

interzone/58

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

APRIL
1992

New stories by
J. G. Ballard
Storm Constantine
M. John Harrison
Robert Irwin
Graham Joyce
and
Ian McDonald

**TENTH ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE**



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Submissions: stories, in the 2,000-6,000 word range, should be sent singly and each one must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript (marked as such) 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. Submissions should be sent to either of the following addresses: Lee Montgomerie, 53 Riviera Gardens, Leeds LS7 3DW
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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 58

April 1992

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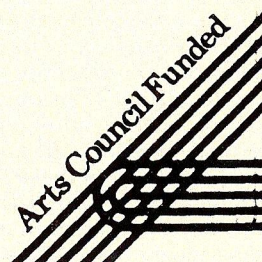
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Interface

David Pringle

Here it is, our tenth anniversary issue, featuring a good line-up of names old and new.

It has been a sometimes gruelling but frequently enjoyable ten years, and we're proud to have got this far. (See **Brian Stableford's** cogent article on the difficulties of publishing British science-fiction magazines, last issue.) *Interzone* began, a decade ago, as a slim 32-page quarterly with a black-and-yellow cover and no internal illustrations. It may have been small in those days, but it contained some very good stories. It also had eight co-editors, a weird arrangement in retrospect. Apart from myself, they were: **John Clute**, **Alan Dorey**, **Malcolm Edwards**, **Graham James**, **Roz Kaveney** and **Simon Ounsley**. All credit to those seven for helping get this ball rolling.

Commendations too to **Lee Montgomerie**, who has been Deputy Editor for the past several years, and to **Andy Robertson**, **Paul Annis**, **Matthew Dickens**, **Andrew Tidmarsh** and (sometimes) **Paul Brazier** – these are the people who, as assistant editors, do the real donkey work of sifting through some 200 unsolicited

submissions per month: an unsung chore which brings them no pay, little glory and occasional abusive letters. Credit also to our wise advisory editors, who include two of the original founders, Messrs Clute and Edwards, and **Judith Hanna**. Words of gratitude to our longstanding typesetter, **Bryan Williamson**; and to my wife, **Ann Pringle**, who is subscriptions secretary.

And thanks to all those who have helped us in various ways over the ten years, including (not least) the **Arts Council** as well as numerous individuals in publishing houses and science-fiction fandom – in America and elsewhere overseas as well as in Britain. Too many to name! Thanks to all our regular contributors of fiction, non-fiction and illustrations, and to our loyal subscribers (among them about 70 who have taken out lifetime subscriptions – you know who you are). The list is endless.

Despite dire predictions in the early days, and the economic doom and gloom of the past 18 months, we're still going strong! So here's to the next ten years...

which survive quite well on regular subscription rates of about \$25 to \$30. (In contrast, *Interzone's* rate within the UK is £26 [about \$45] per year.) At this point, a decade into *IZ's* publication history, it should have moved into this category in the US.

So why hasn't it attained this moderately high subscription volume? Well, it's not for lack of quality in its fiction. Most American fans who have managed to see *IZ* rank it in a tie for third among sf magazines: not quite on the level of *Asimov's* or *F&SF*, about even with *Omni*, and clearly better than *Analog*, *Amazing*, or *Aboriginal*. Nor is it a deficiency in *IZ's* cover art and interior design, which can't compete with *Omni's* slickness, of course, but is about the same quality as *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, or *Analog* and is distinctly better than *Amazing* or *Aboriginal*.

Nor is it any distinctly British quality in the fiction that would alienate American readers. I've heard this argued by British fans. At best, this is an exaggeration of some modest differences between American and British tastes in fiction. At worst, it's another example of the snide snobbishness among Britons about American culture which says, "Well, of course, we are purveyors of high art, while you Americans are mere panderers to popular taste."

The real problem is that *IZ* is badly marketed, and behind this, that it's been undercapitalized from the beginning. James Hughes is exactly right in his letter in *IZ* 55. In the three years I lived in England, I don't think I ever once saw a copy of *IZ* on a newsstand. In contrast, most newsstands in the US carry at least one, and often two or three, sf magazines. Had *IZ* ever been marketed correctly, it would have been selling 25,000 copies a month just within the UK by now. Long ago, *IZ* should have found some extra capital and sold an edition on American newsstands and to American subscribers. It should be selling 75,000 copies a month in the US by now.

It would have been better, of course, if this had all been accomplished five or six years ago when the economy was in better shape and investors were more willing to put money in expanding the subscription base of a magazine. Even now though, I think it still should be possible. I think the best thing would be if *Aboriginal* were to fold (it won't really be missed any-

Interaction

Dear Editors:

Commenting on your editorial in *IZ* 55 about the difference between US and UK magazine subscription rates: the rule of thumb in the US is that newsstand sales and first-year discounted subscriptions are at best a break-even proposition for magazine publishers. Profits come only from long-term subscriptions. This is only partly because of the greater economy of scale that is possible in the US. Mostly it is because of the difference in postage rates. The US rates are about two-thirds of the UK rates, despite the vastly greater distances that have to be covered.

There are two main factors in this lesser cost. One is that the American Post Office (superbly well-managed in my view, despite the frequent whining of Americans about its slowness) has decided to concentrate on overall efficiency, rather than on point-to-point speed. There's no expectation that a letter sent within 100 miles will arrive the next day, nor that a letter sent anywhere in the country will arrive within two days, as there is in the UK. Americans accept that a letter mailed across

the city might take three days. They do this realizing that a letter mailed, for instance, from New York to Los Angeles will probably also take three days, while a letter mailed between any two spots in the US, no matter how rural and separated, will take at most a week. They have also learned to accept one delivery a day instead of two.

The other factor is that the US Post Office has deliberately chosen to offer rock-bottom postage rates in order to create a much larger volume of mail that will then make these lower postage rates an acceptable economic proposition. This is fairly typical of the difference between American and British marketing techniques. Britons tend to project modest initial sales for their products and thus price them rather highly, while Americans tend to gamble on a large initial volume of sales by pricing the product quite cheaply.

Consequently, besides the large-subscription (500,000 and above) magazines which appear on most American newsstands, of which there are perhaps 200, there are a couple thousand moderate-size (50,000 to 500,000 subscriptions) magazines with only small newsstand sales

way), and IZ were to acquire its subscription base and its place on American newsstands. *Interzone* deserves to be seen by more sf readers.

Wendell Wagner, Jr.
Greenbelt, Maryland

Editor: Thanks for your suggestions, and for your high estimation of the magazine. To reply to just one point: we doubt that *Interzone*, however well marketed, could sell 25,000 copies a month in the UK. Life is not easy for any fiction magazine in this country at present. The now-defunct horror magazine *Fear* used to claim (for its advertisers' benefit) a circulation of 15,000, and we all thought it was doing well. According to Newsfield Publications' liquidators' report, however, its actual circulation was down to less than 4,000 towards the end. That's fewer copies than IZ sells; which just goes to show...

Dear Editors:

You are quite right, of course, when you say that people buy magazine subscriptions more readily in the US than in the UK. In this respect, *Interzone* has always been at a disadvantage relative to its American counterparts. You fail to mention, however, that newsstand distribution in the UK is achieved a lot more easily than in the US, and with much greater efficiency. Britain is a smaller country, the distribution system is less corrupt, and you do not necessarily have to accept returns (unsold copies returned for credit) at rates of 50 percent or more.

Also, IZ enjoys an Arts Council grant. I can't think of a science-fiction magazine in the US that has any kind of grant to help sustain it. Thus, I am not entirely convinced by your hard-luck story. Could it not be that American magazines are simply better at controlling their costs, and (in some cases) better at presenting themselves in a more interesting style? True, you have insured the survival of IZ by managing it with caution. Survival at subsistence level, however, is not the highest pinnacle to which one can aspire. To achieve a more resounding success (which seems to be what you really want), something a little more daring might be required.

According to your figures, after you exchanged issues with *Aboriginal SF*, 5 percent of your subscribers sent money to *Aboriginal*, while only 0.2 percent of *Aboriginal*'s subscribers wanted *Interzone*. This ratio of 25:1 may reflect relative subscription prices, as you imply. Or it could mean that *Aboriginal* is 25 times more interesting than IZ. The possibility is not mentioned in your editorial, but I think you should give it some thought.

Charles Platt
New York

Editor: Aboriginal 25 times more interesting than *Interzone*? Oh come, come, Charles – shame on you for entertaining the thought. Recently, we were talking to Charles Brown, editor of *Locus*, and he suggested that one reason our marketing of IZ to Aboriginal's readers worked poorly is because AbSF has a readership which is much more juvenile than IZ's. Aboriginal has its undoubted merits, but its readers are mainly teen-aged (and presumably hard-up). *Interzone*'s readers tend to be in their 20s and 30s, and beyond. On the matter of newstrade returns: yes, we do have to accept returns of more than 50% in the UK – alas. As to the annual Arts Council grant which we enjoy: yes, it's been a help and is much appreciated, but it's small and covers less than the costs of one issue out of the year's 12.

Dear Editors:

Congratulations on your tenth anniversary, keep up the (on the whole) good work, and keep giving major chances to minor writers.

Nathalie Bennion
Birmingham

Dear Editors:

I recently bought a copy of *Interzone* (number 54) for the first time. I am very pleased I did. The quality of the stories and reviews is excellent. In particular, I was very taken by "Bad Timing" by Molly Brown. I felt there was perhaps an underlying message being imparted in a very fun way. You have one more customer – great stuff!

Frank Dullaghan
Chelmsford

Dear Editors:

Some interesting experiments last year, like the *Aboriginal* swap, which worked, and the *MILLION* one, which didn't. On the whole, your non-fiction items throughout issues 43 to 54 were informative and entertaining, the high-points for me being Richard Kadrey's and Larry McCaffery's wide-ranging (and highly contentious) "Cyberpunk: A Schematic Guide"; most of John Clute's book reviews, but in particular his remarkable analysis of *The Difference Engine*; Dave Hughes interviewing Jonathan Carroll; and Bruce Sterling's account of "The Cyberpunk Bust."

Nicola Griffith is the most consistently brilliant writer you have published in the last couple of years and I look forward to seeing more of her stories in your pages in '92.

Mike O'Driscoll
Swansea

Editor: If you liked the Kadrey/McCaffery cyberpunk checklist, you may want to seek out the book from which it was a pre-publication extract, *Storming the Reality Studio* (see

advert on page 34 of IZ 56). Bruce Sterling is currently expanding his "Cyberpunk Bust" article into a full-length non-fiction book about computer hackers, etc. And Nicola Griffith has a first sf novel, *Bones of Rock*, coming out from HarperCollins in the latter part of this year. (The same publisher will be releasing IZ discovery Richard Calder's debut novel, *Dead Girls*.)

Dear Editors:

This letter comes to you from Gintaras Aleksonis, editor of the first Lithuanian sf magazine, *Kaukas*. In our magazine (*Kaukas* is a goblinlike creature from Lithuanian mythlore) we'll try to popularize the world's best sf and fantasy literature, give some historical background, review famous sf films, inform our readers about world and European sf conventions, and stimulate Lithuanian writers in the science-fiction field.

Our readers had no opportunity to read the best Anglo-American sf for more than 50 years. Because of the almost impenetrable Iron Curtain which the Soviets built around Lithuania and other occupied Baltic states, our readers know nothing about the Hugo Gernsback era, about the Golden Age of sf or John W. Campbell's influence on the field. They have never heard about the New Wave revolution in the 60s – and the role of J.G. Ballard, M. Moorcock, B.W. Aldiss – or the so-called cyberpunk in the 80s.

I want to have two or three issues a year devoted completely to the world's greatest sf authors: R. Heinlein, A. Budrys (he is of Lithuanian origin), H. Harrison, P. Anderson, Aldiss, Ballard and others. Quite accidentally, I got two back issues (numbers 26 and 29) of your magnificent magazine *Interzone*. I liked the stories very much, especially "Dark Night in Toyland" by Bob Shaw and "The Cutie" by Greg Egan. Would you inform me about the possibility of publishing these and other stories from IZ in the Lithuanian magazine *Kaukas*?

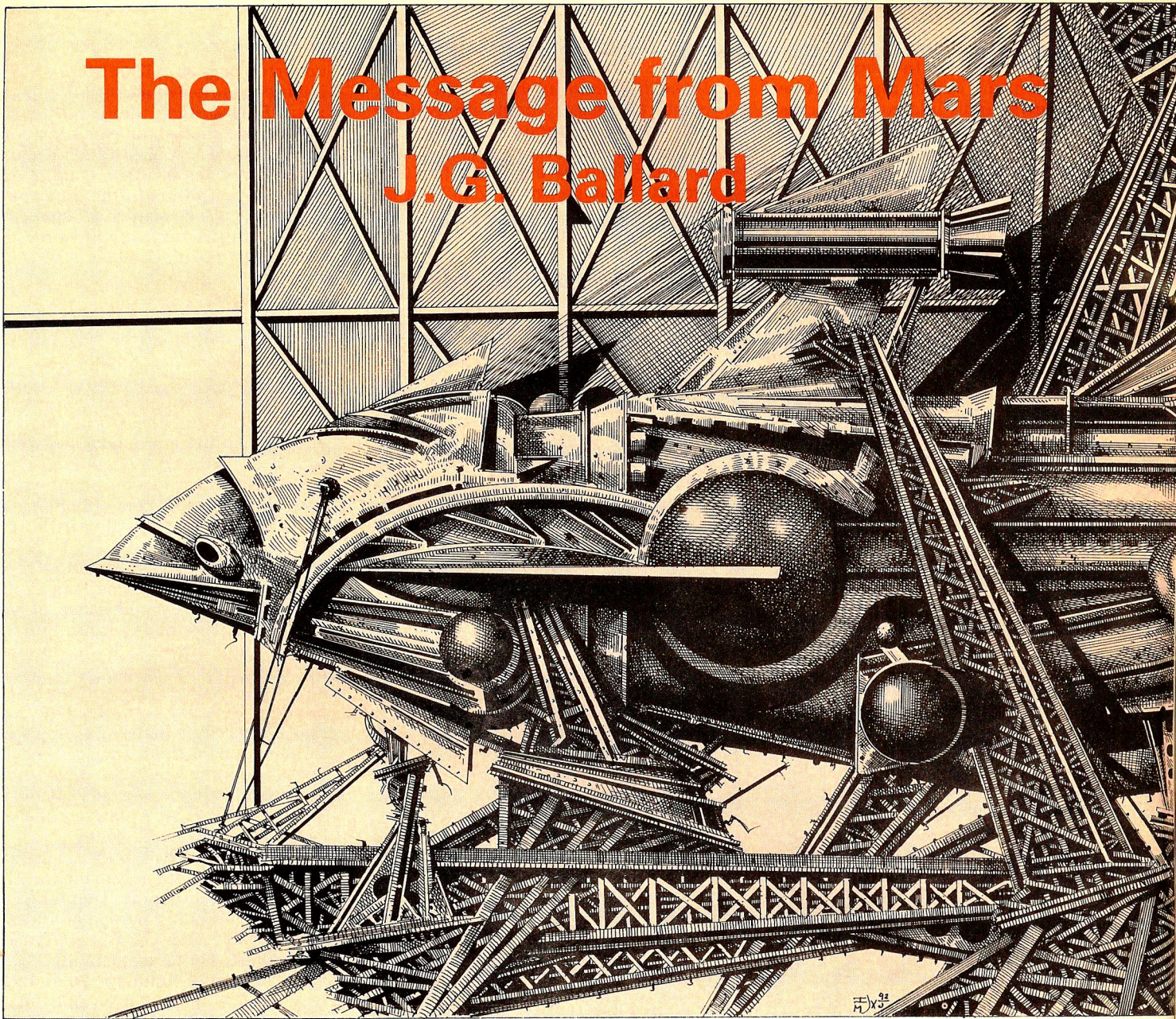
Gintaras Aleksonis
Radvilenu 56a-35
Kaunas-28, Lithuania

Editor: Here's a good opportunity for those authors who wish to see their stories published in Lithuania. If you're interested, please send back issues of *Interzone* and other magazines and anthologies containing your work to the above address. Mr Aleksonis also translates novels for book publication, and I'm sure he would appreciate recommended reading lists, old paperbacks, etc. Also articles on the history of science fiction, the current state of British sf, and so on, from anyone who is knowledgeable and competent.

