, he said, "She's already given them to you. I think we can assume that – how else could you have gotten them? If you don't ask for them, then all the guilt rests on her alone, and none on you. If you love her, you'll be as eloquent and persuasive as you know how tomorrow."

Fox gave him the briefcase.

The hotel was right in the middle of town, with location meters in every hall, and genesniffer/bodycounter units over the doors. They weren't ashamed of their love, and they didn't care who knew about it.

It was late afternoon when Carolyn left, called away to an emergency session of Telefunken-Amerika's security people. She nodded to the briefcase on the way out and said, "Now we're even. I'm going to have you killed, and you've made me betray my husband, my career, everything I've worked for all my life." She was smiling as she said it.

"It must be a relief to have done with it," he'd said. "To forget. Now you'll never know who it was that sold you out."

"I don't want to forget a thing. But I suppose it's not my choice, is it?"

A slash of honey-coloured sunlight knifed through the air from the gap between the drapes. It caressed Carolyn's naked cheeks as she struggled into her blouse, danced to her thighs, then leaped from her body as she reached for her panties.

The beeper went off and she slapped it silent.

A moment before they were sprawled lazily across the bed, legs tangled, skin slippery. "Do you keep a diary?" Carolyn asked.

"No," he'd said. "What would be the use?"

"I'm going to burn mine just before I betray you. So I won't remember that you ever existed. Do you understand that? If I can't have you, I don't want the least trace of you to survive."

"You're a romantic."

He'd gasped with pleasure on entering her. Having known all his life that it was going to be like this didn't spoil the present instant one bit.

Beneath her business suit Carolyn wore the same lacy underthings she would wear on their last night together... a bleak joke that made them both laugh.

"I'd do anything for you," she said. "You know that. I wish you wanted to do something filthy to me, I wish you wanted to hit me. I'd let you do that." In the elevator, her long red nails left love tracks down his back. She ran her hands up under his shirt, and a small white button went flying. He stroked her back, as if he could melt the silk of her blouse with the heat of his palms. They were only seconds away from lovemaking, and the memory of it aroused them both to feverish heat. Fox guessed that this would be their first time together. They stepped into the elevator. The door opened.

A few minutes earlier, they met for the first time.

Michael Swanwick lives in Philadelphia, USA. He published his first short stories in the early 1980s, and his first novel, *In the Drift*, in 1985. His second novel, *Vacuum Flow-ers* (Arbor House, 1987) is forthcoming in this country from Simon & Schuster Ltd. It is a fast-moving, mind-bending tale of space habitats, artificial intelligence and multiple personalities.

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# Iain M. Banks

## A Gift from the Culture

Money is a sign of poverty. This is an old Culture saying I remember every now and again, especially when I'm being tempted to do something I know I shouldn't, and there's money involved (when is there not?).

I looked at the gun, lying small and precise in Cruzell's broad, scarred hand, and the first thing I thought – after Where the hell did they get one of those? – was: Money is a sign of poverty. However appropriate the thought might have been, it wasn't much help.

I was standing outside a no-credit gambling club in Vreccis Low City in the small hours of a wet week-night, looking at a pretty, toy-like handgun while two large people I owed a lot of money to asked me to do something extremely dangerous and worse than illegal. I was weighing up the relative attractions of trying to run away (they'd shoot me), refusing (they'd beat me up; probably I'd spend the next few weeks developing a serious medical bill), and doing what Kaddus and Cruzell asked me to do, knowing that while there was a chance I'd get away with it – uninjured, and solvent again – the most likely outcome was a messy and probably slow death while assisting the security services with their enquiries.

Kaddus and Cruzell were offering me all my markers back, plus – once the thing was done – a tidy sum on top, just to show there were no hard feelings.

I suspected they didn't anticipate having to pay the final instalment of the deal.

So, I knew that logically what I ought to do was tell them where to shove their fancy designer pistol, and accept a theoretically painful but probably not terminal beating. Hell, I could switch the pain off (having a Culture background does have some advantages), but what about that hospital bill?

I was up to my scalp in debt already.

"What's the matter, Wrobik?" Cruzell drawled, taking a step nearer, under the shelter of the club's drip-

ping eaves. Me with my back against the warm wall, the smell of wet pavements in my nose and a taste like metal in my mouth. Kaddus and Cruzell's limousine idled at the kerb; I could see the driver inside, watching us through an open window. Nobody passed on the street outside the narrow alley. A police cruiser flew over, high up, lights flashing through the rain and illuminating the underside of the rain clouds over the city. Kaddus looked up briefly, then ignored the passing craft. Cruzell shoved the gun towards me. I tried to shrink back.

"Take the gun, Wrobik," Kaddus said tiredly. I licked my lips, stared down at the pistol.

"I can't," I said. I stuck my hands in my coat pockets. "Sure you can," Cruzell said. Kaddus shook his head.

"Wrobik, don't make things difficult for yourself; take the gun. Just touch it first, see if our information is correct. Go on; take it." I stared, transfixed, at the small pistol. "Take the gun, Wrobik. Just remember to point it at the ground, not at us; the driver's got a laser on you and he might think you meant to use the gun on us... come on; take it, touch it."

I couldn't move, I couldn't think. I just stood, hypnotized. Kaddus took hold of my right wrist and pulled my hand from my pocket. Cruzell held the gun up near my nose; Kaddus forced my hand onto the pistol. My hand closed round the grip like something lifeless.

The gun came to life; a couple of lights blinked dully, and the small screen above the grip glowed, flickering round the edges. Cruzell dropped his hand, leaving me holding the pistol; Kaddus smiled thinly.

"There, that wasn't difficult, now was it?" Kaddus said. I held the gun and tried to imagine using it on the two men, but I knew I couldn't, whether the driver had me covered or not.

"Kaddus," I said, "I can't do this. Something else;

I'll do anything else, but I'm not a hit-man; I can't —"

"You don't have to be an expert, Wrobik," Kaddus said quietly. "All you have to be is... whatever the hell you are. After that, you just point and squirt: like you do with your boyfriend." He grinned and winked at Cruizell, who bared some teeth. I shook my head.

"This is crazy, Kaddus. Just because the thing switches on for me —"

"Yeah; isn't that funny." Kaddus turned to Cruizell, looking up to the taller man's face and smiling. "Isn't that funny, Wrobik here being an alien? And him looking just like us."

"An alien and queer," Cruizell rumbled, scowling. "Shit."

"Look," I said, staring at the pistol, "it... this thing, it... it might not work," I finished lamely. Kaddus smiled.

"It'll work. A ship's a big target. You won't miss." He smiled again.

"But I thought they had protection against —"

"Lasers and kinetics they can deal with, Wrobik; this is something different. I don't know the technical details; I just know our radical friends paid a lot of money for this thing. That's enough for me."

Our radical friends. This was funny, coming from Kaddus. Probably he meant the Bright Path. People he'd always considered bad for business, just terrorists. I'd have imagined he'd sell them to the police on general principles, even if they did offer him lots of money. Was he starting to hedge his bets, or just being greedy? They have a saying here: Crime whispers; money talks.

"But there'll be people on the ship, not just —"

"You won't be able to see them. Anyway; they'll be some of the Guard, Naval brass, some Administration flunkies, Secret Service agents... What do you care about them?" Kaddus patted my damp shoulder. "You can do it."

I looked away from his tired grey eyes, down at the gun, quiet in my fist, small screen glowing faintly. Betrayed by my own skin, my own touch. I thought about that hospital bill again. I felt like crying, but that wasn't the done thing amongst the men here, and what could I say? *I was a woman. I was Culture.* But I had renounced these things, and now I am a man, and now I am here in the Free City of Vreccis, where nothing is free.

"All right," I said, a bitterness in my mouth, "I'll do it."

Cruizell looked disappointed. Kaddus nodded. "Good. The ship arrives Ninthday; you know what it looks like?" I nodded. "So you won't have any problems," Kaddus smiled thinly. "You'll be able to see it from almost anywhere in the City." He pulled out some cash and stuffed it into my coat pocket. "Get yourself a taxi. The underground's risky these days." He patted me lightly on the cheek; his hand smelt of expensive scents. "Hey, Wrobik; cheer up, yeah? You're going to shoot down a fucking starship. It'll be an experience." Kaddus laughed, looking at me and then at Cruizell, who laughed too, dutifully.

They went back to the car; it hummed into the night, tyres ripping at the rain-filled streets. I was left to watch the puddles grow, the gun hanging in my hand like guilt.



Illustrations by SMS

"I am a Light Plasma Projector, model LPP 91, series two, constructed in A/4882.4 at Manufactory Six in the Spanshacht-Trouferre Orbital, Orvoulos Cluster. Serial number 3685706. Brain value point one. AM battery powered, rating: indefinite. Maximum power on single-bolt:  $3.1 \times 8^{10}$  joules, recycle time 14 seconds. Maximum rate of fire: 260 RPS. Use limited to Culture genofixed individuals only through epidermal gene analysis. To use with gloves or light armour, access 'modes' store via command buttons. Unauthorized use is both prohibited and punishable. Skill requirement 12-75% C. Full instructions follow; use command buttons and screen to replay, search, pause or stop...

"Instructions, part one: Introduction. The LPP 91 is an operationally-intricate general-purpose 'peace'-rated weapon not suitable for full battle use; its design and performance parameters are based on the recommendations of -"

The gun sat on the table, telling me all about itself in a high, tinny voice while I lay slumped in a lounge, staring out over a busy street in Vreccis Low City. Underground freight trains shook the rickety apartment block every few minutes, traffic buzzed at street level, rich people and police moved through the skies in fliers and cruisers, and above them all the starships sailed.