Continued on page 20

The Message from Mars

J.G. Ballard



The successful conclusion of NASA's Mars mission in 2008, signalled by the safe touch-down of the Zeus IV space vehicle at Edwards Air Force Base in California, marked an immense triumph for the agency. During the 1990s, after the failure of the Shuttle project, NASA's entire future was in jeopardy. The American public's lack of interest in the space programme, coupled with unsettling political events in the former Soviet bloc, led Congress to cut back its funding of astronautics. Successive U.S. Presidents were distracted by the task of balancing the national budget, and their scientific advisers had long insisted that the exploration of the solar system could be achieved far more economically by unmanned vehicles.

But NASA's directors had always known that the scientific exploration of space was a small part of the agency's claim to existence. Manned flights alone could touch the public imagination and guarantee the huge funds needed to achieve them. The triumph of the Apollo landing on the moon in 1969 had shown that the road to the spiritual heart of America could be paved with dollar bills, but by the year 2000 that road seemed permanently closed. Struggling to keep

the agency alive, the NASA chiefs found themselves reduced to the satellite mapping of mid-western drought areas, and were faced with the prospect of being absorbed into the Department of Agriculture.

However, at the last hour the agency was saved, and given the funds to embark on its greatest mission. The announcement in Peking on January 1, 2001, that a Chinese spacecraft had landed on the moon sent an uneasy tremor through the American nation. True, the Stars and Stripes had been planted on the moon more than thirty years earlier, but that event lay in a past millennium. Was the next millennium to be dominated by the peoples on the Asian side of the Pacific rim, spending their huge trade surpluses on spectacular projects that would seize the planet's imagination for the next century?

As the pictures of the Chinese astronauts, posing beside their pagoda-shaped space vehicle *The Temple of Lightness*, were relayed to the world's TV screens, news came that an Indonesian space crew and an unmanned Korean probe would soon land next to the Chinese.

Galvanised by all this, a no longer somnolent Presi-

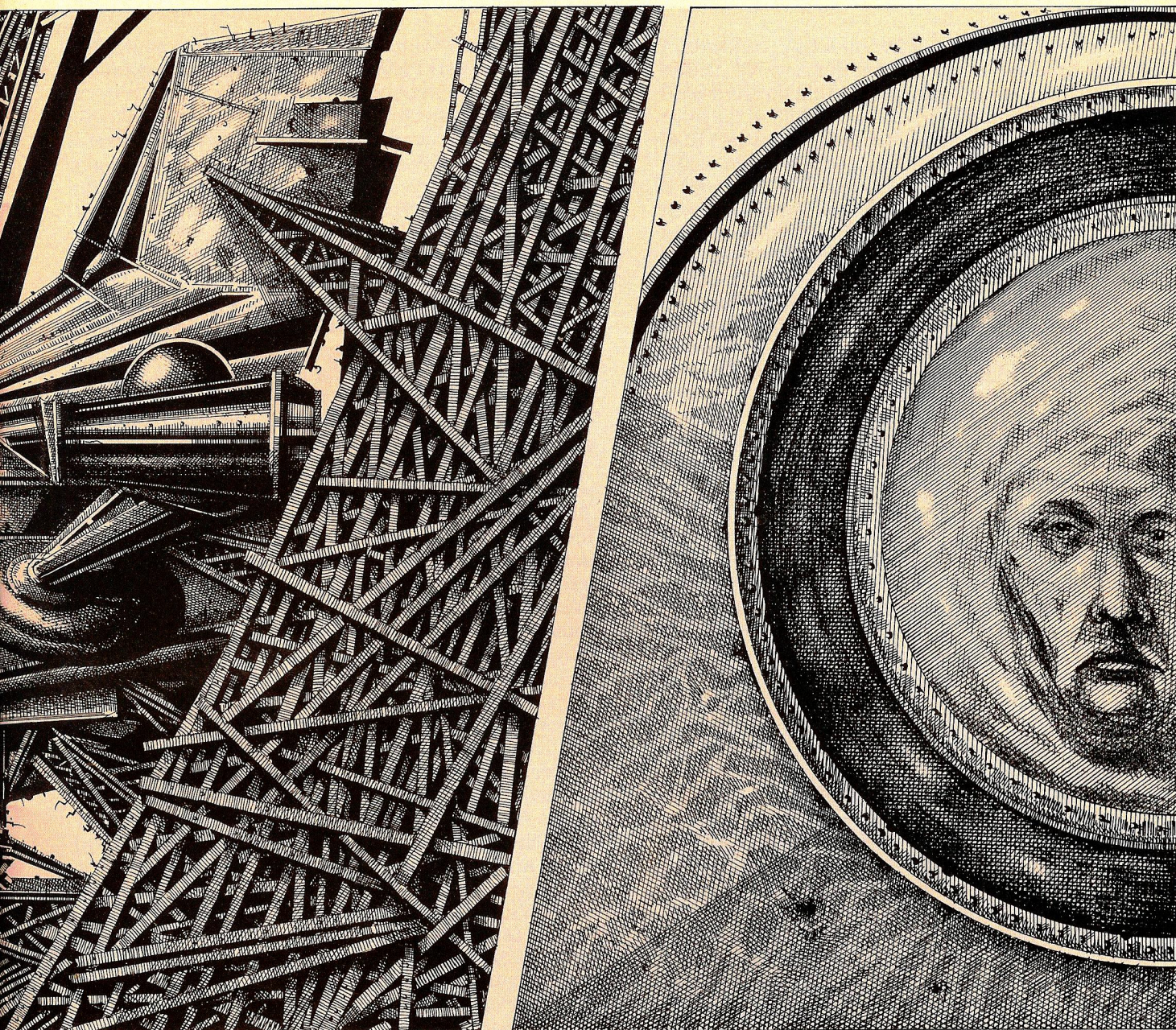


Illustration by Ian Miller

dent Quayle addressed both houses of Congress. Within weeks NASA was assigned a multi-billion dollar emergency fund and ordered to launch a crash programme that would leap-frog the moon and land an American on Mars before the end of the decade.

NASA, as always, rose bravely to the challenge of the tax-dollar. Armies of elderly space-engineers were recruited from their Florida retirement homes. Fifty civilian and military test pilots were pressed into astronaut training. Within two years Zeus I, the unmanned prototype of the vast space vehicles that would later carry a five-man crew, had roared away from Cape Canaveral on a six-month reconnaissance voyage. It circled the Red Planet a dozen times and surveyed the likely landing zone, before returning successfully to Earth.

After two more unmanned flights, in 2005 and 2006, Zeus IV set off in November, 2007, guaranteeing President Quayle's third-term electoral landslide, which the five astronauts saluted from the flight-deck of the spacecraft. By now the Chinese, Indonesian and Korean lunar programmes had been forgotten. The world's eyes were fixed on

the Zeus IV, and its five crew-members were soon more famous than any Hollywood superstar.

Wisely, NASA had selected an international crew, led by Colonel Dean Irwin of the USAF. Captain Clifford Horner and Commander John Merritt were former US Army and Navy test pilots, but the team was completed by a Russian doctor, Colonel Valentina Tsarev, and a Japanese computer specialist, Professor Hiroshi Kawahito.

During the two-month voyage to Mars the quirks and personalities of the five astronauts became as familiar as any face across a breakfast table. The Zeus IV was the largest spacecraft ever launched, and had the dimensions of a nuclear submarine. Its wide control rooms and observation decks, its crew facilities and non-denominational chapel (if a marriage was arranged, Colonel Irwin was authorized to conduct it) happily reminded TV viewers of the Starship Enterprise in the *Star Trek* TV series, still endlessly broadcast on a hundred networks. Everyone responded to the calm and dignified presence of Colonel Irwin, the deadpan humour of Captain Horner, the chirpy computer-speak of the mercurial Japanese, and the mothering but

sometimes flirtatious eye of Dr Valentina. Millions of viewers rallied to their aid when the Zeus IV passed through an unexpected meteor storm, but the ultra-hard carbon fibre and ceramic hull, a byproduct of the most advanced tank armour, proved even more resilient than the designers had hoped. The inspection space-walks seemed like gracefully choreographed ballets – which of course they were, like every other activity shown to the TV audience – and confirmed that mankind had at last entered the second Space Age.

Two months to the day after leaving Cape Canaveral, the Zeus IV landed on Mars, whose sombre presence had loomed ever more threateningly for the previous weeks. Signals blackouts caused by the planet's magnetic fields added their own thrills and panics, skilfully orchestrated by NASA's PR specialists. But the landing was a triumph, celebrated by the hoisting of the Stars and Stripes and, behind it, the flag of the United Nations. Within an hour the crew of the Zeus IV was standing on Martian soil beside the spacecraft, intoning their carefully rehearsed "Hymn to the Space Age." From that moment no Congressman dared to deny the NASA chiefs anything they demanded.

For the next six weeks public interest in the Mars mission remained high, sustained by NASA's careful attention to the emotional needs of the world-wide audience. Life within the spacecraft was presented as a cross between a TV sitcom and a classroom course in elementary astronautics. The crew tolerantly went along with these charades. Dr Valentina was seen replacing a filling in Commander Merritt's mouth, and Professor Kawahito, the heart-throb of a billion Asian viewers, won a hard-fought chess tournament against the Zeus IV's combined on-board computers. Romance was in the air as Dr Valentina's cabin door remained tantalizingly ajar. The TV cameras followed the crew as they drove in their excursion vehicles across the fossil Martian seas, collecting rock samples and analysing the local atmosphere.

At the half-way stage of their mission the crew revealed a mild impatience with the media roles imposed on them, which the NASA psychologists attributed to a greater maturity brought on by a sense of planetary awe. To remind them of Earth, the astronauts were urged to watch episodes of *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *The Flintstones*, and to take part in a series of Oval Office interviews with President Quayle. But their spirits lifted as the day of departure drew near. When the Zeus IV rose at last from the Martian surface the entire crew burst spontaneously into an unscripted cheer, in which some observers detected a small note of irony.

Ignoring this impromptu levity, NASA planned a lavish reception at Edwards Air Force Base, where the Zeus IV would land. Every Congressman and Governor in the United States would be present, along with President Quayle, the heads of state of thirty countries and a host of entertainment celebrities. An unending programme of media appearances awaited the astronauts – there would be triumphal parades through a dozen major cities, followed by a worldwide tour lasting a full six months. NASA had already appointed firms of literary agents and public relations experts to look after the commercial interests of the astronauts. There were sports sponsorships, book contracts and highly paid consultancies. The news of these

deals was transmitted to the home-coming crew, who seemed gratified by the interest in their achievement, unaware that whenever they appeared on screen their images were accompanied by the cash totals now committed to them. Two days before the Zeus IV landed, NASA announced that three major Hollywood studios would collaborate on the most expensive film of all time, in which the astronauts would play themselves in a faithful recreation of the Martian voyage.

So, at 3.35 pm on April 29, 2008, the Zeus IV appeared in the California sky. Accompanied by six chase planes, the spacecraft swept down to a perfect landing, guided by its on-board computers to within 50 metres of President Quayle's reception podium. The stunned silence was broken by an immense cheer when two of the astronauts were glimpsed in the observation windows. The crowd surged forward, waiting for the hatches to open as soon as the landing checks were over.

Despite the warmth of this welcome, the astronauts were surprisingly reluctant to emerge from their craft. The decontamination teams were poised by the airlocks, ready to board the spaceship and evacuate its atmosphere for laboratory analysis. But the crew had overridden the computerized sequences and made no reply over the radio link to the urgent queries of the ground controllers. They had switched off the television cameras inside the craft, but could be seen through the observation windows, apparently tidying their cabins and changing into overalls. Dr Valentina was spotted in the galley, apparently sterilizing her surgical instruments. A rumour swept the review stands, where President Quayle, the Congress and invited heads of state sweltered in the sun, that one of the crew had been injured on re-entry, but it soon transpired that Dr Valentina was merely making soup. Even more strangely, Professor Kawahito was seen setting out six parallel chess-boards, as if preparing for another tournament.

At this point, an hour after their arrival, the crew became irritated by the grimacing faces pressed against the observation windows, and the interior shutters abruptly closed. This dismissive gesture made the crowd even more restive, and the ground staff tried to force the main hatch. When they failed, the head of NASA's crash recovery team began to pound on the locks with a baseball bat borrowed from a youngster seated on his father's shoulders. The first whistles and jeers rose from the crowd, who jostled the scaffolding towers on which the impatient TV crews were waiting. A camera-man lost his footing and fell through the roof of a parked bus. Loud-speakers blared meaninglessly across the million or more spectators sitting on their cars around the perimeter of the airfield. The heads of state, diplomats and generals consulted their watches, while President Quayle, making involuntary putting movements with the portable microphone in his hands, beckoned in an unsettling way to his military aide carrying the briefcase of nuclear launch codes. The boos of the crowd were only drowned when a squadron of jet planes flew low over the field, releasing streams of red, white and blue smoke. Ordered away by the frantic control tower, the victory flight broke up in confusion as the pilots returned to their muster points in the sky, leaving a delirium of crazed smoke over the Zeus IV.

At last calm was restored when a company of military

police took up positions around the spacecraft, forcing the crowds behind the VIP stands. Led by President Quayle, the dignitaries shuffled from their seats and hurried along the lines of red carpet to the refreshment tents. The TV cameras trained their lenses on the Zeus IV, watching for the smallest sign of movement.

As evening fell, the spectators beyond the airfield perimeter began to disperse. Powerful arc-lights bathed the spacecraft, and during the night a fresh attempt was made to contact the crew. But the messages in morse code tapped on the hull, like the laser beams shone at the darkened observation windows, failed to draw any response. No sound could be heard from the interior of the craft, as if the crew had settled in for the night, and a hundred theories began to circulate among the NASA chiefs and the teams of doctors and psychiatrists summoned to their aid.

Were the astronauts in the last stages of a fatal contagious disease? Had their brains been invaded by an alien parasite? Were they too emotionally exhausted by their voyage to face the reception awaiting them, or gripped by so strong a sense of humility that they longed only for silence and anonymity? Had an unexpected consequence of time dilation returned them psychological hours or days after their physical arrival? Had they, perhaps, died in a spiritual sense, or were they, for inexplicable reasons of their own, staging a mutiny?

Surrounded by the deserted stands and the silent bunting, the NASA chiefs made their decision. An hour before dawn two thermal lances played their fiery hoses against the heat-resistant plates of the spacecraft. But the carbon-ceramic hull of the Zeus IV had been forged in temperatures far beyond that of a thermal lance.

A controlled explosion was the only solution, despite the danger to the crew within. But as the demolition squad placed their charges against the ventral hatchway, the shutter of an observation window opened for the first time. Captured on film, the faces of Colonel Irwin and Commander Merritt looked down at the limpet mines, the detonators and fuse wire. They gazed calmly at the NASA officials and engineers gesticulating at them, and shook their heads, rejecting the world with a brief wave before closing the shutter for the last time.

Needless to say, NASA allowed nothing of this to leak to the public at large, and claimed that the crew had alerted their ground controllers to the possible dangers of a virulent interplanetary disease. NASA spokesmen confirmed that they had ordered the crew to isolate themselves until this mystery virus could be identified and destroyed. The Zeus IV was hitched to its tractor and moved to an empty hangar on a remote corner of the airbase, safe from the TV cameras and the thousands still camped around the perimeter fence.

Here, over the next weeks and months, teams of engineers and psychologists, astrophysicists and churchmen tried to free the crew from their self-imposed prison. Right from the start, as the doors of the hangar sealed the Zeus IV from the world, it was taken for granted that the astronauts' immolation was entirely voluntary. Nonetheless, an armed guard, backed by electronic security devices, kept careful watch on the craft. Sets of aircraft scales were manoeuvred

under the landing wheels, so that the weight of the Zeus IV could be measured at all times, and instantly expose any attempt at escape.

As it happened, the spaceship's weight remained constant, never fluctuating by more than the accumulated dust on its hull. In all senses the Zeus IV constituted a sealed world, immune to any pressures from within or without. A controlled explosion strong enough to split the hull would also rupture the engines and disperse the craft's nuclear fuel supply, provoking a worldwide political outcry that would doom NASA forever. There was no way of starving the crew out – to deal with the possibility of the Zeus IV missing its rendezvous with Mars and stranding itself forever in deep space, a 200-ton stock of food had been placed aboard, enough to last the crew for 40 years. Its air, water and human wastes were recycled, and there were enough episodes of *Dallas* in the video-library to amuse the astronauts for all eternity.

The Zeus, in fact, no longer needed the Earth, and the NASA officials accepted that only psychological means would ever persuade the crew to leave their craft. They assumed that a profound spiritual crisis had afflicted the astronauts, and that until this resolved itself the rescuers' main task was to establish a channel of communication.

So began a long series of ruses, pleas and stratagems. The puzzled entreaties of relatives, whose tearful faces were projected onto the hangar roof, the prayers of churchmen, the offer of huge cash bribes, the calls to patriotism and even the threat of imprisonment, failed to prompt a single response. After two months, when public curiosity was still at fever pitch, the NASA teams admitted to themselves that the Zeus IV crew had probably not even heard these threats and promises.

Meanwhile an impatient President Quayle, aware that he was the butt of cartoonists and TV comedians, demanded firmer action. He ordered that pop music be played at full blast against the spacecraft's hull and, further, that the huge ship be rocked violently from side to side until the crew came to their senses. This regime was tried but discontinued after two hours, partly for reasons of sheer ludicrousness, and partly for fear of damaging the nuclear reactors.

More thoughtful opinion was aware that the crisis afflicting the Zeus crew merited careful study in its own right, if mankind were ever to live permanently in space. A prominent theologian was invited to the Edwards airbase, and surveyed the claustrophobic hangar in which the Zeus was now entombed, draped like Gulliver in its cables and acoustic sensors. He wondered why the crew had bothered to return to Earth at all, knowing what they probably faced, when they might have stayed forever on the vast and empty landscapes of Mars. By returning at all, he ventured, they were making an important point, and acknowledged that they still saw their place among the human race.

So a patient vigil began. Concealed cameras watched for any signs of internal movement and electronic gauges mapped the smallest activities of the crew. After a further three months the daily pattern of life within the Zeus IV had been well established. The crew never spoke to each other, except when carrying out the daily maintenance checks of the space-

craft systems. All took regular exercise in the gymnasium, but otherwise stayed in their own quarters. No music was played and they never listened to radio or television. For all that anyone knew, they passed the days in sleep, meditation and prayer. The temperature remained at a steady 68°F., and the only constant sound was that of the circulation of air.

After six months the NASA psychiatrists concluded that the crew of the Zeus IV had suffered a traumatic mental collapse, probably brought on by oxygen starvation, and were now in a vegetative state. Relatives protested, but public interest began to wane. Congress refused to allocate funds for further Zeus missions, and NASA reluctantly committed itself to a future of instrumented spaceflights.

A year passed, and a second. A small guard and communications crew, including a duty psychologist and a clergyman, still maintained a vigil over the Zeus. The monitors recorded the faint movements of the crew, and the patterns of daily life which they had established within a few hours of their landing. A computerized analysis of their foot-treads identified each of the astronauts and revealed that they kept to their own quarters and seldom met, though all took part in the maintenance drills.

So the astronauts languished in their twilight world. A new President and the unfolding decades of peace led the public to forget about the Zeus IV, and its crew, if remembered at all, were assumed to be convalescing at a secret institution. In 2016, eight years after their return, there was a flurry of activity when a deranged security officer lit a large fire under the spacecraft, in an attempt to smoke out the crew. Four years later a Hollywood telepathist claimed to be in contact with the astronauts, reporting that they had met God on Mars and had been sworn to silence about the tragic future in store for the human race.

In 2025 the NASA headquarters in Houston were alerted to a small but sudden fall in the overall weight of the Zeus – 170 pounds had been wiped from the scales. Was the spacecraft preparing for take-off, perhaps employing an anti-gravity device which the crew had been constructing in the seventeen years since their return? However, the tread-pattern analysis confirmed that only four astronauts were now aboard the craft. Colonel Irwin was missing, and an exhaustive hunt began of the Edwards airbase. But the organic sediments in the trapped gases released from a discharge vent revealed what some engineers had already suspected. Colonel Irwin had died at the age of 62, and his remains had been vapourized and returned to the atmosphere. Four years later he was followed by the Japanese, Professor Kawahito, and the Zeus was lighter by a further 132 pounds. The food stocks aboard the Zeus would now last well beyond the deaths of the three astronauts still alive.

In 2035 NASA was dissolved, and its functions assigned to the immensely wealthy universities which ran their own scientific space programmes. The Zeus IV was offered to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, but the director declined, on the grounds that the museum could not accept exhibits that contained living organisms. The USAF had long wished to close the Edwards airbase, and responsibility for this huge desert expanse passed to the National Parks Bureau,

which was eager to oversee one of the few areas of California not yet covered with tract housing. The armed guards around the Zeus IV had long gone, and two field officers supervised the elderly instruments that still kept watch over the spacecraft.

Captain Horner died in 2040, but the event was not noticed until the following year when a bored repairman catalogued the accumulated acoustic tapes and ran a computer analysis of tread-patterns and overall weight.

The news of this death, mentioned only in the National Parks Bureau's annual report, came to the attention of a Las Vegas entrepreneur who had opened the former Nevada atomic proving grounds to the tourist trade, mounting simulated A-bomb explosions. He leased the Zeus hangar from the Parks Bureau, and small parties of tourists trooped around the spacecraft, watching bemused as the rare tread-patterns crossed the sonar screens in the monitor room.

After three years of poor attendances the tours were discontinued, but a decade later a Tijuana circus proprietor sub-leased the site for his winter season. He demolished the now derelict hangar and constructed an inflatable astro-dome with a huge arena floor. Helium-filled latex "spacecraft" circled the Zeus IV, and the performance ended with a mass ascent of the huge vehicle by a team of topless women acrobats.

When the dome was removed the Zeus IV sat under the stars, attached to a small shack where a single technician of the Parks Bureau kept a desultory watch on the computer screens for an hour each day. The spaceship was now covered with graffiti and obscene slogans, and the initials of thousands of long-vanished tourists. With its undercarriage embedded in the desert sand, it resembled a steam locomotive of the 19th century, which many passers-by assumed it to be.

Tramps and hippies sheltered under its fins, and at one time the craft was incorporated into a small shanty village. In later years a desert preacher attracted a modest following, claiming that the Messiah had made his second coming and was trapped inside the Zeus. Another cultist claimed that the devil had taken up residence in the ancient structure. The housing drew ever closer, and eventually surrounded the Zeus, which briefly served as an illuminated landmark advertising an unsuccessful fast-food franchise.

In 2070, sixty-two years after its return from Mars, a young graduate student at Reno University erected a steel frame around the Zeus and attached a set of high-intensity magnetic probes to its hull. The computerized imaging equipment – later confiscated by the U.S. Government – revealed the silent and eerie interior of the spacecraft, its empty flight decks and corridors.

An aged couple, Commander John Merritt and Dr Valentina Tsarev, now in their late eighties, sat in their small cabins, hands folded on their laps. There were no books or ornaments beside their simple beds. Despite their extreme age they were clearly alert, tidy and reasonably well nourished. Most mysteriously, across their eyes moved the continuous play of a keen and amused intelligence. ●

Anima

M. John Harrison

A week ago last Tuesday I dreamed all night of trying to find out what had happened to the woman I loved. She was a pianist and a writer. We had met in New York when she played a concert of American and British music. She had reminded me how I had once been able to dance. Now, some time later, she had come to Britain to find me. But she could no longer speak, only weep. How had she travelled here? Where did she live? What was she trying to say? It was a dream heavy with sadness and urgency. All avenues of inquiry were blocked. There were people who might know about her, but always some reason why they could not be asked, or would not tell. I walked up and down the streets, examining the goods on the market stalls, my only clue the re-issue date of a once-banned medicine.

I never dreamed anything like this until I met Choe Ashton –

Ten past ten on a Saturday night in December, the weekend Bush talked to Gorbachev on the *Maxim Gorki* in half a gale in Valetta Harbour. In the east, governments were going over like tired middleweights – saggy, puzzled, almost apologetic. I sat in the upper rooms of a media drinking club in central London. The occasion was the birthday of a corporate executive called Dawes who sometimes commissioned work from me. Shortly they would be giving him a cake shaped like half a football on which had been iced the words: OVER THE MOON BUT NOT OVER THE HILL!

Meanwhile they were eating pasta.

“Now that’s two thousand calories. How much more do you want?”

“So far I’ve had cheese but not much else, which is interesting –”

“Are we going to get that fettucini we’ve paid for?”

The women were in TV: the last of the power dressers. The men were in advertising, balding to a pony tail. Men or women, they all had a Range Rover in the car park at Poland Street. They were already thinking of exchanging it for one of the new Mazdas. I moved away from them and went to stare out of the window. The sky over towards Trafalgar Square looked like a thundery summer afternoon. The buildings, side-lit by street lamps, stood out against it, and against one another, like buildings cut from cardboard. I followed an obscure line of neon. A string of fairy lights slanting away along the edge of a roof. Then cars going to and fro down at the junction by St Martins-in-the-Field, appearing very much smaller

than they were. I had been there about a minute when someone came up behind me and said:

“Guess what? I was just in the bog. I switched the hand-drier on and it talked to me. No, come on, it’s true! I put my hands under it and it said, ‘Choe, I really like drying your hands.’”

I knew his name, and I had seen him around: no more. He was in his forties, short and wiry, full of energy, with the flat-top haircut and earring of a much younger man. His 501s were ripped at the knees. With them he wore a softly-tailored French Connection blouson which made his face, reddened as if by some kind of outdoor work, look incongruous and hard.

“Has anything like that ever happened to you? I’m not kidding you, you know. It talked to me!”

I shrugged.

“OK. Give us a fag then, if you don’t believe me. Eh?”

He was delighted by my embarrassment.

“I don’t smoke,” I said.

“Come on,” he wheedled. “Every fucker smokes. Dawsie only knows people who smoke. Give us a fag.”

I had spent all day feeling as if my eyes were focusing at different lengths. Every so often, things – especially print – swam in a way which suggested that though for one eye the ideal distance was eighteen inches, the other felt happier at twelve. Choe Ashton turned out to be the perfect object for this augmented kind of vision, slipping naturally in and out of view, one part of his personality clear and sharp, the rest vague and impressionistic. What did he do? Whose friend was he? Any attempt to bring the whole of him into view produced a constant sense of strain, as your brain fought to equalize the different focal lengths.

“I’m sick of this,” he said. “Let’s fuck off to Lisle Street and have a Chinese. Eh?”

He gave me a sly, beautiful smile. An ageing boy in a French Connection jacket.

“Come on, you know you want to.”

I did. I was bored. As we were leaving, they brought the birthday cake in. People always seem very human on occasions like this. Dawes made several efforts to blow the candles out, to diminishing applause; and ended up pouring wine over them. Then an odd thing happened. The candles, which – blackened, but fizzing and bubbling grossly, dripping thick coloured wax down the sides of the football – had seemed to be completely extinguished, began to burn again. Blinking happily around, Dawes had taken the incident as a powerful metaphor for his own vitality, and was already pouring more wine on them.

"Did you see that?" I asked Choe Ashton.
But he was halfway out of the door.

At first we walked rapidly, not talking. Head down, hands rammed into the pockets of his coat, Ashton paused only to glance at the enormous neon currency symbols above the Bureau de Change on Charing Cross Road. "Ah, money!" But as soon as he recognized Ed's Easy Diner, he seemed content to slow down and take his time. It was a warm night for December. Soho was full of the most carefully dressed people. Ashton pulled me towards a group standing outside the Groucho, so that he could admire their louche haircuts and beautifully crumpled chinos. "Can't you feel the light coming off them?" he asked me in a voice loud enough for them to hear. "I just want to bask in it."