I felt trapped between these strata of purposeful movements.

Far in the distance over the city, I could just see the slender, shining tower of the city's Lev tube, rising straight towards and through the clouds, on its way to space. Why couldn't the Admiral use the Lev instead of making a big show of returning from the stars in his own ship? Maybe he thought a glorified elevator was too undignified. Vainglorious bastards, all of them. They deserved to die (if you wanted to take that attitude), but why did I have to be the one to kill them? God-damned phallic starships.

Not that the Lev was any less prick-like, and anyway, no doubt if the Admiral had been coming down by the tube Kaddus and Cruzell would have told me to shoot it down; holy shit. I shook my head.

I was holding a long glass of jahl - Vreccis City's cheapest strong booze. It was my second glass, but I wasn't enjoying it. The gun chattered on, speaking to the sparsely furnished main room of our apartment. I was waiting for Maust, missing him even more than usual. I looked at the terminal on my wrist; according to the time display he should be back any moment now. I looked out into the weak, watery light of dawn. I hadn't slept yet.

The gun talked on. It used Marain, of course; the Culture's language. I hadn't heard that spoken for nearly eight standard years, and hearing it now I felt sad and foolish. My birthright; my people, my language. Eight years away, eight years in the wilderness. My great adventure, my renunciation of what seemed to me sterile and lifeless to plunge into a more vital society, my grand gesture... well, now it seemed like an empty gesture, now it looked like a stupid, petulant thing to have done.

I drank some more of the sharp-tasting spirit. The gun gibbered on, talking about beam-spread diameters, gyroscopic weave patterns, gravity-contour mode, line-of-sight mode, curve shots, spatter and

settings... I thought about glanding something soothing and cool, but I didn't; I had vowed not to use those cunningly altered glands eight years ago, and I'd broken that vow only twice, both times when I was in severe pain. Had I been courageous I'd have had the whole damn lot taken out, returned to their human-normal state, our original animal inheritance... but I am not courageous. I dread pain, and cannot face it naked, as these people do. I admire them, fear them, still cannot understand them. Not even Maust. In fact, least of all Maust. Perhaps you cannot ever love what you completely understand.

Eight years in exile, lost to the Culture, never hearing that silky, subtle, complexly simple language, and now when I do hear Marain, it's from a gun, telling me how to fire it so I can kill... what? Hundreds of people? Maybe thousands; it will depend on where the ship falls, whether it explodes (could primitive starships explode? I had no idea; that was never my field). I took another drink, shook my head. I couldn't do it.

I am Wrobik Sennkil, Vreccile citizen number... (I always forget; it's on my papers), male, prime race, aged thirty; part time freelance journalist (between jobs at the moment), and full time gambler (I tend to lose but I enjoy myself, or at least I did until last night). But I am, also, still Bahlln-Euchersa Wrobich Vress Schennil dam Flaysse, citizen of the Culture, born female, species mix too complicated to remember, aged sixty-eight, standard, and one-time member of the Contact section.

And a renegade; I chose to exercise the freedom the Culture is so proud of bestowing upon its inhabitants by leaving it altogether. It let me go, even helped me, reluctant though I was (but could I have forged my own papers, made all the arrangements by myself? No, but at least, after my education into the ways of the Vreccile Economic Community, and after the module rose, dark and silent, back into the night sky and the waiting ship, I have turned only twice to the Culture's legacy of altered biology, and not once to its artefacts. Until now; the gun rambles on). I abandoned a paradise I considered dull for a cruel and greedy system bubbling with life and incident; a place I thought I might find... what? I don't know. I didn't know when I left and I don't know yet, though at least here I found Maust, and when I am with him my searching no longer seems so lonely.

Until last night that search still seemed worthwhile. Now utopia sends a tiny package of destruction, a casual, accidental message.

Where did Kaddus and Cruzell get the thing? The Culture guards its weaponry jealously, even embarrassedly. You can't buy Culture weapons, at least not from the Culture. I suppose things go missing though; there is so much of everything in the Culture that objects must be mislaid occasionally. I took another drink, listening to the gun, and watching that watery, rainy-season sky over the rooftops, towers, aeriels, dishes and domes of the Great City. Maybe guns slip out of the Culture's manicured grasp more often than other products do; they betoken danger, they signify threat, and they will only be needed where there must be a fair chance of losing them, so they must disappear now and again, be taken

as prizes.

That, of course, is why they're built with inhibiting circuits which only let the weapons work for Culture people (sensible, non-violent, non-acquisitive Culture people, who of course would only use a gun in self-defence, for example, if threatened by some comparative barbarian...oh the self-satisfied Culture; its imperialism of smugness). And even this gun is antique; not obsolescent (for that is not a concept the Culture really approves of – it builds to last), but outdated; hardly more intelligent than a household pet, whereas modern Culture weaponry is sentient.

The Culture probably doesn't even make handguns any more. I've seen what it calls Personal Armed Escort Drones, and if, somehow, one of those fell into the hands of people like Kaddus and Cruizell, it would immediately signal for help, use its motive power to try and escape, shoot to injure or even kill anybody trying to use or trap it, attempt to bargain its way out, and destruct if it thought it was going to be taken apart or otherwise interfered with.

I drank some more jahl. I looked at the time again; Maust was late. The club always closed promptly, because of the police. They weren't allowed to talk to the customers after work; he always came straight back...I felt the start of fear, but pushed it away. Of course he'd be all right. I had other things to think about. I had to think this thing through. More jahl.

No, I couldn't do it. I left the Culture because it bored me, but also because the evangelical, interventionist morality of Contact sometimes meant doing just the sort of thing we were supposed to prevent others doing; starting wars, assassinating...all of it, all the bad things...I was never involved with Special Circumstances directly, but I knew what went on (Special Circumstances; Dirty Tricks, in other words. The Culture's tellingly unique euphemism). I refused to live with such hypocrisy and chose instead this honestly selfish and avaricious society, which doesn't pretend to be good, just ambitious.

But I have lived here as I lived there, trying not to hurt others, trying just to be myself; and I cannot be myself by destroying a ship full of people, even if they are some of the rulers of this cruel and callous society. I can't use the gun; I can't let Kaddus and Cruizell find me. And I will not go back, head bowed, to the Culture.

I finished the glass of jahl.

I had to get out. There were other cities, other planets, besides Vreccis; I'd just have to run; run and hide. Would Maust come with me though? I looked at my watch again; he was half an hour late. Not like him. Why was he late? I went to the window, looking down to the street, searching for him.

A police APC rumbled through the traffic. Just a routine cruise; siren off, guns stowed. It was heading for the Outworlder's Quarter, where the police had been making shows of strength recently. No sign of Maust's svelte shape swinging through the crowds.

Always the worry. That he might be run over, that the police might arrest him at the club (indecent, corrupting public morals, and homosexuality; that great crime, even worse than not making your pay-off!), and, of course, the worry that he might meet somebody else.

Maust. Come home safely, come home to me.





I remember feeling cheated when I discovered, towards the end of my regendering, that I still felt drawn to men. That was long ago, when I was happy in the Culture, and like many people I had wondered what it would be like to love those of my own original sex; it seemed terribly unfair that my desires did not alter with my physiology. It took Maust to make me feel I had not been cheated. Maust made everything better, Maust was my breath of life.

Anyway, I would not be a woman in this society. I decided I needed a refill. I walked past the table. "...will not affect the line-stability of the weapon, though recoil will be increased on power-priority, or power decreased -"

"Shut up!" I shouted at the gun, and made a clumsy attempt to hit its Off button; my hand hit the pistol's stubby barrel. The gun skidded across the table and fell to the floor.

"Warning!" The gun shouted. "There are no user-serviceable parts inside! Irreversible deactivation will result if any attempt is made to dismantle or -"

"Quiet, you little bastard," I said (and it did go quiet). I picked it up and put it in the pocket of a jacket hanging over a chair. Damn the Culture; damn all guns. I went to get more drink, a heaviness inside me as I looked at the time again. Come home, please come home... and then come away, come away with me...

I fell asleep in front of the screen, a knot of dull panic in my belly competing with the spinning sensation in my head as I watched the news and worried about Maust, trying not to think of too many things. The news was full of executed terrorists and famous victories in small, distant wars against aliens, outworlders, subhumans. The last report I remember was about a riot in a city on another planet; there was no mention of civilian deaths, but I remember a shot of a broad street littered with crumpled shoes. The item closed with an injured policeman being interviewed in hospital.

I had my recurring nightmare, reliving the demonstration I was caught up in three years ago; looking, horrified, at a wall of drifting, sun-struck stun gas and seeing a line of police mounts come charging out of it, somehow more appalling than armoured cars or even tanks, not because of the visored riders with their long shock-batons, but because the tall animals were also armoured and gas-masked; monsters from a ready-made, mass-produced dream; terrorizing.

Maust found me three hours later, when he got back. The club had been raided and he hadn't been allowed to contact me. He held me as I cried, shushing me back to sleep.

"**W**robik, I can't. Risåret's putting on a new show next season and he's looking for new faces; it'll be big-time, straight stuff. A High City deal. I can't leave now; I've got my foot in the door. Please understand." He reached over the table to take my hand. I pulled it away.

"I can't do what they're asking me to do. I can't stay. So I have to go; there's nothing else I can do." My voice was dull. Maust started to clear away the plates and containers, shaking his long, graceful head. I hadn't eaten much; partly hangover, partly nerves. It was a muggy, enervating mid-morning; the tene-

ment's conditioning plant had broken down again.

"Is what they're asking really so terrible?" Maust pulled his robe tighter, balancing plates expertly. I watched his slim back as he moved to the kitchen. "I mean, you won't even tell me. Don't you trust me?" His voice echoed.