For a moment after he had said this, there did seem to be a light round them – like the soft light in a 70s movie, or the kind of watery nimbus you sometimes see when you are peering through a window in the rain. I pulled him away, but he kept yearning back along the pavement towards them, laughing. "I love you!" he called to them despairingly. "I love you!" They moved uncomfortably under his approval, like cattle the other side of a fence.

"The middle classes are always on watch," he complained.

We dodged briefly into a pick-up bar and tried to talk. The only free table was on a kind of mezzanine floor on the way to the ladies' lavatory. Up there you were on a level with the sound system. Drunken girls pushed past, or fell heavily into the table.

"I love them all!" shouted Ashton.

"Pardon?"

"I love them!"

"What, these too?"

"Everything they do is wonderful!"

Actually they just sat under the ads for Jello-shots, Schlitz and Molson's Canadian and drank Lowenbrau: boys in soft three-button shirts and Timberline boots, girls with tailored jackets over white silk trousers. I couldn't see how they had arrived there from Manor House or Finsbury Park, all those dull, broken, littered places on the Piccadilly line; or why. Eventually we got sick of bawling at one another over the music and let it drive us back out into Cambridge Circus.

"I was here this afternoon," he said. "I thought I heard my name called out."

"Someone you knew."

"I couldn't see anyone."

We ended up in one of those Lisle Street restaurants which specialize in degree-zero décor, cheap crockery and grudging service. There were seven tables crammed into an area smaller than a newsagent's shop. The lavatory – with its broken door handle and empty paper roll – was downstairs in the kitchens. Outside it on a hard chair sat a waitress, who stared angrily at you as you went past. They had a payphone: but if you wanted to use it, or even collect your coat from the coat rack, you had to lean over someone else's dinner. Choe Ashton, delighted, went straight to the crepe paper shrine mounted in the alcove to show me a vase of plastic

flowers, a red-and-gold tin censer from which the stubs of old incense sticks protruded like burnt-out fireworks, two boxes of safety matches.

"See this? Make a wish!"

With considerable gentleness he put fresh incense in the censer and struck a match.

"I love these places –" he said.

He sat down and rubbed his hands.

"– but I'm bored with Hot and Sour."

He stared away from the menu and up at the industrial ceiling, which had been lowered with yellow-painted slats. Through them you could still see wires, bitumen, ventilator boxes. A few faded strings ejected from some exhausted Christmas party-popper still hung up there, as if someone had flung noodles about in a claustrophobic fit or paddy.

"Let's have some Bitter and Unfulfilled here!" he called to the waitress. "No. Wait a minute. I want Imitation Pine Board Soup, with a Loon Fung calendar.

"But it has to have copulating pandas on it."

After that we began to drink Tsing Tao beer. Its packaging, he said, the pale grey ground and green, red and gold label, reminded him of something. He arranged several empty cans across the table between us and stared at them thoughtfully for some time, but nothing came of it. I don't remember eating, though we ordered a lot of food. Later he transferred his obsession from the Tsing Tao label to the reflections of the street neon in the mirror behind the bar. SOHO. PEEP SHOW. They were red, greenish-yellow, a cold blue. A strobe flickered inside the door of the peep show. Six people had been in there in two minutes. Two of them had come out again almost immediately. "Fucking hell, sex, eh? Why do we bother?" Ashton looked at me. "I fucking hate it," he said. Suddenly he stood up and addressed the people at the nearer tables. "Anyone who hates sex, stand up!" he tried to persuade them. "Fucking sex." He laughed. "Fucking fucking," he said. "Get it?" The waitresses began to move towards us.

But they had only come to bring the bill and offer him another beer. He smiled at them, moved his hands apart, palms forward, fingers spread.

"No thanks," he said shyly.

"The bill's in Chinese!" he shouted. He brandished it delightedly at the rest of the diners. "Hey!"

I agreed to drive him home. For the first few minutes he showed some interest in my car. At that time I had an Escort RS Turbo. But I didn't drive it fast enough for him, and he was silent again until we were passing The Flying Dutchman in Camberwell. There, he asked in an irritable voice: "Another thing. Why is this pub always in the same place?" He lived on the other side of Peckham, where it nudges up against Dulwich. It took him some time to find the right street. "I've only just moved in." I got him upstairs then consulted my watch. "I think I'd better sleep on your floor," I said. But he had passed out. It seemed like a nice flat, although he hadn't bought much furniture.

Iwoke late the next morning. Ten o'clock. Sleet was falling. A minicab driver had parked his Renault under the front window, switched its engine off, and turned up Capital Radio so that I could hear clearly a preview of a new track by the Psyche-



delic Furs. Every thirty seconds he leaned on his horn. At that, the woman who had called him leant out of a fourth floor window in one of the point blocks on the other side of the road and shrieked:

"Cammin dahn!"

Beep.

"Cammin dahn!"

Beep.

"Cammin dahn!"

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Cammin dahn! Cammin dahn!"

At the back the flat overlooked a row of gardens. They were long and narrow and generally untended; so choked, some of them, with bramble, elder and buddleia stalks, that they reminded you of overgrown lanes between walls of sagging, sugary old brick. In the bleaker ones, you knew, a dog would trot restlessly all day between piles of household or builders' rubbish, under a complex array of washing lines. Choe Ashton's garden had once been kept in better order. There was a patio of black and white flagstones like a chess board, a few roses pruned savagely back to bare earth. The little pond was full of leaves. Suddenly I saw that there was a fox sniffing round the board fence at the bottom of the garden.

At first I thought it was some breed of cat I had never seen before: long-backed, reddish, brindling towards its hindquarters and long tail. It was moving a bit like a cat, sinuously and close to the ground. After a minute or two it found the pond and drank at length, looking up every so often, but too wet and tired, perhaps too ill, to be wary or nervous.

I watched with my heart in my mouth, afraid to move even behind the window in case it saw me and ran off. Choe Ashton came into the room.

"Fucking hell," he said. "Are you still here?"

"Sssh. There's a fox in your garden."

He stood beside me. As he watched, the fox moved into the middle of the overgrown lawn, pawing and sniffing at the earth. It yawned. I couldn't see anything there it might eat. I wondered if it might have smelt another fox. It sat down suddenly and stared vaguely into the sleet.

"I can't see anything."

I stared at him.

"Choe, you must be blind –"

He gripped my arm very hard, just above the elbow.

"That hurts," I said.

"I can't fucking see any fucking fox," he said quietly.

We stood like that for thirty or forty seconds. In that time the fox went all round the lawn, not moving very fast, then crossed the low brick wall into the next garden, where it vanished among some elders, leafless laburnum bushes and apple trees.

"OK, Choe."

People like Choe are like moths in a restaurant on a summer evening just as it gets dark. They bang from lamp to lamp then streak across the room in long flat wounded trajectories. We make a lot of their confusion but less of their rage. They dash themselves to pieces out of sheer need to be more than they are. It would have been better to leave him alone to do it, but I was already fascinated.

I phoned everyone who had been at the Dawes

party. No one knew the whole story. But they all agreed he was older than he appeared and, career-wise at least, a bit of a wimp. He was from the north of England. He had taken one of the first really good media degrees – from East Sussex – but never followed it up. He did the odd design job for one of the smaller agencies that operate out of top rooms above Wardour Street. In addition, he had some film work, some advertising work. But who didn't? The interesting thing was how he had filled his time until he appeared in Soho. After East Sussex he had moved back north and taken a job as a scaffolder; then joined a Manchester steeplejacking firm. He had worked in the massive stone quarries around Buxton, and out in the North Sea on the rigs. Returning to London obsessed with motorcycles, he had opened one of the first courier operations of the Thatcher boom. He never kept any job for long. Boredom came too easily to him. Anything hard and dangerous attracted him, and the stories I heard about him, true or not, would have filled a book. He told me some of them himself, later:

Stripping old render near the top of a thirty storey council high-rise in Glasgow, he found himself working from scaffolding fifty feet above a brick-net. These devices – essentially a few square feet of strong plastic netting stretched on a metal frame – are designed to catch dropped tools or bits of falling masonry. With a brick-net, you don't need safety bunting or a spotter on the ground to protect unwary pedestrians. Ashton quickly became obsessed. He thought about the brick-net in his digs at night. (Everyone else was watching *Prisoner in Cell Block H.*) During the day everything that fell seemed to go down into it in slow motion. Things were slow in his life too. One cold windy Monday ten minutes before lunch, he took a sly look sideways at the other jacks working on the scaffolding. Then he screamed and jumped off, turning over twice in the air and landing flat on his back. The breath went out of him – boof! Everything in the net flew up into the air and fell down again on top of him – old mastic tubes, bits of window frame, half bricks.

"I'd forgotten that stuff," he said with a grin.

"Were you injured?"

"I walked a bit stiff that week."

"Was it worth it?"

"It was a fucking trip."

Later, induced by money to take a long-running steelworks job, he decided to commute to Rotherham from London on a Kawasaki 750 racer. Each working week began in the early hours of Monday morning, when, still wobbly from the excesses of the weekend, he pushed this overpowered bright green monster up the motorway at a hundred and fifty miles an hour in the dark. He was never caught, but quite soon he grew bored. So he taught himself to lie along the Kawa with his feet on the back pegs, wedge the throttle open with a broken matchstick so that he could take both hands off the handlebars, and roll a joint in the tiny pocket of still air behind the fairing. At the right speed, he claimed, Kawasaki engineering was good enough to hold the machine on track.

"The idea," he said, "is not to slow down."

I wasn't sure boredom was entirely the issue. Some form of exploration was taking place, as if Choe Ashton wanted to know the real limits of the world,

not in the abstract but by experience. I grew used to identifying the common ground of these stories – the point at which they intersected – because there, I believed, I had found Choe's myth of himself, and it was this myth that energized him. I was quite wrong. He was not going to let himself be seen so easily. But that didn't become plain until later. Meanwhile, when I heard him say, "We're sitting on the roof one dinner time, and suddenly I've poured lighter fuel on my overalls and set myself on fire," I would nod sagely and think of Aleister Crowley's friend Russell, discharged from the US Navy after he had shot up forty grains of medical-grade cocaine and tried to set fire to a piece of glass by willpower alone.

"I just did it to see what people would do," Choe said. "They had to beat me out with their hands."

In a broad fake Northern accent he added:

"I'm scared of nowt, me." Then in a more normal voice: "Do you believe that?"

"I think I do," I said, watching with some interest the moth on its flat, savage, wounded trajectory.

He gave me a look of contempt.

This didn't prevent him from flirting all winter, slipping away – but never too far – between the sets of a comically complex personality: always waiting for me to catch up, or catch my breath.

Drunk in bars, he would suggest going to the first night of a photographic exhibition, a new production of Ionesco, ballet at the Royal Opera House: arrive on the night in some immaculate designer two-piece with baggy trousers and immense shoulder pads: and then say –

"I've got the Kawa parked round the corner."

"I'm sure you have, Choe."

"You don't believe I came on it, do you?" And again, appealing to a foyer full of people who had arrived in BMWs:

"This fucker doesn't believe I came on me bike!"

To see how far he would go, I took him to a dance version of *Beauty and the Beast*. He sat there quietly, entranced by the colour and movement, quite unconcerned by the awful costumes and Persil white sentimentality, until the interval. Then he said loudly: "It's like the fucking fish tank at the dentist's in here. Look at them!" He meant the audience, which, gorgeously dressed and vaguely smiling, had begun to come and go in the depopulated front stalls like moonlight gourami or neon tetras nosing among the silver bubbles of the oxygenator. Quiet, aimless, decorative, they had come, just like the dancers, to be seen.

"They're a bit more self-conscious than fish, Choe."

"Are they?"

He stood up.

"Let's go and get some fucking beer. I'm bored with this."

Two or three weeks later, having heard I liked Turgenev, he sent me an expensive old edition of *Sketches from a Hunter's Notebook*, on the front endpapers of which he had written in his careful designer hand:

"Turgenev records how women posted flowers – pressed marguerites and immortelles – to the child-murderer Tropmann in the days before his execution. It was as if Tropmann were going to be 'sent on before.' Each small bouquet or floret was a confused

memory of the pre-Christian plea 'Intercede for us' which accompanied the sacrifice of the king or his substitute. But more, it was a special plea: 'Intercede for me.' These notes, with their careful, complex folds, arrived from the suicide provinces – bare, empty coastal towns, agricultural plains, the suburbs of industrial cities. They had been loaded carefully into their envelopes by white hands whose patience was running out between their own fingers like water."

I phoned him up.

"Choe, what a weird quote. Where did you find it?"

"I'm not stupid, you know," he said, and put the phone down. He had written it himself. For two weeks he refused to speak to me, and in the end I won him round only by promising him I would go to the Tate and spend a whole afternoon with the Turners. He shivered his way down to the Embankment from Pimlico tube station to meet me. The sleeves of the French Connection jacket were pushed up to his elbows, to show off slim but powerful forearms tattooed with brilliantly coloured peacock feathers which fanned down the muscle to gently clasp his thin wrists.

"Like them? They're new."

"Like what, Choe?"

He laughed. I was learning. Inside the gallery, the Turners deliquesced into light: *Procession of Boats with Distant Smoke*, circa 1845; *The Sun of Venice Going Down to Sea*, 1843. He stood reverentially in front of them for a moment or two. Then the tattooed arms flashed, and he dragged me over to *Pilate Washing his Hands*.

"This fucker though! It can't have been painted by the same man!"

He looked at me almost plaintively.

"Can it?"

Formless, decaying faces. Light somehow dripping itself apart to reveal its own opposite.

"It looks like an Ensor."

"It looks like a fucking Emil Nolde. Let's go to the zoo."

"What?"

He consulted his watch. "There's still plenty of daylight left," he said. "Let's go to the zoo." On the way out he pulled me over to John Singer Sargent's *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*. "Isn't that fucking brilliant?" And, as I turned my head up to the painting, "No, not that, you fucking dickhead, the title. Isn't that the most brilliant title in the world? I always come here to read it."

Regents Park. Winter. Trees like fan coral. Squirrel monkeys with fur a distinct shade of green scatter and run for their houses, squeaking with one high pitched voice. A strange, far-off, ululating call – lyrical but animalistic – goes out from the zoo as if something is signalling. Choe took me straight to its source: lar gibbons. "My favourite fucking animal." These sad, creamy-coloured little things, with their dark eyes and curved arthritic hands, live in a long tall cage shaped like a sailing vessel. Inside, concrete blocks and hatches give the effect of deck and bridge fittings. The tallest of these is at the prow, where you can often see one gibbon on its own, crouched staring into the distance past the rhino house.

"Just look at them!" Choe said.

He showed me how they fold up when not in use,

the curve of their hands and arms fitting exactly into the curve of their thigh. Knees under their chins they sit hunched in the last bit of winter sun, picking over a pile of lettuce leaves; or swing through the rigging of their vessel with a kind of absent-minded agility. They send out their call, aching and musical. It is raw speech, the speech of desires that can never be fulfilled, only suffered.

"Aren't they perfect?"

We watched them companionably for a few minutes.

"See the way they move?" Choe said suddenly. Then:

"When someone loves you, you feel this whole marvellous confidence in yourself. In your body, I mean."

I said nothing. I couldn't think how the two ideas were linked. He had turned his back on the cage and was staring angrily away into the park, where in the distance some children were running and shouting happily. He was inviting me to laugh at him. When I didn't, he relaxed.

"You feel good in it," he said. "For once it isn't just some bag of shit that carries you around. I —"

"Is that why you're trying to kill yourself, Choe?"

He stared at me.

"For fuck's sake," he said wearily.

Behind us the lar gibbons steered their long strange ship into the wind with an enormous effort of will. A small plaque mounted on the wire netting of the cage explained: "the very loud call is used to tell other gibbons the limit of its territory, especially in the mornings." I thought that was a pity.

In the spring he gave up his job with the agency and went offshore.

"I need some money," he said. "The rigs are the place for that. Besides, I like the helicopter ditching course."

He wanted to take the Kawa round Europe that summer.

"You need dosh to pay the speeding tickets." He thought for a moment. "I like Europe."

And then, as if trying to sum up an entire continent:

"I once jumped over a dog in Switzerland. It was just lying in the middle of the road asleep. I was doing a hundred and ten. Bloke behind me saw it too late and ran it over."

He was away for two or three months, but he hadn't forgotten anything. Whatever it was he wanted me for remained as important to him as it had been when he singled me out at the Dawes party. He came back at the height of summer and knocked at my door in Camden, wearing Levi 620s, brand new 16-hole DMs, a black sleeveless T shirt which had faded to a perfect fusty green, and a single gold ear ring. We walked up between the market stalls to Camden Lock, where he sat in the sunshine blinking at the old curved bridge which lifts the towpath over the canal. His arms had been baked brown in Provence and Chamonix, but the peacock feathers still rioted down them, purple, green and electric blue, a surf of eyes; and on his upper left arm one tiny perfect rose had appeared, flushed and pink.

"How was Europe?" I asked him.

"Fucking brilliant," he said absently. "It was great."

"Get many tickets?"

"Too fucking right."

"I like the new tattoo."

"It's good."

We were silent for a bit. Then he said:

"I want to show you something."

"What?"

"It would mean driving up north."

Determined not to make a mistake this time, I said:

"Would two days' time do?"

"Are you sure you want to know this?"

I wasn't sure. But I said yes anyway. In fact it was four or five days before he was free to leave. He wheedled me into letting him drive. A blip in the weather brought strong south-west winds which butted and banged at the RS as he stroked it up the motorway at a steady hundred and twenty. Plumes of spray drifted across the carriageways, so that even the heaviest vehicle, glimpsed briefly through a streaming windscreen, seemed to be moving sideways as well as forwards, caught in some long dreamlike fatal skid. Beyond Nottingham, though, where the road petered out into roadworks, blocked exits and confusing temporary signboards, the cloud thinned suddenly.

"Blue sky!" said Choe, braking heavily to avoid the back of a fleet Cavalier, then dipping briefly into the middle lane to overtake it. Hunched forward over the steering wheel until his face was pressed against the windscreen, he squinted upwards.

"I can see sunshine!"

"Will you watch where you're fucking going?"

He abandoned the motorway and urged the RS into the curving back roads of the White Peak, redlining the rev counter between gear changes, braking only when the bend filled the windscreen with black and white chevrons, pirouetting out along some undrawn line between will and physics. I should have been frightened, but it was full summer, and the rain had brought the flowers out, and all I could see were horses up to their knees in moon-daisies. The verges were fat with clover and cow parsley. The foxgloves were like girls. Thick clusters of creamy flowers weighed down the elders, and wherever I looked there were wild roses the most tremulous pink and white. Every field's edge was banked with red poppies. That would have been enough — fields of red poppies! — but among them, perhaps one to five hundred, one to a thousand, there were sports or hybrids of a completely different colour, a dull waxy purple, rather sombre but fine.

"How odd! Did you see that, Choe?"

"Don't talk."

After about twenty minutes he stopped the car and switched the engine off.

"This is near enough for now."

We were in a long bleak lay-by somewhere on the A6. The road fell away from us in a gentle curve until it reached the flatter country west and north. Down there I could see a town — houses for quarry workers, a junction with traffic lights, a tall steel chimney designed to pump hot gases up through the chronic inversion layers of Spring and Autumn.

"When I was a kid," Choe said, "I lived a few miles outside that place. He undid his seatbelt and turned to face me. "What you've got to understand is that it's

a fucking dump. It's got that fucking big chimney, and a Sainsburys and a Woolworths, and a fucking bus station." He adjusted the driving mirror so that he could see his own face in it. "I hated that fucking bus station. You know why? Because it was the only way in and out. I went in and out on one of those fucking buses every day for ten years, to take exams, look for jobs, go round the record shop on a wet Saturday afternoon." He pushed the mirror back into its proper place. "Ever spend any time in bus stations?"

"Never."

"I didn't think you had. Let me tell you they're death on a stick. Only people who are socially dead use a bus station."

Everything warm, he said, went on at a distance from people like that. Their lives were at an ebb. At a loss. They had to watch the clean, the happy, the successfully employed, stepping out of new cars and into the lobbies of warm hotels. If the dead had ever been able to do that, they would never be able to do it again. They would never be able to dress out of choice or eat what they would like.

"They're old, or they're bankrupt, or they've just come out of a long-stay mental ward. They're fucked."

All over the north of England they stood around at ten in the evening waiting for the last bus to places called Chinley Cross, or Farfield or Penistone. By day it was worse.

"Because you can see every fucking back-end village you're going through. The bus is fucked, and it never gets up any speed." He appealed to me: "It stinks of diesel and old woollen coats. *And the fuckers who get on are carrying sandwich boxes.*"

I laughed.

"There's nothing intrinsically wrong with a sandwich box," I said.

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Sorry, Choe."

"I hated those fucking buses except for one thing—"

He was seventeen or eighteen years old. It was his last summer in the town. By September he would be at East Sussex. He would be free. This only seemed to make him more impatient. Women were everywhere, walking ahead of him on every pavement, packed into the vegetarian coffee-shop at lunchtime, laughing all afternoon on the benches in the new shopping plaza. Plump brown arms, the napes of necks: he could feel their limbs moving beneath the white summer dresses. He didn't want them. At night he fell out with his parents and then went upstairs to masturbate savagely over images of red-haired preRaphaelite women he had cut from a book of prints. He hardly understood himself. One afternoon a girl of his own age got on the bus at Stand 18. She was perfectly plain – a bit short and fat, wearing a cardigan of a colour he described as "a sort of Huddersfield pink" – until she turned round and he saw that she had the most extraordinary green eyes. "Every different green was in them." They were the green of grass, of laurel leaves, the pale green of a bird's egg. They were the deep blue-green of every sea-cliché he had ever read. "And all at the same time. Not in different lights or on different days. All at the same time." Eyes intelligent, reflective of the light, not human: the eyes of a bird or an animal. They



seemed independent of her, as if they saw things on behalf of someone else: as if whatever intelligence inhabited them was quite different to her own. They examined him briefly. In that glance, he believed, "she'd seen everything about me. There was nothing left to know." He was transfixed. If you had ridden that bus as an adult, he said, and seen those eyes, you might have thought that angels travel route X39 to Sheffield in disguise.

"But they don't. They fucking don't."

After that first afternoon she often travelled from Stand 18. He was so astonished by her that when she got off the bus one day at a place called Jumble Wood, he got off too and followed her. A nice middle-class road wound up between bungalows in the sunshine. Above them, on the lip of a short steep gritstone scarp, hung the trees: green and tangled, rather impenetrable. She walked past the houses and he lost sight of her: so he went up to the wood itself. Inside, it was smaller than he had expected, full of a kind of hot stillness. He sat down for a minute or two, tranquilized by the greenish gold light filtering down into the gloom between the oaks; then walked on, to find himself suddenly on the edge of a dry limestone valley. There was a white cliff, fringed with yew and whitebeam. There were grassy banks scattered with ferns and sycamore saplings. At his feet purple vetches twined their tendrils like nylon monofilament round the stems of the moon daisies. He was astonished by the wood avens, pure art nouveau with their complaisantly bowed yellow-brown flowerheads and strange spiky seed cases. He had never seen them before: or the heath spotted orchids, tiny delicate patterns like intaglio on each pale violet petal.

When he looked up again, sunshine was pouring into the narrow valley from its southwestern end, spilling through the translucent leaves of young ash trees, transfiguring the stones and illuminating the grassy slopes *as if from inside* – as if the whole landscape might suddenly split open and pour its own mysterious devouring light back into the world.

"So what did happen, Choe?" Instead of answering he stared away from me through the windscreen, started the car up, and let it roll gently down the hill, until, on the right, I saw the turning and the sign:

JUMBLE WOOD.

"You decide," he said. "We'll walk up."

I don't know what he wanted me to see, except what he had seen all those years ago. All I found is what he had already described – the wood, smaller than you would expect, full of dust motes suspended in sunshine – and beyond that, on the knife-edge of the geological interface, the curious little limestone valley with its presiding crag like a white church.

"You're going to have to give me a bit more help," I said.

He knelt down.

"See this? Wood avens. I had to look it up in a book."

He picked one and offered it to me.

"It's pretty. Choe, what happened here?"

"Would you believe me if I told you the world really did split open?"

He gazed miserably away from me.

"What?" I said.

"Somehow the light peeled itself open and showed me what was inside. It was her. She walked out of it, with those eyes every green in the world." He laughed. "Would you believe me if I said she was naked, and she stank of sex, and she let me push her down there and then and fuck her in the sunshine? And then somehow she went back into the world and it sealed itself up behind her and I never saw her again?"

"Choe –"

"I was eighteen years old," he said. "It was my first fuck."

He turned away suddenly.

"It was my only fuck," he said. "I've never done it since. Whatever lives here loves us. I know it does. But it only loves us once."

He drove back to London in silence, parked the Escort in Camden and walked off to the tube. I telephoned him daily for two weeks, and then weekly for two months. All I got was his answering machine. In the end I gave up. Someone told me he had moved to Chiswick; someone else that he had left Britain altogether. Then one day in December I got a call from him. He was living in Gravesend.

"All that Jumble Wood stuff," he said. "I made it up. I only told you that to get you going, you know."

I said I would still like to talk.

"Can you get down here?"

I said I could, and we arranged a meeting. He rang to cancel three or four times. Each time it was back on within an hour or two. First I was to meet him at the bar of a pub called the Harbour Lights. Then, if I was bringing a car, at his flat. Finally he agreed to be in the main car park at one o'clock.

I drove down there along the coast road, past the rows of empty caravans, exhausted amusement parks and chemical factories which occupied the low ground between the road and the sea. Wet sleet had fallen on them all that month without once turning into snow. You could hear the women in the supermarkets congratulating themselves on being born on a warm coast, though in fact it was quite raw in the town that afternoon. I found Choe sitting on the wall of the car-park, kicking his feet, his jeans rolled up to show off a pair of paint-splattered workboots. He had shaved his hair off, then let it grow out two or three millimetres so that the bony plates of his skull showed through, aggressive and vulnerable at the same time. He seemed bored and lonely, as if he had been sitting there all morning, his nose running, his face and arms reddening in the wind from the sea.

He jumped off the wall.

"You'll love the Harbour Lights!" he promised, and we began to walk down through the town towards the sea. Quite soon, everything was exciting him again: a girl getting out of a new car; brilliantly-coloured skateboard components displayed in the window of the Surf Shack; an advertisement for a film he hadn't seen. "See that? Wow!" He waved his arm. "And look at those fucking gannets up there!" Thinking perhaps that he had thrown them something, the circling birds – they were actually herring gulls – dipped and veered abruptly in their flight.

"They could wait forever!"

"They're big strong birds," I agreed.

He stared at me.

"I'm fucking scared of them," he said.

"I thought you were scared of nowt."

He laughed.

We had come out on to the sea-front, and there was the Harbour Lights, facing out across the bay where a handful of wind-surfers bobbed around on a low swell, their bright sails signalling in acid greens and pinks from a lost summer. "You should see the pies in here," Choe said delightedly. "There's a kind of black residue in them. It's the meat."

We went in and sat down.

"Tell me about what you do," he said.

I opened my mouth but he interrupted immediately.

"Look at this place!"

It seemed no different to any other pub on a flat coast, but perhaps that was what he meant. The brewery had put in an imitation ship's bell; a jukebox played 60s surfer classics. At one end of the long cavernous bar were a few empty seafood trays under chipped glass, while at the other the barman was saying to a woman in a torn fur coat, "You've picked a bad day." He hurried off down to the other end, where he seemed to fall into a dream. She smiled vaguely after him, then took off one shoe to examine the heel. A small tan and white dog, driven to hysteria by this act, rushed barking at her bare foot. The locals laughed and winked at one another.

Choe stared at them with dislike.

"You went along with all this so you'd have something to write," he accused me.

I got my notebook out and put it on the table between us.

"It's a living, Choe."

I went to the bar to get the drinks. "Write something about me then," he said when I came back. He grinned. "Go on! Now! I bet you can!"

"I don't do portraits, Choe."

The lies liberated from this statement skittered off into infinity like images between two mirrors. He must have sensed them go, because instead of answering he stood up and turned his back on me and pretended to look out of the window at the aimless evolutions of the windsurfers –

They would tack hesitantly towards one another until they had gathered in a slow drift like a lot of ducks on a pond: then one of them, his sail like neon in the sleety afternoon light, would shoot out of the mass and fly for quarter of a mile across the bay in a fast, delirious curve, spray shuddering up around him as he leapt from wave to wave. During this drive he seemed to have broken free not just from the other surfers but from Gravesend, winter, everything. Every line of his body tautened against the pull of the sail – braced feet, bent legs, yellow flotation jacket – was like an advert for another climate.

Sooner or later, though, the board would swerve, slow down suddenly, subside. Abandoned by the wind the bright sail, after hunting about for a second or two in surprise, sagged and fell into the water like a butterfly into a bath, clinging to a moment of self-awareness too confused to be of any use. This made Choe Ashton shiver and stare round the bar.