What could I say? That I didn't know if I did trust him? That I loved him but: only he had known I was an outworlder. That had been my secret, and I'd told only him. So how did Kaddus and Cruzell know? How did Bright Path know? My sinuous, erotic, faithless dancer. Did you think because I always remained silent that I didn't know of all the times you deceived me?

Maust, please; it's better that you don't know." "Oh," Maust laughed distantly; that aching, beautiful sound, tearing at me. "How terribly dramatic. You're protecting me. How awfully gallant."

"Maust, this is serious. These people want me to do something I just can't do. If I don't do it they'll... they'll at least hurt me, badly. I don't know what they'll do. They...they might even try to hurt me through you. That was why I was so worried when you were late; I thought maybe they'd taken you."

"My dear, poor Wrobbie," Maust said, looking out from the kitchen, "it has been a long day; I think I pulled a muscle during my last number, we may not get paid after the raid - Stelmer's sure to use that as an excuse even if the filth didn't swipe the takings - and my ass is still sore from having one of those queer-bashing pigs poking his finger around inside me. Not as romantic as your dealings with gangsters and baddies, but important to me. I've enough to worry about. You're over-reacting. Take a pill or something; go back to sleep; it'll look better later." He winked at me, disappeared. I listened to him moving about in the kitchen. A police siren moaned overhead. Music filtered through from the apartment below.

I went to the door of the kitchen. Maust was drying his hands. "They want me to shoot down the starship bringing the Admiral of the Fleet back on Ninthday," I told him. Maust looked blank for a second, then sniggered. He came up to me, held me by the shoulders.

"Really? And then what? Climb the outside of the Lev and fly to the sun on your magic bicycle?" He smiled tolerantly, amused. I put my hands on his and removed them slowly from my shoulders.

"No. I just have to shoot down the ship, that's all. I have... they gave me a gun that can do it." I took the gun from the jacket. He frowned, shaking his head, looked puzzled for a second, then laughed again.

"With that, my love? I doubt you could stop a motorized pogo-stick with that little -"

"Maust, please; believe me. This can do it. My people made it and the ship... the state has no defence against something like this."

Maust snorted, then took the gun from me. Its lights flicked off. "How do you switch it on?" He turned it over in his hand.

"By touching it; but only I can do it. It reads the genetic make-up of my skin, knows I am Culture. Don't look at me like that; it's true. Look." I showed him. I had the gun recite the first part of its monologue and switched the tiny screen to holo. Maust inspected the gun while I held it.

"You know," he said after a while, "this might be rather valuable."

"No, it's worthless to anyone else. It'll only work for me, and you can't get round its fidelities; it'll deactivate."

"How...faithful," Maust said, sitting down and looking steadily at me. "How neatly everything must be arranged in your 'Culture'. I didn't really believe you when you told me that tale, did you know that, my love? I thought you were just trying to impress me. Now I think I believe you."

I crouched down in front of him, put the gun on the table and my hands on his lap. "Then believe me that I can't do what they're asking, and that I am in danger; perhaps we both are. We have to leave. Now. Today or tomorrow. Before they think of another way to make me do this."

Maust smiled, ruffled my hair. "So fearful, eh? So desperately anxious." He bent, kissed my forehead. "Wrobbie, Wrobbie; I can't come with you. Go if you feel you must, but I can't come with you. Don't you know what this chance means to me? All my life I've wanted this; I may not get another opportunity. I have to stay, whatever. You go; go for as long as you must and don't tell me where you've gone. That way they can't use me, can they? Get in touch through a friend, once the dust has settled. Then we'll see. Perhaps you can come back; perhaps I'll have missed my big chance anyway and I'll come to join you. It'll be all right. We'll work something out."

I let my head fall to his lap, wanting to cry. "I can't leave you."

He hugged me, rocking me. "Oh, you'll probably find you're glad of the change. You'll be a hit wherever you go, my beauty; I'll probably have to kill some knife-fighter to win you back."

"Please, please come with me," I sobbed into his gown.

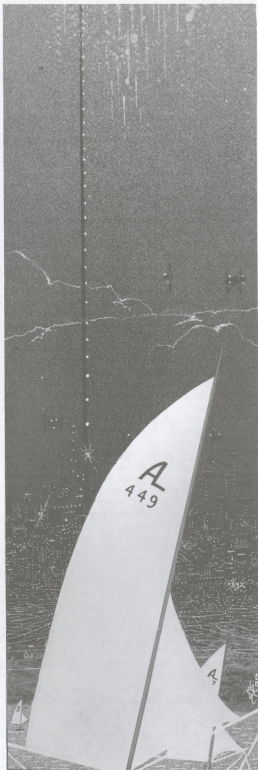
"I can't, my love. I just can't. I'll come to wave you goodbye, but I can't come with you."

He held me while I cried; the gun lay silent and dull on the table at his side, surrounded by the debris of our meal.

I was leaving. Fire escape from the flat just before dawn, over two walls clutching my travelling bag, a taxi from General Thetropolis Avenue to Intercontinental Station...then I'd catch a Railtube train to Bryme and take the Lev there, hoping for a standby on almost anything heading Out, either trans or inter. Maust had lent me some of his savings, and I still had a little high-rate credit left; I could make it. I left my terminal in the apartment. It would have been useful, but the rumours are true; the police can trace them, and I wouldn't put it past Kaddus and Cruizell to have a tame cop in the relevant department.

The station was crowded. I felt fairly safe in the high, echoing halls, surrounded by people and business. Maust was coming from the club to see me off; he'd promised to make sure he wasn't followed. I had just enough time to leave the gun at left luggage. I'd post the key to Kaddus, try to leave him a little less murderous.

There was a long queue at Left Luggage; I stood, exasperated, behind some naval cadets. They told me the delay was caused by the porters searching all bags



and cases for bombs; a new security measure. I left the queue to go and meet Maust; I'd have to get rid of the gun somewhere else. Post the damn thing, or even just drop it in a waste bin.

I waited in the bar, sipping at something innocuous. I kept looking at my wrist, then feeling foolish. The terminal was back at the apartment; use a public phone, look for a clock. Maust was late.

There was a screen in the bar, showing a news bulletin. I shook off the absurd feeling that somehow I was already a wanted man, face liable to appear on the news broadcast, and watched today's lies to take my mind off the time.

They mentioned the return of the Admiral of the Fleet, due in two days. I looked at the screen, smiling nervously. Yeah, and you'll never know how close the bastard came to getting blown out of the skies. For a moment or two I felt important, almost heroic.

Then the bombshell; just a mention – an aside, tacked on, the sort of thing they'd have cut had the programme been a few seconds over – that the Admiral would be bringing a guest with him; an ambassador from the Culture. I choked on my drink.

Was that who I'd really have been aiming at if I'd gone ahead?

What was the Culture doing anyway? An ambassador? The Culture knew everything about the Vreccile Economic Community, and was watching, analyzing; content to leave ill enough alone for now. The Vreccile people had little idea how advanced or widely spread the Culture was, though the court and Navy had a fairly good idea. Enough to make them slightly (though had they known it, still not remotely sufficiently) paranoid. What was an ambassador for?

And who was really behind the attempt on the ship? Bright Path would be indifferent to the fate of a single outworlder compared to the propaganda coup of pulling down a starship, but what if the gun hadn't come from them, but from a grouping in the court itself, or from the Navy? The VEC had problems; social problems, political problems. Maybe the President and his cronies were thinking about asking the Culture for aid. The price might involve the sort of changes some of the more corrupt officials would find terminally threatening to their luxurious lifestyles.

Shit, I didn't know; maybe the whole attempt to take out the ship was some loony in Security or the Navy trying to settle an old score, or just skip the next few rungs on the promotion ladder. I was still thinking about this when they paged me.

I sat still. The station PA called for me, three times. A phonecall. I told myself it was just Maust, calling to say he had been delayed; he knew I was leaving the terminal at the apartment so he couldn't call me direct. But would he announce my name all over a crowded station when he knew I was trying to leave quietly and unseen? Did he still take it all so lightly? I didn't want to answer that call. I didn't even want to think about it.

My train was leaving in ten minutes; I picked up my bag. The PA asked for me again, this time mentioning Maust's name. So I had no choice.

I went to Information. It was a viewcall.

"Wrobik." Kaddus sighed, shaking his head. He was in some office; anonymous, bland. Maust was standing, pale and frightened, just behind Kaddus' seat.

Cruzell stood right behind Maust, grinning over his slim shoulder. Cruzell moved slightly, and Maust flinched. I saw him bite his lip. "Wrobik," Kaddus said again. "Were you going to leave so soon? I thought we had a date, yes?"

"Yes," I said quietly, looking at Maust's eyes. "Silly of me. I'll...stick around for...a couple of days. Maust, I..." The screen went grey.

I turned round slowly in the booth and looked at my bag, where the gun was. I picked the bag up. I hadn't realized how heavy it was.

I stood in the park, surrounded by dripping trees and worn rocks. Paths carved into the tired topsoil led in various directions. The earth smelled warm and damp. I looked down from the top of the gently sloped escarpment to where pleasure boats sailed in the dusk, lights reflecting on the still waters of the boating lake. The duskward quarter of the city was a hazy platform of light in the distance. I heard birds calling from the trees around me.

The aircraft lights of the Lev rose like a rope of flashing red beads into the blue evening sky; the port at the Lev's summit shone, still unclipped, in sunlight a hundred kilometres overhead. Lasers, ordinary searchlights and chemical fireworks began to make the sky bright above the Parliament buildings and the Great Square of the Inner City; a display to greet the returning, victorious Admiral, and maybe the ambassador from the Culture, too. I couldn't see the ship yet.