"These fuckers have all committed suicide," he said. His face was so pale I thought he was going to be sick.

"Be fair, Choe," I said cruelly. "You like the pies."

"I won't let you write anything about me."

"How can you stop that, Choe?"

He shrugged.

"I could beat the fuck out of you," he said.

Outside, the tide was coming in resolutely; the light was fading. I went out to the lavatory. Among the stickers on the bar door was one saying, "Prevent Hangovers – Stay Drunk." When I got back the woman at the bar was doing up her coat. "I'd put far too much cayenne in," she told the barman, "but we had to eat it anyway!" The tan and white dog was begging from table to table, and Choe Ashton had gone. I found him outside. Twenty or thirty herring gulls had gathered shrieking above him in the darkening air, and he was throwing stones at them with single-minded ferocity. It was some time before he noticed me. He was panting.

"These fuckers," he said. "They can wait forever."

He rubbed the inside of his elbow. "I've hurt my arm."

"They only live a year or two, Choe."

He picked up another stone. The gulls shrieked.

"I only told you that stuff to get you going," he said.

"None of it was true. I never even lived there."

I have no idea what happened to Choe Ashton in Jumble Wood. Whatever he says now though, I believe he returns there year after year, probably on the day he took me, the anniversary of his first and perhaps single sexual experience. It is as much an attempt to reassure himself of his own existence as that of the girl he believes came out of the inside of the world. I imagine he stands there all afternoon watching the golden light angle moment to moment across the valley. Seen in the promise of this light, the shadows of the sycamore saplings are full of significance; the little crag resembles a white church. Behind him, on the gritstone side of the geological divide, the wood is hot and tranquil and full of insects. His hand resting on the rough bark of an oak he appeals time and again to whatever lives in that place – "Bring her back. Bring her back to me." – only to be hurt time and again by its lack of response.

I understand that. I understand why he might want to obscure it. From me. From himself. What I don't understand is my own dream.

I've lost no one. My life is perfectly whole. I never dreamed anything like this until I met Choe Ashton. It's since then that I can no longer accept a universe empty of meaning, even if I must put it there myself.

Michael John Harrison contributed four stories to *Interzone's* first dozen issues, and we're more than pleased to welcome him back after such a long time. His new fantasy novel, *The Course of the Heart*, appears from Gollancz this spring, and his last novel was the non-fantasy *Climbers* (1989). He lives in London.

Interaction

Continued from page 6

Dear Editors:

I'm unimpressed by David Pringle's manifesto for *IZ* (upbeat, space and tech-oriented fiction). OK, so upbeat fiction can become unthinking and repetitive in its dreariness, but upbeat fiction can even more easily become escapist adventure stories: you only have to look at the right-wing "high frontier" space-advocacy of *Analog* to see what can happen when this sort of editorial policy is pursued. Do you really want to go down that route? I would suggest that while your balance is quite good at the moment, it would be nice if you could publish more experimental fiction along with the conventional stuff – with 12 issues a year, surely there's room for a variety of material?

Gareth Rees
Cambridge

Editor: My editorial remarks in *IZ* 49 did not constitute a "manifesto"! (See my reply to Christopher Priest's letter in *IZ* 54.) We've certainly no intention of making this magazine a clone of *Analog*. Wouldn't it be nice, though, if there could be some stylish, intelligent, "left-wing" space fiction? It was something like this that we had in mind about eight years ago when we coined the phrase *Radical Hard SF*...

Dear Editors:

I find I had to think twice about renewing my subscription for the coming year following the jolly wheeze (read: sneak trick) of fobbing me off with an issue of *MILLION* in *IZ* 51, a magazine that I would not have bought myself given the choice (I wasn't). I would be more confident if following the *IZ* 54 editorial promise of "no more swap issues, crossover issues or unusual special issues are planned for the foreseeable future" you had learned to curb your errant enthusiasm and not promptly raised the spectre of a special "Where are they now?" issue in your reply to E.R. James's letter (*IZ* 55). No, Mr Pringle, I do not want to see another "special" for a long time.

Steve Jeffrey
Kidlington, Oxon.

Editor: In the previous correspondent's words, "with 12 issues a year, surely there's room for a variety of material?" We think there is. In the *IZ* 54 editorial, which you quote, we said no more special issues are planned for the foreseeable future: we didn't say there would never be any more. We plan about three or four issues ahead, so who knows? As of now, we have no definite intentions of producing a "Where are they now?" issue, but it's an option we'd like to keep open, as a

possibility. To deny us the "right" to produce any more special issues (if the available material warrants them) would be an intolerable suppression of our editorial liberty! Having said that, we have learned from the outrage provoked in certain quarters by the *MILLION* crossover issue (number 51) that it would be a bad idea to produce any more special issues which consist in the main of non-fiction. You want fiction, and fiction you'll get – we pledge that. Sometimes there may be a particular "slant" in a particular issue: for example, the *Interzone* after next, number 60, is shaping up to be a mainly fantasy issue (as was our issue 36 a couple of years ago). Do readers in general object to that?

Dear Editors:

Excuse me, but I always thought that *Interzone* was a magazine for the imaginative reader; so how come your letter columns are full of such narrow-minded pedantry? The missives you printed following the trial merger with *MILLION* (a bold experiment which I enjoyed and which I salute you for) made me chortle at first, and then made me just plain resentful.

The likes of Les Bessant and Judith Johnstone demonstrate the two poles of sf dogma; anorak-clad genre elitism on one hand, the spite of frustrated authorship on the other. I myself realize that I have elements of both lurking within my psyche, but my view is that within the grey, featureless sprawl that is the literary establishment, we're all holed up in the sf ghetto on the edge of town, still trying to get people to listen to us. Less sniping, please, and a little more thinking. Get sorted!

John Paul Catton
Northampton

Dear Editors:

Congratulations on a cheerful issue 55. Oddly, I thought the best beginning was in Nick Lowe's "Mutant Popcorn" – which merited a fiction continuation – but all the stories were very readable.

It was something of a surprise to find one of my letters in "Interaction." Sf has changed so much that I doubt any of the 1950s writers you listed would fit in with today's magazine. New *Worlds'* editor E.J. Carnell – a pillar of science fiction and fantasy – wanted no sex, no religious controversy and no politics. A sincere man with all his own convictions, his death a sad loss. Francis G. Rayer was my cousin, and although he wrote many sf stories, including one hardcover novel, he was more widely known as a science writer, particularly on radio. Another sad loss.

E.R. James
Skipton

Dear Editors:

I think a Nick Lowe coffee-table book of film reviews from *Interzone* is long overdue – a great marketing move to catch all those sf film buffs who would not normally try *IZ*. His intelligent yet non-academic approach to film reviews is very refreshing and withstands many rereadings. His treatment of *Prospero's Books* is a great example of his style. He is thorough, intelligent and witty, but in a way that avoids the pomposity of *Sight and Sound*. He also manages to acknowledge that filmmakers have a sense of humour, which the academics seem to ignore in their contrived arguments. Nick Lowe is certainly one of *IZ*'s greatest assets, even for someone whose tastes in sf are more literary than filmic.

Chris Hart
Bolton

Editor: We agree! In fact, the idea of a "collected Nick Lowe" film book had already occurred to us. Are there any publishers out there listening? We'd be pleased to hear from you if you're interested in the prospect of publishing a wise and witty "diary"-type book about sf and fantasy movies of the past decade... Incidentally, Nick is an academic, though not one whose speciality is film studies. Believe it or not, he is a Classicist who teaches Greek. His subject of scholarship is the ancient world. He has also written an as-yet unpublished novel set in classical Greece.

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We have already been going for ten years, and we have moved from quarterly to bimonthly to monthly publication, so early "lifetime subscribers" bought a bargain! Lifetime subscriptions to *Interzone* now cost £260 (UK); £320 (overseas); \$520 (U.S. accelerated surface mail). Please make your cheque payable to "Interzone" and send it to our main editorial address, shown on page 3.

An Incident at the Monastery of Alcobaca

Robert Irwin

One of the items being offered at the forthcoming auction of rare books and prints which is to take place at Sotheby's next month is almost certain to escape the attention of casual browsers. Lot no. 148 has no title and consists of quarto-size pamphlets and short treatises, all dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries but otherwise unrelated, collected and bound together in calf leather. Most of the material included in the volume will be familiar enough to collectors of this sort of thing – a squib directed against Mr Pitt's new window tax, a short introduction to the science of bee-keeping, a treatise on the dangers of solitary prayer, a brief account of a (quite uninteresting) voyage to the Moluccas.

However, bound in with such commonplace stuff is one item which is certain to be of interest to antiquarian dealers, specialist library buyers and, above all, to collectors of Beckfordiana. This latter item bears the title *Will Mahomedanism Be Allowed on the Moon?*. Although neither the name of the author nor the date or place of printing are given, the work is dedicated to the Duke of Hamilton and is further distinguished by an engraved and hand-coloured frontispiece, a gaudy and undisciplined fantasy, featuring Moors, Crusaders, Inquisitors, camel trains, palaces, mosques and, presiding over all this earthly turmoil, a large yellow Moon.

It must be confessed that little of the text which follows lives up to this exuberantly exotic frontispiece. *Will Mahomedanism Be Allowed on the Moon?* turns out to be yet another work in that well-known genre of 19th-century literature which sought to tackle the theological implications of the idea of a plurality of worlds. This is well-trodden ground and only the author's preoccupation with the menace of Islam gives the opening general speculations some little freshness. In the first part of the treatise, our anonymous author, having established the likelihood of life on other planets, goes on to list first those Biblical texts which can be used to support the contention that Christ's Incarnation on Earth and His subsequent Crucifixion and Resurrection served to save only Earthlings and, secondly, those texts which suggest that Christ died for all the inhabitants of the Solar System. (At this point there is an unrewarding and inconclusive digression in which the author speculates on the possibility that Christ may have visited other planets and sacrificed himself for their several inhabitants, being perhaps beheaded on Mars, boiled in oil on Venus, and so on.)

This is followed by an attempt to refute the Muslim claim that the Prophet Mohammed ascended into the heavens on the mystical steed Buraq and visited each of the planetary spheres. Although our author does not accept that any Muslims have visited the Moon, he goes on to argue that they may yet do so and he naively supposes that balloons of the sort being flown a few decades earlier by the Montgolfier brothers might be the means by which scientists and soldiers in the service of the Ottoman Empire could reach the Moon and colonize it. It seems likely to me that *Will Mahomedanism Be Allowed on the Moon?* is the first work ever to make use of the concept of a space race – in this particular case a race for the Moon between Christians, Muslims and Atheists. Having mentioned atheists, our author once again allows himself to be diverted from his main theme, as he attacks certain notions advanced by the atheistical Tom Paine, and most specifically Paine's contention that "To believe that God created a plurality of worlds at least as numerous as what we call the stars renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous and scatters it in the mind like feathers in the air. The two beliefs cannot be held together in the same mind and he who thinks he believes in both has thought but little of either."

It will be apparent by now that there is little logical ordering in the argument of the treatise, so it is no surprise that, once Paine and his *Rights of Man* have been despatched to our author's satisfaction, he abruptly turns to give a quite detailed account of an interview which he was privileged to be granted by William Beckford, the famous author of the oriental novel *Vathek* (1786) and the former owner of the Gothic folly, Fonthill. The interview took place in 1839 at Lansdown Tower, outside Bath. The interviewer at once remarked on Beckford's haggard hollow-eyed appearance, as with shaking hands, he clawed alternately at his scalp and his chest. "He looked," remarks our author, "like a character from his own feverish rendering of the awful romance of *Vathek*, indeed very like a damned soul who had just succeeded in stumbling out from the Halls of Iblis."

Now of course it would have been interesting if Beckford had been asked about the circumstances behind the writing of *Vathek*, or the sources of inspiration for the architecture of Fonthill. A modern researcher would certainly have wished to question Beckford about the homosexual scandal which had caused him to flee England in 1785. However, our

anonymous interviewer was not a man living ahead of his times and he was moreover (as must already be apparent) an obsessive. So he asked Beckford instead about his views on the question of the plurality of worlds. Beckford replied steadily enough that he did not doubt that there was life on other planets and that he was certain that these inhabitants of other planets were of a demonic nature. Then, after a silence, he added something cryptic to the effect that he was certain that the tormenting demons in Hell were recruited from the surface of the Moon.

His anonymous interlocutor seems to have expressed some incredulity, as Beckford was then provoked into favouring him with a long and circumstantial account of a disputation he had engaged in at the monastery of Alcobaca in Portugal in 1794. Now this debate does not feature in William Beckford's *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha*, which he had published in 1835. Nor do André Parreaux's admirably industrious researches seem to have thrown any light on this curious encounter and the debate at Alcobaca is not mentioned anywhere in *William Beckford, Auteur de Vathek* (1960). However, Beckford was brief and highly selective in the diary notes he took during his sojourn in Portugal and, as Chapman notes, in the introduction to his edition of the published book, *Recollections of an Excursion*, the latter is an artful piece of work written to achieve certain quite specific literary and social goals. Moreover, as we shall see, Beckford may have had a quite specific reason for wishing to conceal what he had learned at the Monastery of Alcobaca for as long as he was able to endure to keep the secret to himself. Certainly, what follows must be considered to be a major literary discovery.

On the evening of June 9 Beckford had returned from a visit to the nearby Monastery of Batalha, in an ill humour, quite disgusted by the excesses of the monastery's Manueline style of architecture "with all its scollops and twistifications." His ill humour increased when he learned he was no longer the Prior of Alcobaca's sole guest of honour, for Abd al-Rahman al-Shibshuki, the newly accredited Moorish ambassador to Lisbon, had arrived in Alcobaca earlier that day and was proposing to take advantage of the famed hospitality of the Cistercian monks. He carried with him a letter of introduction to the Lord Abbot from the Portuguese Prince Regent. This Abd al-Rahman, a distant cousin of the ruling Sharif Sulayman, appears to have been a man of some cultivation. However, Beckford formed no favourable impression of the man's appearance. The Moor's face was sallow and he spasmodically clutched at his face and head with palsied hands. Beckford at first supposed that it was the Moor's difficulty in understanding what was being said around him which caused him to act in this strange manner. Having exchanged some politenesses with the ambassador and the Abbot, Beckford went up to change.

Dinner was given in the Abbot's private saloon. The company – the Abbot, Abd al-Rahman, Beckford and Beckford's personal physician, Dr Erhart – were comfortably seated on settees. Beckford's travelling cook, Simon, working with the monks in their magnificent kitchen, had once again excelled himself with his

sauces, so that what might have been a plain meal of macedoines, ortolans, quails and bechamels was turned into a feast. But, alas, the conversation (which was in French, of which language the Moor had as easy a command as any in the company) did not begin auspiciously.

Beckford spoke of his admiration for the Sharifs of Morocco, especially for the savage despot, Muly Ismail, and he quoted admiringly the latter's prescription for dealing with his courtiers, "I like to keep them stirring constantly like rats in a sack."

We may readily surmise that Abd al-Rahman supposed that Beckford wished to include him in this sackful of rats and the Moorish Ambassador's humour can hardly have improved when Beckford went on to make disparaging remarks about the deleterious influence of the Moorish taste for ornateness on the antique architecture of Portugal, citing the unhappy example of the Monastery of Batalha. Abd al-Rahman, thus challenged, responded by belittling what he had seen of modern European architecture at Gibraltar and in Lisbon and went on to make great claims for the superiority of the Muslims in mathematics and astronomy. Beckford denied this, citing Galileo and Kepler in his support, and he pointed out that, since the Moors made no use of the telescope, they must be quite ignorant about the nature of the Moon and the curious configurations of its craters.

To this Abd al-Rahman, smiling calmly, replied that his fellow citizens were very well acquainted with the true nature of the Moon, since for some years now, they had been in communication with the inhabitants of that globe.

"By God!" said Beckford. "Is there then a Lunar Embassy in Fez?"

"No," said Abd al-Rahman. "But, since I see that you are importunate, I shall tell you how things are." And he gazed upon the company with what Beckford thought was a remarkably evil smile.

"A little less than a year ago one of our most respected dervishes went out to the desert to perform the ritual of the *halwa* (a period of isolation, fasting and prayer in a desolate place). After the prescribed thirty days, this dervish returned to the city and, a few days after his return, he preached in one of the city's little mosques. Fortunately, as it turned out, his audience was small. The dervish's sermon dealt with the correct manner of performing the ritual ablutions. There was nothing remarkable in this, but having dealt with the forms of the ablution according to the religious law, the dervish was then impelled to add some news of his own.

"The dervish told them that he had indeed gone out into the desert to perform the *halwa*. But though he sought complete isolation, this was not to be and he had had a visitation that was not of his seeking. On the fifth night of his prayers and meditations, he sat looking up at the Moon. He thought he saw a shadow pass across its face. He watched the shadow and, as he watched, it seems that his attention attracted its attention. He felt its approach and the shadow filled the horizon, then, as it came closer yet, it seemed to shrink and then to slip through the space between his eyes and into his head. An instant later, he heard the shadow speak within his head. Its manner

of speech was curious, for it spoke no Arabic nor any other language. Rather, it was as if it played tunes with the ideas that were already in the dervish's head.

"In this manner and from such a creature, he learned about the Moon and its inhabitants. The dervish told his audience [and Abd al-Rahman had been one of the handful of listeners that fateful Friday] that there is no rainfall on the Moon and therefore no vegetation and, consequently, no corporeal inhabitants. Rather, the surface of the Moon is covered by thought forms, bodiless beings. Centuries old, they have no colour nor mass, they inhabit no buildings and do no work in fields, they have no need to eat or sleep. Their only desire is to multiply, yet, since they have no bodies, copulation is impossible for these creatures and they would long ago have become extinct, if they had not made use of other creatures to transmit their lineage.

"In a single shuddering instant the dervish understood that he had now become one of those creatures to be used, a host to an unearthly parasite, a bearer of a *nazafa al-aql*. [Here, uniquely, Abd al-Rahman had some difficulty with finding the correct French for what he wanted to express, but, after some consultation with the Abbot, he settled on *vampire dans la tête*.] A *nazafa* preys upon the ideas of sentient beings and, according to the dervish, a *nazafa* prefers to link up with ideas that are akin to it, ideas about witchcraft, changelings and ghouls, also ideas about parasitism and replication. It derives its energy from being thought of by the host body. It is impossible for it not to be thought of, for if one tries not to think of the *nazafa*, by that very token, one infallibly finds oneself thinking of it. It makes its nest within the intricate filigree of a man's thoughts and, day by day, it grows within the head, preying on every other idea in there, until, in the end, the skull has been hollowed out like a calabash, and it is inhabited by nothing save the *nazafa*.

"Since the *nazafa* knows that human beings are mortal, it has to transmit itself from host to host, in order to survive. So it propagates itself by speech or writing, moving from person to person, just as a fly, leaping from corpse to corpse, communicates plague. Entering through the ear, it discharges itself out through the mouth or the hand and enters as an uninvited but noisy guest into its new host's skull."

Here Abd al-Rahman clutched at his own skull, before throwing out his arms in a dramatic gesture. "'Tell my story to someone else. If not, you suffer and die!' Day and night, I hear the *nazafa* making this cry!"

Then he continued more calmly, going on to explain how the *nazafa*'s desire to be spoken of is an integral part of the *nazafa*. Indeed, the creature's need to hear stories about itself is the most important part of the creature which is transmitted in the telling of the *nazafa*. Its host can obtain relief, albeit of a temporary sort, only by passing the *nazafa* on to someone else.

At this point in the narrative, Beckford leaned over and pinched his anonymous interlocutor on the arm, saying, "It is very like what schoolboys do. 'A pinch and a punch for the first of the month and pass it on!'"

He laughed a nasty little laugh. Then he sat in

silence for a while, perhaps ashamed of this unwonted and somewhat childish display of glee, before returning to his relation of what the Moorish Ambassador had passed on to the company at Alcobaca.

According to the Moorish Ambassador, the dervish's audience left the mosque, very ill-contented with what they had heard. They reviled the dervish to their wives and friends, for it was due to this man's folly that they too had fallen prey to the *nazafa* and had become like a herd of cattle to be milked by it. Its pestilence began to spread through the city.

"I had not intended to tell this story," Abd al-Rahman concluded. "But now that I have done so, I feel at peace with myself – insofar as it is possible to find peace within myself in these blighted days."

Now Abd al-Rahman's audience, heavy-headed and heavy-stomached, were not at all at peace with themselves, but they all affected, as well as they could, to greet the Moor's tale with jovial incredulity.

"What is the *nazafa*'s religion?" cried the Abbot mockingly. "Is it a Muslim or a Christian?"

"Whatever will best allow it to multiply," replied the Moor somberly. "My *nazafa* has taken on Muslim notions, but I am sure he will find other notions to feed on in other heads."

"Quite Erastian then," mused the Abbot, suddenly gloomy.

"But surely you are the only one to have been seized by this lunatic idea?" enquired Dr Ehrhart.

The Moor's response was impatient: "I have told you. I was in the mosque, and there were some thirty of us in the audience that Friday. Since that fateful day, each of us has, I think, been driven to pass on the story to at least two or three others. That was before the Sharif first had us put under quarantine and then he sent us abroad, lest the *nazafa* be communicated any further in his own land. Now, though I have only been a few weeks in in your delightful Portugal, I find that, tonight, I have communicated the *nazafa* to three others."

The Abbot sat silently working on the sums. At length he looked up at the rest of the company. "By the year 2000, this idea... this... this *nazafa*, will be in heads of everyone on earth!"

Abd al-Rahman nodded: "And now I think I must thank you for your generous hospitality, while apologizing for the uninvited guest that I have brought with me. But it has done me good to have an audience."

And with that, the Moor rose from his seat and, kissing his listeners on their cheeks, declared that it was time for him to retire.

The company were not allowed to remain silent for long after his departure, for a few moments' later Beckford's music master, Franghi, accompanied by two gleeful monks, burst in upon the company, desirous to entertain them with a concert played upon jews' harps. Beckford however was not in the humour and he walked out and, finding his way with difficulty through the darkened cloisters, he stumbled out of the Abbey. He walked briskly, seeking the cooler air in the orchards higher up.

Passing by some monks cooling their feet by a watermill, he was struck by the innocent pleasure they found in creating patterns in the water with their

feet and he could not help contrasting it with the (surely ?) abstract danger conjured up by the villainous Moor. Yet, as he walked through the moonlight, he found he could not shake the idea. Again and again, he found that he was congratulating himself on having at last succeeded in thinking of something else, only to realize in the next instant that he was never more aware of the *nazafa* than when he fancied that he was not thinking of it.

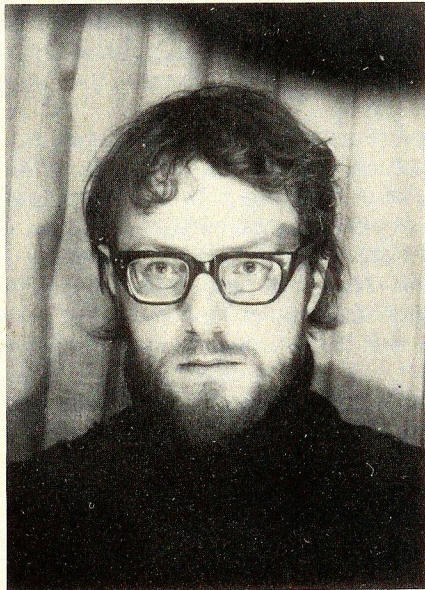
And later that night when he slept (but this he achieved with great difficulty) it seemed to him that, as he slept, the *nazafa* burrowed and toiled within his head, seeking congenial ideas and images, mingling with them and then devouring them, until even Beckford's dreams were possessed by the sleepless *nazafa*.

"Possession is a curious thing. Do I possess the *nazafa*, or does it possess me? I see that you are unable to help me. Well, now I that I have told you, I dare hope that I shall sleep peacefully tonight. After that, we shall see."

And since Beckford had no further thoughts to communicate on the subject of lunar life, he saw the unknown author of *Will Mahomedanism Be Allowed on the Moon?* out of the door and, smiling sweetly, escorted him down the garden path.

Though there is more in the treatise, what remains is of little interest. Lot number 148 will certainly fetch a good price when it comes up for auction in a few weeks' time. In the meantime, I feel impelled to pass on what I have learned from *Will Mahomedanism Be Allowed on the Moon?* as swiftly as possible.

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Robert Irwin, who lives in London, is the author of three highly praised novels, including *The Arabian Nightmare* (1983) which was described by Brian Stableford as "one of the best fantasy novels written this century" and by John Clute as "deft and lovely and harder to describe than to experience... a joy to read." The above story, "The Monastery of Alcobaca," represents his first appearance in *Interzone*.

FOR SALE

Interzone: The 2nd Anthology. Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to *IZ* readers at just over half the original cover price – £1.75 (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare. A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Covers all Ballard's work from "The Violent Noon" in 1951 up to the eve of publication of *The Unlimited Dream Company* in 1979. Still in print in the USA but long hard to obtain in Britain. Now copies are available from *Interzone* at £3.50 each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

For either or both items please send a cheque or postal order for the appropriate amount to: *Interzone*, 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. You may also pay by Access (MasterCard) or Visa card: please send us your card-holder's name, address, card expiry date and signature.

COMPETITION

Yes, *Interzone* is holding its first ever readers' competition: BBC audio tapes of the 1950s serial *Journey Into Space* to be won!

See the last paragraph of Wendy Bradley's column, page 28, for details.

Mutant Popcorn

Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

To get millennial for a moment, it's not clear why the movies should necessarily pull out of recession at all. This is, in the most voguish possible sense, a chaotic time for Hollywood, and one modestly catastrophic year (1991-2, for instance) might be all it takes to kick the whole fragile machinery of entertainment-industry profitability into a terminal tailspin. The things that usually get the blame – salary overspend, hardening of the creative arteries, the declining over-25 audience, the rise and rise of the packaged picture, the widening financial gap between hits and flops, the competitive success of the small furry warm-blooded indies at the expense of the lumbering studios Godzillas with a brain each end of their spinecable – could easily be symptoms rather than causes.

There doesn't seem any obvious reason why films, at least in the sense of very large moving images projected before hundreds of citizens in a purpose-built funhouse they pay busfare to get to, shouldn't be a relatively mortal artform. Some possible omens of extinction are already apparent at the margins: the death of the drive-in, the steep decline in video rentals, the inexorable momentum towards pay-as-you-watch hi-def satellite vision as the medium of the immediate future. Like a lot of things in '92, it could swerve unpredictably either way. But it wouldn't especially surprise me if *Terminator 2* turned out to be, for historical purposes, the last movie ever made, and if our century's definitive artform took a dive down the same tube as the pop single and the vinyl LP. In that sense, at least, the British film industry may still be leading the world by a generation or so. The movies as we know them may actually be teetering on the brink; one nudge, and it's a long way down.

And in that harsh new world on the other side of apocalypse, where only those who can adapt to the new market conditions will survive, who will be the inheritors? Not, we may be sure, the hulking behemoths we used to know as "movie stars." Already their numbers are in steep decline. After Julia Roberts joined the fossil record

in 1991, there were only two left to struggle on alone, and one of those is already so bland he has virtually to reinvent himself in every film. If the mighty Arn still manages to lumber on unstopably alone, it's surely because he's already at least a close kinsman of the new, higher species that stands poised to take possession of the old star habitats: an ancient class, long overlooked as of no evolutionary significance, but destined to feed more efficiently and multiply much more rapidly, performing on vastly lower inputs of budgetary energy than their clumsy, outmoded competitors.

For this new world is the age of the character actor: a world in which the most prolific filmstars in the industrialized world are not Kevin Costner or the big guy with the accent coach, but the likes of Donald Pleasance and Harvey Keitel – men whose inexorable charisma depends not on a chameleon-like power to assume whatever identity is required to embody the fantasies of a whole civilization, but *au contraire* on a magnificent incapacity to play more than the one funny-looking character in a career, and a defiant refusal to be a man of a thousand faces when most people are stuck with the one. These people survive because they offer screen presence that is affordable, efficient, professional, and well-liked. They won't fill seats by their name alone, but they will more or less assure satisfaction once the backends are in place. And the future surely belongs to them.

All in all, it's rather like the scenario of *Delicatessen*: a solitary disintegrating tenement standing alone in an apocalyptic future wasteland, and stuffed to the rotting beams with a Brueghel gallery of character players, all terrorized by one fat carnivorous thug whose dodgy cannibal deli keeps his subjects fed on the carcasses of incoming sales assistants, while sewer-dwelling guerrillas watch and wait for the moment to pounce on the pickings. As an allegory of the state of cinema, this takes some beating; and it thus goes without saying that the rivalry-to-death over possession of the heroine's future between her looming brute of a tyrant dad (shot always from below) and her nimble circus-lad lover

(Dominique Pinon's phiz already unforgettable from the amiable short that did the rounds with *Matador*) can only go one way. The unembarrassed virtuosity proclaimed by the credit sequence persists right through the picture, with gorgeous sets, lighting, and incidental detail captured in a relentless series of cockeyed angles and distortions; and the cast of beautiful handpicked weirdoes perform magnificently in the setting, backed up by a music score of exemplary strangeness.