I sat down on a tree stump, drawing my coat about me. The gun was in my hand; on, ready, ranged, set. I had tried to be thorough and professional, as though I knew what I was doing; I'd even left a hired motorbike in some bushes on the far side of the escarpment, down near the busy parkway. I might actually get away with this. So I told myself, anyway. I looked at the gun.

I'd considered using it to try and rescue Maust, or maybe using it to kill myself; I'd even considered taking it to the police (another, slower form of suicide). I'd also considered calling Kaddus and telling him I'd lost it, it wasn't working, I couldn't kill a fellow Culture citizen...anything. But in the end; nothing.

If I wanted Maust back I had to do what I'd agreed to do.

Something glistened in the skies above the city; a pattern of falling, golden lights. The central light was brighter and larger than the others.

I had thought I could feel no more, but there was a sharp taste in my mouth, and my hands were shaking. Perhaps I would go berserk, once the ship was down, and attack the Lev too; bring the whole thing smashing down (or would part of it go spinning off into space? Maybe I ought to do it just to see). I could bombard half the city from here (hell, don't forget the curve shots; I could bombard the whole damn city from here); I could bring down the escort vessels and attacking planes and police cruisers; I could give the Vreccile the biggest shock they've ever had, before they got me...

The ships were over the city. Out of the sunlight, their laserproof mirror hulls were duller now. They were still falling; maybe five kilometres up. I checked the gun again.

Maybe it wouldn't work, I thought.

Lasers shone in the dust and grime above the city, producing tight spots on high and wispy clouds. Searchlight beams faded and spread in the same haze, while fireworks burst and slowly fell, twinkling and sparkling. The sleek ships dropped majestically to meet the welcoming lights. I looked about the tree-lined ridge; alone. A warm breeze brought the grumbling sound of the parkway traffic to me.

I raised the gun and sighted. The formation of ships on the holo display, the scene noon-bright. I adjusted the magnification, fingered a command stud; the gun locked onto the flagship, became rock-steady in my hand. A flashing white point in the display marked the centre of the vessel.

I looked round again, my heart hammering, my hand held by the field-anchored gun. Still nobody came to stop me. My eyes stung. The ships hung a few hundred metres above the state buildings of the Inner City. The outer vessels remained there; the centre craft, the flagship, stately and massive, a mirror held up to the glittering city, descended towards the Great Square. The gun dipped in my hand, tracking it.

Maybe the Culture ambassador wasn't aboard the damn ship anyway. This whole thing might be a Special Circumstances set-up; perhaps the Culture was ready to interfere now and it amused the planning Minds to have me, a heretic, push things over the edge. The Culture ambassador might have been a ruse, just in case I started to suspect...I didn't know. I didn't know anything. I was floating on a sea of possibilities, but parched of choices.

I squeezed the trigger.

The gun leapt backwards, light flared all around me. A blinding line of brilliance flicked, seemingly instantaneously, from me to the starship ten kilometres away. There was a sharp detonation of sound somewhere inside my head. I was thrown off the tree stump.

When I sat up again the ship had fallen. The Great Square blazed with flames and smoke and strange, bristling tongues of some terrible lightning; the

remaining lasers and fireworks were made dull. I stood, shaking, ears ringing, and stared at what I'd done. Late-reacting sprinterceptiles from the escorts criss-crossed the air above the wreck and slammed into the ground, automatics fooled by the sheer velocity of the plasma bolt. Their warheads burst brightly amongst the boulevards and buildings of the Inner City, a bruise upon a bruise.

The noise of the first explosion smacked and rumbled over the park.

The police and the escort ships themselves were starting to react. I saw the lights of police cruisers rise strobing from the Inner City; the escort craft began to turn slowly above the fierce, flickering radiations of the wreck.

I pocketed the gun and ran down the damp path towards the bike, away from the escarpment's lip. Behind my eyes, burnt there, I could still see the line of light that had briefly joined me to the starship; bright path indeed, I thought, and nearly laughed. A bright path in the soft darkness of the mind.

I raced down to join all the other poor folk on the run.

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**Iain Banks** is one of the most fashionable literary figures in Britain today (among the more youthful readers, at any rate). His novels *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge* have created a stir and achieved good sales. His latest book, *Consider Phlebas*, is reviewed in this issue of IZ. To our delight, Mr Banks has now come out of the closet and declared himself a science fiction writer. The above is his first published short story. A Scotsman born and bred, he currently lives in Kent.

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## WRITE TO INTERZONE

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**Gollancz**



"The past is a mystery, but the future is familiar."

So runs the refrain from Paul Theroux's *O-Zone* (Hamish Hamilton, £10.95), squawked out of the garrulous masks of his egregious rich New Yorkers as they rotor over an early Twenty-first Century landscape of radioactive wastelands, ruined cities, shanty towns packed with paupers and barricaded garrisons terrorized by homicidal vigilantes.

The future is familiar because the territory has already been subjugated by the macho platoon of the fantasy brigade; its irradiated deserts and obliterated cities requisitioned as arenas for masculine initiation rites; its psychopathic guards and fortified enclaves commandeered as substitutes for the implacable demons and impregnable castles the hero with a mission must conquer. But this is *Dungeons & Dragons* with a Message. "This may well be a pre-holocaust novel," writes John Shirley in his introduction to *Eclipse* (Methuen, £2.50). "A cautionary tale about the dangers of nuclear war," is the excuse for David Brin's *The Postman* (Bantam, £2.95).

*The Postman* takes place largely in the conscience of its self-centred protagonist, seventeen years after the Bomb has destroyed all consumer comforts, cultural sensibilities and community spirit in the USA. Gordon, still sensitive, anxious about tooth decay and able to quote Shakespeare to still appreciative audiences after half a lifetime in the radioactive, plague-ridden, bandit-infested wilderness, finds a pre-war postman's uniform and instantly becomes a Myth Figure. Arriving at long-isolated settlements with his cap, bag, pack of lies about being an emissary of the Restored United States, and burden of guilt about lying, he is welcomed with the Flag, Apple Pie and nubile women anxious to experience Motherhood (Gordon's gonads, like his ethics, being in better shape than most). Even his hair changes colour, unnoticed by the proofer.

"Who will take responsibility?," is his constant italicized whine. There are Survivalists in them that hills; they live by lies and violence, ransack abandoned buildings, kidnap, kill, mutilate corpses. Gordon, "the last idealist alive," and his band of courageous, self-sacrificing followers are not above doing any of these things, but they feel bad afterwards. They know they are right, unlike their opponents who are smug with "derived truth" (Gordon's scathing italics). His teenage postboys, barely educated, scarcely literate, are able to read the bombastic and polysyllabic Survivalist version of history (that Burr was a better man than Franklin) and indignantly pronounce it a lie.

## Book Reviews, 1 Lee Montgomerie

Gordon does eventually find someone to take responsibility. The women. The war, the collapse of civilization, the shortage of toothpaste, technology and Hope can be blamed on them, for being insufficiently sold on Science and for failing (through some means short of strangling recalcitrant sons in infancy, says Gordon, trusting to their good sense) to get rid of the Rambos, making the world a safe place for a conceited, self-justifying egotist with a mailbox full of clunking clichés. Might is right. The end justifies the means. A woman's place is in the wrong. I refuse to accept delivery of any of *The Postman's* messages.

If *The Postman* is pedestrian stuff, plodding along under a heavy load of misdirected evangelical junkmail, *Eclipse* is worse: a book in which serious messages, sharp insights and striking turns of phrase are swamped by a constant stream of officialistic effluent. It reads like something compiled by an elderly bureaucrat from the shreds of declassified Pentagon documents: minutes of meetings, transcripts of monitored conversations and technical specifications for equipment; with offcuts from fashion magazines, tourist brochures, pop songs, school essays and a thunderingly obtuse political cartoon pasted in for local colour.

To follow the plot, one needs an onboard database with inbuilt jargon decoder incorporating AAF (advanced acronymics facility) and some sort of gizmo for keeping track of the characters, of whom there are dozens. Even the characters complain that their names all sound alike: "Swenson and Watson. Praeger and Jaeger. These people are the vectors for the new conformity." Arch-villain Richard Crandall and his antagonist Rickenharp are both referred to by their intimates as "Rick"; a totally unnecessary source of confusion.

This sort of thing might be unavoidable if one was obliged to plough through a pile of undigested documentation to arrive at a version of the truth, but this prolix and turgid volume – only the opener of a trilogy that could easily run to a thousand ponderous pages – is meant to be fiction, damn it,

not a CIA dossier. Fiction, at that, though one would never guess it from the prose, about Punk Rock revivalists and rebel space colonists confronting born-again Nazis in the wreckage of a nuked-out Europe! It is also unique as an avowed anti-racist diatribe in that all the main characters seem to be white; not that it is easy to tell when they are overwhelmingly grey.

Both *Eclipse* and *The Postman* are urgent, ideological books, screaming awful warnings about the imminent arrival of the polluted, pauperized future in which pockets of privilege are maintained in fortified strongholds patrolled by the degenerate progeny of security guards; a future of the jackboot, iron fist or brigand's bullet frustrating the lone male idealist stranded in the ruins of the technological society, forever.

Paul Theroux's *O-Zone*, a considerably less flustered work, takes its name from the Outer Zone, the Ozarks, depopulated by a nuclear waste excursion and reverted to a guarded island of unspoiled greenery in a ravaged America. It has a cast of complacently-embattled New York plutocrats, insulated from the prevailing squalor and inequality by money and mythology, experiencing everything at second hand through the distorting masks of technology and ideology. It has a vigilante squad, Godseye, who make Brin's Survivalists look like wimps, Shirley's Nazis like liberals, as they thunder in helicopter gunships through the battlements of the garrisoned city, pulverizing suspected Aliens – Starkies, Skells, Trolls, Shitters, Diggers, Roaches (mere non-citizens, but treated with such hysterical xenophobia that they pass for non-humans) – with sonic stunners and particle beams.

Fisher, the closest thing to a hero, is a credible dystopian product: clinic-conceived, computer-educated; half-clumping, bleeping, blaring robot, half creepy teenage genius. Pitched among the Aliens in *O-Zone*, a virtual basket case, he eventually ripens into a swaggering male individualist in a battered spacesuit, thereby disposing of most of the plot and demystifying most of the

archetypes (not all, though; a contrapuntal adolescent Alien girl, snatched from O-Zone to New York, adjusts with even more grace and gratitude than is generally granted to the rescuers of beautiful barbarian women, and displays even less personality in the process).

Theroux lingers through 470 pages on a leisured exploration of the territory, taking in all the scenery. The stark naked millionaires in the glassed-in shopping centres. The Pilgrims; cretinous anachronisms, reading science fiction and proselytizing about space travel. The Godseye squad, hyped up to screaming jitters on their own propaganda videos, wearing gasmasks against the macho stink of their own feet. This is not the past or the future. It is the present; only a slight intensification of the situation between whites and blacks in South Africa or, more broadly, the West versus the rest, and Theroux is fully aware of it. It is not the end of the world. It is the way of the world.

**This is the Way the World Ends** (Gollancz, £10.95) by James Morrow is something else. Couched as a commentary by Nostradamus illustrated with a slide show by Leonardo da Vinci, it postulates various unexpected effects of nuclear war to keep the plot going after the first burst. Time is speeded up relative to the protagonist so that the protracted death-agonies of the Earth are experienced in a few days. Evanescent avatars of the never-to-beborn and simulacra of the invalidated dead arrive to populate the ashes. The protagonist, an erstwhile contented tombstone engraver, having signed an admission of complicity in the arms race in return for a survival suit, is snatched from the holocaust and sent on a luxury submarine cruise to Antarctica to stand trial, with a handful of other more-or-less witting warmongers, for crimes against the future. Eccentric, sardonic, argumentative, sentimental and whimsical, it eschews all tough-guy stuff amid the smouldering rubble and ends with a tombstone to humanity in the bleakness of the ice cap. The cautionary tale about the dangers of nuclear war is that nuclear war will result in extinction – an end to all stories – not in any familiar futuristic replay of the past.

**T**he horrors of the anticipated future are nothing to the horrors of the recreated present, manifest in those racks of dark covers with glaring embossed metallic titles obscuring ominous landscapes, glowering faces and gouts of blood. Supernatural horror is at its most effective when it imitates everyday life without partaking of it – the literary analogue of the animated corpse, threaded with self-

inflicted skewers and razorblades, that rots its way through the pages of Clive Barker's **The Damnation Game** (Sphere, £3.50); becoming progressively more disjointed until only held together by crude wooden contraptions; cosmetics and perfume only partly concealing the maggots and rising stench of putrefaction.

**The Damnation Game**, an obscure story of gambling, immortality and Armageddon set in a secluded country house, a derelict hotel and the seamier parts of London, is an awkward and alarming book, full of infantile disgusts – toilets disgorging torrents of squirming filth, reanimated dead dogs chewing their own rotting entrails – a close simulation of pornography in the motif of meat getting up again and again beyond all reasonable expectations, and in the succession of increasingly more perverted climaxes operating on progressively flimsier pretexts. It seems to work well.

Graham Masterson's **Night Warriors** (Sphere, £2.95) also has its lacerating moments, but a considerably more rational (and therefore very unconvincing) plot about Southern California terrorized by a plague of diabolical eels. The **Night Warriors**, a bunch of ordinary guys recruited by a sinister androgyne, are invested with comic-strip superhero uniforms, weapons and powers to fight the Devil, progenitor of the eels, through a series of mundane, mechanical dreams. T.E.D. Klein's **Dark Gods** (Pan, £2.50) is a collection of four novellas set in a seedy New York of bugs, blacks and garbage. The novella is an awkward length for horror – the menace tends to be either explicit at the outset or still obscure at the end. The pay-offs to these ones remain enigmatic, and the build-ups would only arouse the most reprehensible of readers: "loud music...cooking smells...dark faces...sharp eyes...arguments in Spanish..." **Aarrggghhhh!** Call Godseye, somebody – QUICK!

## BOOK REVIEWS, 2

### John Clute

**T**he difference between Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks is more than having a publisher to gnash between your syllables. Both guises of the man, it is true, glare at one from within the bondage of the same skin. Both display a glittery of extroverted bruising familiarity with material of penal-colony extremity, the sort of material most writers utter in very solemn terms out of a kind of dour awe at their having such darknesses within them to emit. And both versions of Banks seem chary of blotting a line. But Iain's tales of

psychosis paradigms dance out of range of genre fixatives, and Iain M. has begun his career with a space opera. (It was, by the way, his publishers, once known as Macmillan and Co. Limited, but now as merely M., who requested the insertion of the middle initial – it could be the beginning of a trend.) Despite the quotation from T.S. Eliot which provides its title, **Consider Phlebas** (M, £10.95; a limited edition of 176 copies is also available and will cost more than a week's dole) looks very much for some of its excessive length to be a full-hearted attempt at contributing to the subcategory of science fiction whose conventions are least easily breached.

Certainly, for a while, **Phlebas** seems to obey most of the rules to which space opera – like any romance form – demands such unsmiling adherence. The setting is galactic, as it must be, but the vast expanses of the **Phlebas** "known" space are traversible within the characters' life-spans, as necessary, via FTL drives banged into shape by the descendants of Scotsmen. The **Phlebas** universe is properly huger than we in the nursery can guess, but is not unimaginable (as is any Stanislaw Lem universe), and the war which charges the entire canvas seems to be apprehensible as a form of conflict in which identifiable Good will fight identifiable Evil to a kinetically resounding close; galaxy-wide strife properly obtains between the Nivenesque non-human Idirans and the hi-tech but pacific and community-minded Culture, while an ancient omnipotent race to whom we are as mayflies gaze on indifferently, so that God seems in his heaven and the main action can take place, as it should, in a baroque cacophony of interregnum reaching from the Golden Age of the Deep Past into a future of universal milk and honey, like it was when we were very young. And the protagonist of the book, a humanoid killer and mercenary named Borza Horza Gobuchol, seems properly to combine competence at killing with mysteries of origin, two of the vectors whose junction generally proclaims a hero with a thousand faces. So far so good.

Horza's faces are indeed many. As one of a dwindling diaspora of Changers, most of whom inhabit Idiran territory as homeless hirelings, and all of whom are distrusted by other humans, he can take on the appearance of other humans at will. But here something oddly subversive in Iain M.'s larger strategy may begin to nag at the reader. Other human societies distrust and shun these sly, untrustworthy, mercenary, rootless Changers, who are clearly the Phoenicians evoked by the title. No matter how many faces he may wear in **The Waste Land**, **Phlebas** is so

damningly the merchant, the haggling money-changer, that water will only drown him. There is no miracle of the Grail for Semites, according to Mr Eliot. So with the protagonist of this novel. Though no hint of racism even begins to touch *Consider Phebas*, the title does inescapably invoke an exile that is unredeemable, a death without point.

Where the book stumbles is in the shenanigans that nearly trample its message into invisibility. A super-computer of Culture origins has crash-landed on a planet quarantined by the geezers to whom we are as mayflies, and Horza's Idiran commanders rescue him from certain death elsewhere so he can hightail it to Schar's World (which as a Changer he has previously visited) and gain control of the terribly powerful artificial Mind. But a battle in hyperspace soon dumps him into a series of picaresque detours which last most of the book, neatly herniating it. Picked up by a ragtag crew of freelancers whose captain could be played by Harrison Ford, Horza helps raid a temple (unsuccessfully) on one totally irrelevant planet, and then visits a ringworld-like Culture artifact called Vavatch Orbital (but as a visual writer Banks is foggy to the extreme, though loud, and I for one could never work out just what Vavatch actually orbited). On this Orbital Iain M. twiddles his dials like Jack Vance at his most ditheringly picturesque, spending far too long on a corrupt religious sect's attempts to eat the Changer, and on a stunningly dim spectator-sport board game whose name I cannot remember, whose description would stupefy the paraphrast, and whose only plot function is to return Horza to the ship he only left because Iain M. wanted to dally with his palette of gouache. Finally, deep into the night, everyone who has survived does manage motivelyless to reach Schar's World, where a denouement is played out whose decibel level and plot pattern strongly remind one of the last half of *Aliens*, without the laughs, and the novel ends in shambles.

It is a conclusion Banks has been preparing for, though he almost loses us on Vavatch. What began as seemingly orthodox space opera turns into a subversion of all that's holy to the form. The War Mind turns out to be a papier-mache MacGuffin which causes the destruction, in the end, of almost the entire cast, rendering both their hegira and their deaths entirely futile. As peripheral in the Grail Quest as Phebas (and ultimately as dead), Horza has also (in any case) been fighting for the wrong side (and never learns better). The Idirans are not only losers in the war, they are in fact the bad guys, great blundering insufferable

Rambos, their claims to chivalric dignity a sadistic xenophobic mockery, even if they do talk Poul-Andersonese. It is the collegial pinko socialists of the Culture who win the day. In its rubbishing of any idea that kinetic drive and virtue are identical, in its treatment of the deeds of the hero as contaminatingly entropic, *Consider Phebas* punishes the reader's every expectation of exposure to the blissful dream momentum – the healing retrogression into childhood – of true and terrible space opera. If only Iain M. had turned the volume down, if only someone had had the gumption to excise the odd half acre of fallow Vance, a phoenix of art might have burned into our vision out of the chaos and the splot. Maybe next time.

**W**e come into the quietude and melancholy periods of Richard "K." Cowper's most recent novel, *Shades of Darkness* (Kerosina Books, £10.95; a limited edition at £25.00) includes a 37 page pamphlet of neat elegiac fables, *The Magic Spectacles and Other Tales*. About *Shades of Darkness* little need be said, except to praise the book for what it very precisely is. Richard Cowper is far too experienced a craftsman to go philandering – and if there is some marginal sense that his tale of a haunting in East Anglia rests too comfortably within its limits, he invests the nicely caught 1930s domesticity of the seaside cottage with a deft surrealist glow, so that the moments of genuine terror seem illuminated from within. The terror, in other words, seems strangely natural.

Jim Fuller, a journalist newly expelled from Uganda for truth-telling, needs solitude in which to write a novel about the haunting Matter of Africa. With his lover Karen he comes across the former home in East Anglia of some old Africa hands. Before long, as though excited by his subject matter, haunting urgencies of African import begin to insert into the upper world clues about an old tragedy of miscegenation, murder, spoiled lives. Jim finally understands this excitation of distress to be longing for resolution, and compassionately exorcises the ghost, after being half frightened to death by it. Several subsidiary characters are sketched in Cowper's best manner – delicate, slightly waspish, stoic in its dealings with the large obdurate passage of the world – and a swift knowing portrait of *Peter Grimes* country is awarded us. Jim's novel is finished. He and Karen marry. They are alive. What more could such a book give us?

**T**here is something almost magical about the suave savvy ease of Leigh "Cape" Kennedy's first novel.

**The Journal of Nicholas the American** (Jonathan Cape, £9.95) is about as rough-edged as a Fabergé egg, and about as easy to pick the heart out of. One must edge inside the thing, like a ghost, because Nicholas Dal lets his chas cut out of the bag with almost supernatural reluctance. I think the word "empath" is never mentioned, but it is his alienating curse – the journals impart a Dostoyevskyan savagery of estrangement – to have been born of a family of Russian empaths. After an earlier Dal has gone murderously insane from the stress of a paranormal sensitivity to the emotional content of others' minds, the family has fled to America, where Nicholas is born. Speaking Russian before he speaks Coloradan, and ravaged by every contact with the raw blood inside everyone else's head, he is by the time the novel opens an almost extinguished creature. He is in his late 20s, but remains a perpetual student in Boulder Colorado so he can stay out of sight, being terrified of discovery. To dull his empathy, he drinks almost constantly. He is unprepossessing, rude, tortured, gnarled and skinny. (Sartre could have conceived him.) He falls in love.

The girl is also a student. Her mother Susanne is dying of cancer. The emotions concerned with this turn the knife in Nicholas's psyche. Meanwhile a research psychologist seems to have tracked him down. Events darken and twist, but at the heart of the book the two anguishes – Dal's flayed openness to others, and Susanne's slow dying – dovetail slowly and plangently into a single exercise in the topos of reconciliation. To decipher this movement of the heart through Kennedy's impeccably crafted impersonation of Nicholas is rather like doing a crossword in Cyrillic, but something very much like hope begins eventually to dawn. To be sure the book then snaps shut. But something rich has been glimpsed. It is a novel to unpack more than once.

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## FANTASY

**The Finnbranch** by Paul Hazel (Sphere, £4.15) is three novels, (Yearwood, Undersea and Winterking) now in one volume. The first two are the story of Finn, brought up in a remote valley in the mountains, who wanders out to fulfil his destiny – lots of destiny. Rather incestuous (literally, more than once), with surprisingly few characters (most of whom turn up under different names in different sections), perhaps there's too much

destiny about – no-one seems to have much choice in their actions, the mood is all death, doom and decay. Cleverly if densely written, but maybe a little too much to take in in one mouthful, at the end of book two I still hadn't quite found the plot. The work as a whole is rescued by a refreshing shift in the third book from a (very well evoked) pre-Celtic heroic society to somewhere not unlike 20th century Massachusetts that owes more to Lovecraft and Melville than any real state. Not only is it fun to see Oliver Wendell Holmes in a fantasy novel, but the reader's interest is revived by the intellectual effort required to work out what the hell is going on, apart from Hell freezing over (which it does shortly before the end).

By contrast, *Cards of Grief* by Jane Yolen (Futura, £2.50) is a precise, almost delicate mix of styles – myth, description, conversation and the transcription of a court-martial – which tell the story of a team of human anthropologists studying an alien culture based round mourning and bereavement. Well-crafted (apart from a tendency to dialogue that sounds written) and the right length for the material, it's a good antidote to the more usual run of current fantasy – books like *The Wizards and the Warriors (Chronicles of an Age of Darkness, Vol.1)* by Hugh Cook (Corgi, £2.95) which is at least 300 pages too long, wanders from flat seriousness to parody and back and is nearly over before the reader's attention or feelings are caught. The latter badly needs the attention of a professional editor – if only to do something about the terrible title.

Editors, apparently, were always changing the titles of Piers Anthony's short stories collected in *Anthology* (Grafton, £2.95) when they weren't rejecting them outright. I can see why in most cases. The main thing going for them is the author's facility for mild sex, providing raw material for our daydreams without much slippery on stage. In one of his rather self-important introductions Anthony calls himself a writer of "light fantasy" which adequately describes *Golem in the Gears* (Futura, £2.50). If you've read the previous eight Xanth books (I have) you've probably already got it, if not you won't like it unless you go for bad puns and that little hint of sex. It's noticeable that Anthony's inadequate men always get their egoboo from the beautiful women, never the other way round.

While Anthony is humorous Terry Pratchett is actually funny. I even laughed. *Equal Rites* (Gollancz, £9.95) is set in the same world as *The Colour of Magic*. It's the story of Esk, a girl fated to grow up to be a Wizard in a

world where women have to be Witches, and her omniscient super-Gran's efforts to enrol her in The Unseen University. Of course, she both saves the world and matriculates. If you read it don't miss the glorious E.E. Smith-type description of the wizard's staff. This is the only one of this columnist's books I'd pay real money for – anything serialized on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* can't be all bad.

(Ken Brown)

## NON-FICTION

David Dowling's *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (Macmillan Press, £27.50) is probably the first full-length study of its important subject. Unfortunately, it could have been a more interesting book. Although it's well researched, this thesis does little with the many relevant novels and stories which it describes. As a jog-trot through the landscapes of nuclear holocaust, it's okay (and appropriately illustrated throughout with woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer). *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* by Tom Moylan (Methuen, £7.95) gives us the other side of the coin, in more than one sense. It is an intellectually rigorous and rewarding work, which contains long and detailed studies of "utopian" sf texts by Russ, Le Guin, Piercy and Delany. From the same publisher comes *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History* edited by Peter Humm and others (Methuen, £6.95), a volume which covers a large stretch of literary territory from John Gay's *Beggars' Opera* to Angela Carter's "bloody" fairy tales. There's not much of direct interest to sf readers here, other than a good essay on Frankenstein and its avatars by Paul O'Flinn, but for anyone interested in "pop lit" theory it's a very useful volume. *Psifi: Psychological Theories and Science Fictions* by Jim Ridgway and Michele Benjamin (British Psychological Society, £8.95) is an anthology rather than a critical study, but one in which the "Commentary" outweighs the fiction. Each of the stories (by Disch, Shaw, Le Guin, Pohl, etc.) is followed by pages of psychological exegesis, with various illustrations, charts, tables and diagrams. Heavy, but revealing. Finally Ian Covell's *J.T. McIntosh: Memoir and Bibliography* (Drumm, \$2) is a piece of spadework on a forgotten British author who once ranked with the sf greats of the 1950s. This is number 25 in a series of tiny booklets which may be ordered from Chris Drumm, PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226, USA.

(David Pringle)

## COMICS

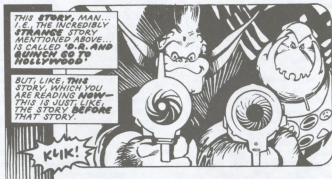
The past year or so has been a boom period for adult science fiction and fantasy comics. Titan Books, Britain's leading publisher in the comics field, have kindly sent us a large quantity of books and magazines for review, including such choice goodies as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller with Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley (£8.95). Miller's witty and imaginative reworking of Batman, as a middle-aged near alcoholic with psychological hang-ups, is justly celebrated as one of the best things to have happened in the world of *bandes dessinées* for years. Perhaps even more impressive, though, is the current series called *Watchmen* (nos. 1-12, DC Comics, \$1.50 each, distributed in the UK by Titan) which is scripted by Britain's foremost comics writer, Alan Moore, with art by Dave Gibbons. This



has a similar premise to Frank Miller's *Dark Knight*, in that it is set in a sleazy, near-future America which has no place for costumed superheroes. The adventures of the *Watchmen*, a troupe of superannuated vigilantes, develops into an sf comic strip of the highest order. Also on hand from Titan Books are three volumes of Alan Moore's *The Ballad of Halo Jones*, a "feminist" sf strip, which we hope to review in our next issue. Meanwhile, we have asked comics artist S.M.S. (see his Dürer-esque "Screaming of the Beetle" in *Interzone* 18) to review a boxful of material, as follows.

(David Pringle)

Most Titan reprint albums hail from 2000 AD. Ostensibly a kids' comic, 2000 AD aspires to something more



'D.R. and Quinch' by Alan Moore and Alan Davis

ambitious, and D.R. and Quinch's **Totally Awesome Guide to Life** (£4.95) amply illustrates this. Written by one-man comics revolution Alan Moore, it's a humorous mixture of 50s lemon popsicle movie, slapstick psychopathic violence and Shekleyesque sf. With Alan Davis's artstyle between cartoon and realism, this collection of tales of extraterrestrial juvenile delinquents ranks as a classic of British comics. Titan have also issued Alan Moore's **Shocking Futures** and **Alan Moore's Twisted Times** (£4.95 each). Being the best of the brightest, these strips are difficult to dip into without finishing the whole album. Most are humorous whimsy ("They Sweep the Spaceways," a tribute to the Trans Galactic Disposal Corps) but some are evocative serious writing ("The Time Machine," a tale of memories). Each strip is drawn by a different artist, so the art varies from workmanlike to excellent.

Before Mr Moore was hailed as the new messiah of strip writing, Pat Mills was chronicling **Nemesis the Warlock** in 2000 AD. This is a high-camp tale of galactic jihad by the xenophobic Termites (that's us), who are opposed by the Cabal of alien freedom fighters led by Nemesis. By Book 3 (Titan, £4.95) the designy art of Kevin O'Neill is replaced by the obsessively grainy Bryan Talbot — perfectly evoking the Gothic Empire, rich in outrageous Victoriana. By Book 4 (also £4.95) Talbot gets to draw a pastiche of the Charles "n" Di wedding, and some women in leather. A positive must for Heavy Metal sf fans who like their Lord of Chaos with his tongue in his cheek.

Meanwhile, in America, new publishing companies flood the market with comics ranging from the brilliantly experimental to clichéd junk. **Threat!** (Fantasmagraphics Books, \$2.25) has every cliché — Han Solo-style space opera, pollution-mutant, future cyborg mercenary, and mutant-killing bounty hunter — yet, sticking to the comics-for-fun tradition, manages

to pull these four tales together as a well-crafted package. The art of each is distinctively polished. Alas, this cannot be said of **Micra** (Comics Interview, \$1.75), which takes the American comics preoccupation with superheroes and "soft bondage" heroines to the logical conclusion of a crippled heroine operating a "Remote" (dishy cyborg) in a post-holocaust US. If bionic Barbie dolls turn you on you may love the pastel kitsch cover of No. 1 — surely the nastiest art since the Third Reich. Oddly endearing is **Dinosaur Rex** (Upshot Graphics, \$2), a Wodehouse-like tale in which an allosaurus makes a passable Joeves.

Back to teen-fodder: **Grendel** (Comico, \$1.50 — "parental guidance suggested") has a yuppie heroine who dons a skintight suit to seek her kidnapped son, in yet another future where cars fly for no apparent reason. The art is a good example of High 80s stylization. Though essentially still in the superhero-plus-sf genre, the **Elektra: Assassin** limited series (Epic, \$1.50 each) is worlds away in content. The consummate writing skill of Frank



'Nemesis' by Mills and Talbot

Miller and the artistic genius of Bill Sienkiewicz transcend the medium. Here are Miller's obsessions with Ninja assassins, insane superheroes, right-wing politics and nasty violence, served in a rich stream-of-consciousness. Sienkiewicz's powerful artwork combines photorealism with disturbing distortion. A very high profile package, every page a gem, a challenge and a revelation to read...slowly.

(S.M.S.)

## ALSO RECEIVED

Recommended:

**The Falling Woman** by Pat Murphy (Tor, \$14.95). Excellent time-fantasy set in Yucatan, Mexico. Psychologically acute, full of authentic Mayan lore.

**Imaginary Lands** edited by Robin McKinley (Julia MacRae Books, £8.95). Attractive fantasy anthology with stories by Blaylock, McKillip, Dickinson, Yolen, Joan Vinge and others.

**The Anvil of Ice** by Michael Scott Rohan (Futura, £2.95). Volume One of the fantasy epic "The Winter of the World." Hardcover was reviewed in IZ 16. This reissue has a cover by Ian Miller (uncredited).

**The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius** by Michael Moorcock (Grafton, £2.50). New edition of a 1976 book, with a 1985 introduction and an added story, "The Doggem Decision."

**Cat Karina** by Michael Coney (Futura, £2.50). First UK paperback of a slickly-written sf novel from 1982.

**The Memory of Whiteness** by Kim Stanley Robinson (Futura, £2.95). Reviewed in IZ 16, where it was described as "rich and compelling."

**The Years of the City** by Frederik Pohl (NEL, £2.95). One of Pohl's better books of recent years — five novellas about the future of New York.

**A Fall of Moondust** by Arthur C. Clarke and **A Wreath of Stars** by Bob Shaw (Gollancz, £3.50 and £2.95). Numbers 9 and 10 in the "Classic SF" series.

**Last and First Men** by Olaf Stapledon and **The Man in the High Castle** by Philip K. Dick (Penguin, £3.95 each). Two excellent volumes in the rival "Classic SF" series (large format paperbacks).

**Galapagos** by Kurt Vonnegut (Grafton, £2.95). First UK paperback of one of Vonnegut's best. See IZ 15.

**The Compleat Traveller in Black** by John Brunner (Methuen, £2.50). Entertaining fantasy from 1971, with new story added since last reprint.

**Galactic Pot-Healer** by Philip K. Dick (Grafton, £2.50). One of Dick's most appealing minor novels (from 1969).



**Heart of the Comet** by Gregory Benford and David Brin (Bantam, £2.95). Big, bouncing and beautiful (if you like hard sf). Hardcover was reviewed in IZ 18.

**The Blue World** by Jack Vance (Grafton, £2.50). Stylish sf from 1966.

**Cuckoo's Egg** by C.J. Cherryh (Methuen, £3.95). Highly competent sf by this American writer. 319 pages (but big print).

**The Faded Sun Trilogy** by C.J. Cherryh (Methuen, £3.50). 756-page volume containing *Kesrith*, *Shon'jir* and *Kutath* (from 1979-80). Good value.

**The Summer's King** by Cherry Wilder (Unwin, £3.50). Third volume in a fantasy trilogy ("The Rulers of Hylor") by a reliable writer.

**SF International: Science Fiction from Around the World** No. 1, January/February 1987 (Andromeda Press, 99 Tear-drop Ct., Newbury Park, CA 91320, USA - \$2.50). Worthy new all-fiction magazine. Small format, 95 pages; production value not high, though the print is clear.

#### Others:

**The Second Great Dune Trilogy** by Frank Herbert (Gollancz, £10.95). Massive volume containing *God Emperor*, *Heretics* and *Chapter House*.

**The Black Ship** by Christopher Rowley (Century, £10.95). Space fiction, sequel to *The War for Eternity*.

**The Dragon Lord** by Peter Morwood (Century, £10.95). Fantasy by an author from Northern Ireland. Follow-up to *The Horse Lord* and *The Demon Lord*.

**Robot Dreams** by Isaac Asimov, illustrated by Ralph McQuarrie (Gollancz, £10.95). Fat collection of over-familiar stories, pleasantly illustrated.

**The Raging** by Tim Stout (Grafton, £2.50). Paperback-original horror novel.

**Sun's End** by Richard Lupoff (Grafton, £2.95). Solid science fiction, from a writer who is better known for his fantasy and his cod-sf (Circumpolar, etc.).

**The Unicorn Quest** by John Lee (Futura, £2.95). "Epic saga of adventure and romance."

**The Lure of the Basilisk** by Lawrence Watt-Evans (Gollancz, £2.50). Book One of "The Lords of Dus."

**The Princess of Flames** by Ru Emerson (Unwin, £2.95). Fantasy.

**Privaters** by Ben Bova (Methuen, £2.50). Ghoulish propaganda fiction, woodenly written.

**Major Operation** by James White (Futura, £1.95). Another reissue in the "Sector General" series. This one dates from 1971.

**The Light of Eden** by W.A. Harbinson (Corgi, £2.95). Sex-laden fantasy from the author of *Genesis, Revelation*, etc.

**The First Named** by Jonathan Wylie (Futura, £2.50). Book One of "Servants of Ark."

**Lifeburst** by Jack Williamson (Sphere, £2.95). A 1984 sf novel by a writer who has been producing the goods since 1928.

**The Goblin Reservation** by Clifford D. Simak (Methuen, £2.50). A 1968 novel by another old-timer (class of 1931). Modest entertainment.

**Time of the Twins** by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman (Penguin, £2.95). "Dragonance Legends Volume 1." Presumably this stuff sells.

**Wizard of the Pigeons** by Megan Lindholm (Corgi, £2.50). Fantasy novel which has been highly praised by Orson Scott Card in *SF Review*.

**Ambassador of Progress** by Walter Jon Williams (Futura, £3.50). Other-planetary adventure. Solid.

## LETTERS

#### Dear Editors:

I am a fairly recent subscriber to *Interzone* but now, after three issues, I feel it necessary to write offering my comments for consideration.

Yes, there has been some excellent literature, like "Freeze-frame", "Hard Work" (IZ 17) and "As Big As The Ritz" (IZ 18), but there are certain undercurrents pervading so many of the stories that I find very depressing. Whilst I fully agree with your comments that good sf and fantasy should challenge the reader, a high proportion of the authors focus upon negative aspects of decay, sexual perversion, hopelessness, horror, lack of communication etc. If this is meant to be a sad reflection of modern humanity it should be left to the writers of conventional fiction. Surely, one of the main tasks of sf and fantasy is to be visionary, revealing alternative goals with positivity and optimism. I find very little of this in IZ though I don't doubt the sincerity of any of the authors.

As an example, take "Jingling Geordie's Hole" (IZ 17). I found this tale so revolting that I was unable to finish reading it. I cannot believe that anyone could actually enjoy reading this story, but I suspect the author would claim that it was intended to be disturbing. I strongly maintain that reading something simply to be "disturbed" is a ridiculous way to pass the time. I chose Ian Watson's story to show that I bear no grudges as his following tale "When Jesus Comes Down The Chimney" (IZ 18) exhibited superb wit.

**Eric Savory**  
Hampshire

#### Dear Editors:

A few words on "Jingling Geordie's Hole"; I thought at first, "Oh, no! A piece of blatant pornography", but I persevered and because of the feedback you will undoubtedly get regarding this story, I consider it very brave of you to print it. The story made sense at the end and I sensed the terror, both spiritual and psychological, that Ian Watson intended to convey.

**Fred Clacey**  
Berkshire

**Simon Ounsley responds:** Eric Savory's letter predates the publication of IZ 19 and perhaps that issue's editorial, with its call for more optimism, will have gone some way to placate him. But if one of the "main tasks of sf and fantasy is to be visionary" then another is surely to reflect the present, to use their great scope for the bending of reality in order to view "modern humanity" from new perspectives, ones which are not available to writers of "conventional" fiction. As for "reading something simply to be disturbed", many writers of ghost and horror stories have built successful careers on the popularity of just such a pastime. Whatever Ian Watson's intention with "Jingling Geordie's Hole", that story does seem to have provoked more response, both positive and negative (as exemplified by the two letters above), than any other since Michael Blumlein's "Tissue Ablation".

#### Dear Editors:

There is a fair amount of discussion in IZ about how to define "science fiction"; one reader put it as "any story not set in the real world or some documented past time". There is also some discussion of the idea that science fiction and the concept of "good literature" are not often well united. I can sympathize with those who hold the latter idea as I have experienced the "swallowing soapsuds" sensation as Bruce Sterling put it ("Letters", IZ 18). This soapsudly phenomenon occurs when the idea of sf and fantasy stories being "not set in the real world" is carried too far. If a story is not anchored to our here and now experience in some way, however small, it can't be effective. I find that a lot of sf seems to be intentionally and stubbornly esoteric or obscure and when this happens, the general reader's reaction must be to switch off. The intention of the writer must have been to make the strangeness appealing or intriguing but in itself the alien aspect doesn't always contribute positively to a story. Conversely, the most intriguing effect can be achieved by a story being



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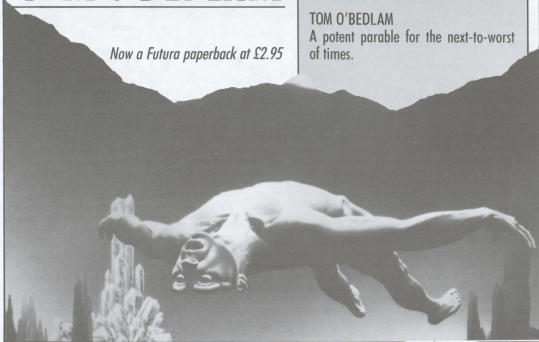
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subtly different. If I'm left thinking "that was odd" but still wondering what made it odd, then the experience is better than feeling a story to be plain inaccessible.

You introduced the strip "Screaming of the Beetle" as an "experiment"; well, if you want my opinion, it was an experiment which worked, really worked. The strip conveys so clearly and cleverly the way in which grief is so unbearable that in experiencing it intensely you see insanity and your own death breathing down your collar. There is also humour there to lift the mood. The writing is mature; it demonstrates, for what it's worth, the point I was trying to put across earlier about ideas working best when firmly based in this experience.

**Claire Kumar**  
Norfolk

Dear Editors:  
SMS's bizarrenesses in IZ 18 were much welcome. As long as the magazine doesn't become another version of *Mutant Teenage Ninja Turtles*, please include more of his/her/its work. Although comic book artists like to pretend that they are graphic novelists, few seem able to leave the quagmire of Melodrama. I was glad to see SMS surmounting the genre's traditional failings. Frankly, I thought "Screaming of the Beetle" came closer to what I expect from IZ than anything else in the issue except Greg Egan's "Mind Vampires", which was only flawed by its predictability. Wilson's "Fountain of Time" was an interesting effort, but his cardboard Florida bar-keeper spoiled much of it. For the rest, much of it really was like "chewing and swallowing soapuds", as Bruce so aptly puts it.

I take exception to Mark Gannon's desire for brief reviews to save one the tedium of actually having to read a less-than-sterling work by a generally good author. How is one to develop critical acumen unless it is by comparison? And what spineless reader will passively accept someone else's judgment of what is a classic and what is not? Neither taste nor art are democratic institutions, whose questions are to be settled by a poll of critics or readers.

**Sarah Frances Stegall**  
Texas

Dear Editors:  
My past encounter with Gregory Benford left me with no desire to renew the acquaintance, but to my surprise I found his short "Freezeframe" almost the only redeeming feature of IZ 17. With "As Big as the Ritz" in IZ 18 he has returned to form, and I do not mean that as a compliment. This story is unremittingly bad, from the pretentious quotation that heads it to the

attempted ambiguity at the end (as if by then anyone really cared). The central idea, that one quite ordinary man will gain control of a black hole and create a space utopia, is totally preposterous, harking back to the old pulp days when a reader's intelligence was not only insulted but generally disregarded altogether. Nor are we told exactly how Rollan plans to make the universe a better place for all, other than by seeding it with his ridiculous Brothers and Sisters. Add to this some mediocre descriptive writing, a hero who is an almost entirely unsympathetic Klutz (foreshadowing the yuppie of "Freezeframe") and a supporting cast of mediocrities. You are left with a story that is overlong and boring.

I have mixed feelings about strip cartoons and SMS's offering did nothing to resolve them. "Screaming of the Beetle" had a nice feel to it, the sensitive line adding shades of emotion, effectively creating a brooding atmosphere of madness and menace, yet grounded in a natural cycle however outré. Yes, I liked this story, but don't make cartoons a regular feature. Once a year is enough.

I've never read any Ramsey Campbell before and "Boiled Alive" didn't work for me, either as a horror story or science fiction. There was a germ of a good idea here but Campbell didn't develop it effectively. He seemed to be striving for a literary effect by the carefully calculated use of fine prose, but he didn't lay any ground for the reader to identify with the protagonist and so his efforts were ultimately wasted.

I had doubts about the wisdom of Interzone publishing material by editor Simon Ounsley and "Adam Found" only strengthened them. However "Paths of Dying" relieved them entirely. Almost surrealist in approach it effectively contrasted different forms of death, subtly suggesting that what outwardly appears to be an ending could in fact be a transformation, thus undermining society's attitudes to this great unmentionable. I look forward to future appearances by Simon Ounsley in these pages, though not I beg you either as a regular contributor or a mere stopgap when other material of a suitable quality is not to hand.

You featured Peter Lamborn Wilson's "Fountain of Time" story on the cover and quite rightly too as it was without a doubt the best piece in the magazine. Everything about this story was simply perfect. The prose was almost lyrical in its intensity, evoking a landscape of haunting and elegiac beauty. His trick of breaking off paragraphs gives the narrative an immediacy that prevents the casual reader being swept away by its seemingly effortless flow. Undercutting the whole is a certain subtle humour that

adds a new dimension to this superbly polished story. Best of all Mr Wilson has the good judgement to avoid any of the obvious twist endings and clichés leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions about the paradoxical nature of Ponce de Leon's fate and free to identify with him as a symbol of mankind itself. I am full of admiration for Mr Wilson's achievement.

An achievement almost but not quite equalled by Greg Egan with "Mind Vampires". A similar poetic quality permeates the prose, though shot through with a savage sense of urgency. The whole thing is fraught with nervous tension held in perilous equilibrium, mirroring the narrator's own mental state. The torrent of words carries you along at breakneck speed, hurling off images and ideas, all culminating in the final descent into madness. An impressive debut for Mr Egan. Please publish more by him.

Ian Watson is another writer about whom I am in two minds, never producing anything I have found wholly satisfactory. "Jingling Geordie's Hole" in IZ 17 reinforced this impression, after an excellent start with a real feel for the material degenerating into the usual science fiction/horror schlock. But "When Jesus Comes Down the Chimney" was a refreshing change of pace, offering a parable for modern times and a much needed antidote to all the seasonal hypocrisy.

As regards the other features, the book reviews and writer interviews are lively and informative, which leaves only "Mutant Popcorn" wanting. Nick Lowe seems to write this column with a perpetual sneer on his face. Simply put, he is hypercritical, deriding anything that aspires to be merely entertaining while offering only qualified praise at the best of times. No serious critic would apply the same standards to Simenon and Jean Genet just because they both happen to be writing about the French criminal classes. Yet Nick regularly slams such films as *Aliens* for falling short of his criteria of science fiction/artist perfection. Directors such as Lucas and Spielberg are not striving for the same effects as Resnais and Godard, so where is the sense in criticizing them for not achieving these? Their work deserves to be evaluated in its own terms.

**Peter A. Tennant**  
Thetford

*S.O.: But Nick described Aliens as "a clever well-written entertainment that respects its audience's intelligence even as it yanks mechanically on their strings" which surely sounds like praise with reservations rather than derision?*

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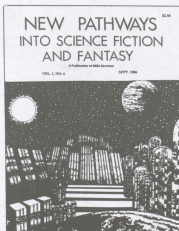
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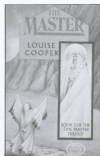
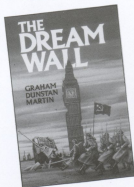
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