The sf ingredients, admittedly, are a bit out-of-the-back-of-the-fridge in the usual BD tradition, and there's not an awful amount to the plot beyond a series of crisscrossing character lines. But the momentum builds artfully from vignette to vignette to its final *farce noir* crescendo, and it's a debut that promises great things. There's more than a touch of cheek in the surnames-only, collaborative billing "un film de Jeunet & Caro," but if they can knock out a first feature that looks like they've been doing this stuff all their lives, perhaps we'll indeed be one day dropping their names as naturally as Gosciny & Uderzo or Boileau & Narcejac, if not quite Powell & Pressburger. On the other hand, Parisian wonderboys have a record of burning out early, so better to hold no breaths.

The Hollywood counterpart to *Delicatessen* is, significantly, the only big release of the glum 91/2 winter collection to make any really substantial return. For *The Addams Family* also disdains conventional narrative logic in favour of a quirky parade of skilful character-actor gothics up and down the stairs of a crumbling but well-dressed and lusciously-photographed pile. The principal differences are, first, the considerably greater expense, incoherence, and general sense of strain in the studio product; and, second, the attempt to generate by the synergy of cold-blooded packaging what in *Delicatessen* springs largely from auteurial vision. In effect, *The Addams Family* is a calculated shot at synthesizing from formula an affordable clinical substitute for Tim Burton, and not the least of the many interesting things about this oddly-assembled

mutant picture is that the beleaguered industry should have arrived at the conclusion that a Burton or Gilliam is not only desirable but replicable. So mix in a preassembled concept and cast of characters old enough to seem new to the target audience; a first-time director picked for his visual rather than his narrative skills; a writing team that's scripted for the man himself; and a team of quality character players who can be trusted to ham the whole project into at least something worth sticking around for. It doesn't altogether get there, largely because the script is shambolically sloppy and Barry Sonnenfeld's sense of pacing, structure, and even continuity don't seem yet to have caught up with his undeniable visual bravura. But it's clearly succeeded in striking a chord with audiences, even if the tuning seems a bit off to the classical ear.

One problem, I think, with the whole package is that the main characters, and the humour, are quite hard to uproot and replant from their original milieu. The original cartoons have been so exhaustively mimicked and plundered for inspiration that any mischievous qualities they had have long since been muted by overfamiliarity. Their imagery is derived from a particular tradition of popular film horror that was still, at the end of the Universal cycle and the beginning of the Hammer, a living phenomenon, though already slithering over the border into camp by the time the TV series aired. And that series in turn was inexorably moulded, in its fleshing out of characters and themes, by the traditions of golden-age mid-sixties US family sit-

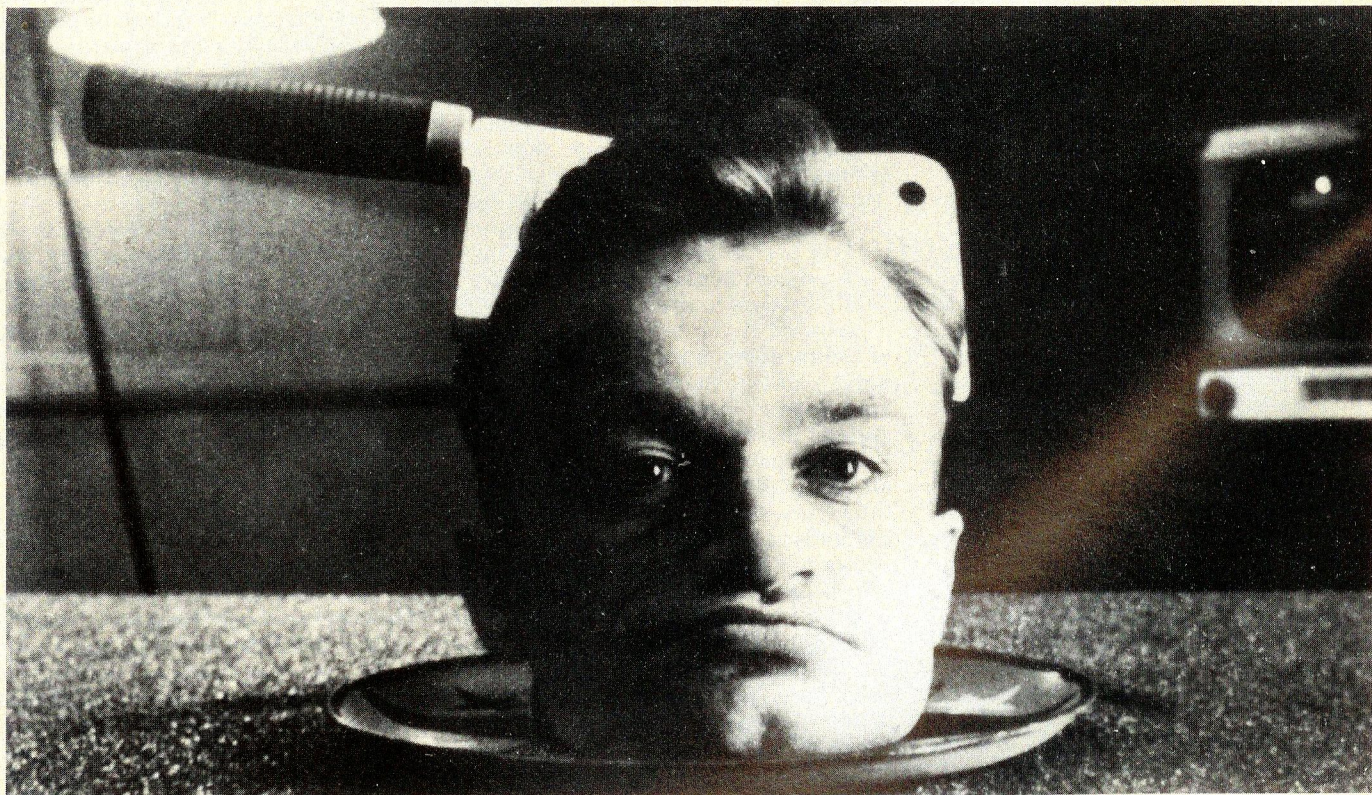
com it set out to reflect and, within bounds, to parody.

Upgrading all this for the nineties results in a very odd and uncertain mishmash of times and cultures: the genre death jokes seeming awfully superannuated, the trumpeting of family values all too contemporary, and the arch splashes of innuendo rather at odds with both. This could have been a so much more dangerous film than it is – it sounds overeager to complain that nobody involved in this production seems to have much real understanding of or sympathy for sadomasochism, but the idea of an entire family of loving relationships cemented by rituals of pain and power is the one element in this entire scenario that has something naughty to say to the nineties, and muddling it up with all this hokum about open graves takes most of the edge off the theme. Given the material, perhaps there was no other option. But if it was down to a contest in deviant allure, Anjelica Huston would still be out in the first round to Fenella Fielding in *Carry On Screaming*.

The most accomplished performance in *The Addams Family* (other than Christina Ricci, naturally, who already has a little league all to herself) is probably Christopher Lloyd's appallingly ill-written Fester. Lloyd typefies as well as anyone the new breed of character-actor superstar, a profession of which he's very much at the summit: strange-looking people giving robustly watchable support in

large numbers of pictures of which someone else is emphatically the star. Within a week of Fester he resurfaced, capably, in the daft Hulk Hogan vehicle *Suburban Commando*, as the mild-mannered paterfamilias (wed to Shelley Duvall, another career veteran) conscripted to aid the beleaguered forces of light against halfwitted hitmen from beyond the stars and fugitive Swamp Thing lookalike galactic dictators in handy tear-away humanoid masks.

Interestingly in light of the Addams phenomenon, the film is pitched very carefully and specifically, at eight-to-ten-year-old males – as even us old-worlders, to whom Saturday morning wrestling shows are about as familiar as roadhouses and *Wheel of Fortune*, swiftly pick up from the consistent age and sex of the legions of kids in the movie. This means that the dense network of knowing visual, dialogue, and musical allusions to *Star Wars* reference a text produced before the target audience was born, and which thus presumably belongs for them already in the domain of period camp. But this time the confrontation is explicitly between the icons of present and past, as kids' champion Hogan educates dad in wiping the floor with the space-opera situations that kept an earlier generation in entertainment. It's a deft enough piece of work, with a very clear view of who and what it needs to go for to make the most of its narrow resources of cash and above-the-line talent. A fairly snappy script, a veteran B-western director, and above all a decent scattering of support mugging go a long way to balance a star whose



following far exceeds his performing range and a second unit apparently unconcerned with incidentals like spots on the lens. Of course it's mild stuff, and strictly for ten-year-olds of all ages. But come armageddon and they could be all that's left.

(Nick Lowe)

The stills on these two pages are from *Delicatessen*, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro (*Electric Pictures*).

Tube Corn

TV Reviews by Wendy Bradley

“Where are the women?” is one question which is never out of order. In *Quantum Leap*, for example, we finally got to the episode where Sam, leaping at random from one body to another, found himself incarnate as a woman. And what use did the plot make of this device? Some oh-so-amusing footage of big butch and not-at-all-effeminate-trust-me Sam in a frock and a silly hat, a few feeble jokes about the stilettos (not as funny as *Some Like it Hot* and not helpful in establishing Sam's genius level IQ – stick to flats, honey) and some fairly interesting but underexplored stuff about how his best friend, the hologram of Dean Stockwell, can't relate to him as an attractive woman. Listen, if men could talk to attractive women as if they were people (and vice versa) there wouldn't be any sex war.

Now *Quantum Leap* is one of those programmes that I enjoy like a secret vice – almost but not quite on the level of *thirtysomething*; something that can be owned to in public if one is sufficiently brazen about it (although of course it helps to be able to throw in a bit of post-modernist bullshit about “deconstruction” and “witty subversion of genre” if necessary). No, when I think about it, not *thirtysomething*: *Quantum Leap* is enjoyed more in the style of *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie* and *Highway to Heaven*, as something at which one can be appalled in public but during which in private one can sniffle quietly into one's hanky and hoot in derision in equal and opposite amounts.

However, even we “secret-vice” *Quantum Leap* viewers boggled at



Sam's explanation to the sexual-harassing boss that he was “really” a man: I walk like a man, I even stand like a man (strikes a pose knees akimbo), I can describe what it's like to be kneed in the groin... Sam, honey, girls have groins too, or hadn't you noticed? And what on earth was the poor woman going to do when Sam leaped off to the next episode and she, poor cow, found herself back in her own body having to scrape the sexual harasser off the ceiling? Oh boy, as Sam himself would say.

Next there are the animated programmes. I am reliably informed that *Truckers* was eagerly awaited by the country's seven-year-olds, all of whom appear to have been compelled to read the Pratchett novel and are, as a consequence, a captive market for the film of the book and presumably the usual T shirt of the film, lunchbox set, model figures, breakfast cereal, fastfood tie-in and all the rest of the merchandise machine output. My maternal spies were less forthcoming about the impact of the programme on the country's youth since only the first episode had been transmitted at the time of writing and the jury was definitely still out. It was dark, dangerous and macho enough to overcome the biggest hurdle, though, the animation itself. Seven-year-olds are into cartoons, but this was not a cartoon but animated figures. Animated figures = Postman Pat, Fireman Sam, Camberwick Green: little kids' stuff, far too uncool for a macho seven-year-old. I think *Truckers* may have turned the trick but, as they say, watch this space.

In contrast, for us oldies, there is the return of the *Magic Roundabout*. If you remember why an unremarkable song

about moped-riding got to number one in the charts you are old enough to remember the *Magic Roundabout* as it ought to be remembered: psychedelic, knowing and naughty. If, of course, you are too young to remember the B side of Jasper Carrott's “Funky Moped” then you may have to live your life thinking Dougal sounds like Neil doing a Hancock impersonation, and I for one pity you.

Next, let us take a side step out of the medium altogether and into its sister medium of radio. The BBC are releasing their talk programmes in attractive packages and selling them in the bookshops right alongside the real books. So you can now buy the whole of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in its original broadcast glory and seethe anew at the disappearance of Trillian: you can even seethe in glorious CD sound and get every twinkling nuance. This collection, an object so covetable the BBC didn't send me a review copy, is top of my birthday-present list (hint hint, reader-relatives). Beware, however, where you listen to these programmes, whether you go for the tapes or the CDs: they can still cause you to fall off the tube seat in foaming hysterics just as they first did all those years ago. So come on, play fair, wipe your bootlegs and shell out for the real thing. Why, I can even forgive Douglas Adams for the *South Bank Show* (in which, with revolting cleverness, he resurrected Ford and Arthur and had them peering in through the window at their creator being interviewed by Melvyn Bragg, sad figures reduced to haunting Hampstead in a pound and a half of makeup since fictional characters age much more slowly than their avatars)

when I hear those immortal words all over again.

As it is, you may have noticed, the Tolkien centenary, the BBC have also issued two handsome boxed sets of tapes of **The Lord of the Rings** and **The Hobbit**. These are "Special Centenary Limited Editions," presumably intended as collectables (my *Hobbit* is numbered edition 000102 and *LoR* 000116/10000: I think they must be planning on selling a reasonable volume if they think *LoR* will go into eleven figures!)

Now these are very handsome objects. The *LoR* is a black box with gold lettering which simply says on its cover "The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien" and has the centenary logo on each side: you have to hand over your forty quid, take off the cellophane wrapper, open the box and read the leaflet to discover you are buying the radio adaptation first broadcast in 1981. *The Hobbit* does at least tell you it is "the acclaimed BBC Radio dramatization on 4 one-hour cassettes" before you buy, which is helpful if you were looking for, say, a straight reading of the text. The fact that the cassettes are in mono should clue you in, but you have to search really hard (page five, in brackets) in the inner booklet to discover you are shelling out

twenty-five quid for a series first broadcast in 1968. There is nothing wrong with recycling old material: "classic" is the usual description, and some people may in fact ascribe that word to these two series. However, you should be able to tell from the outside, before you pay your money and take your choice.

Carping aside, though, how do they sound? I had never heard either before and the *LoR* irritated me because of the adaptation – if you have read the book a few times you know what comes where, and the quirky acceleration, deceleration and re-ordering of the story – they bypass Tom Bombadil altogether but take an age to get out of the Prancing Pony, and we hear Gollum being tortured in Mordor before we even meet the hobbits – will have you grinding your teeth. The famous voices (Ian Holm as Frodo, Michael Hordern as Gandalf, John Le Mesurier as Bilbo and Robert Stephens as Aragorn) didn't work for me because each conjured up a face and, particularly with Stephens, the wrong face. I listened to most of the tapes whilst washing up or cooking and found myself talking back to them, particularly heckling "where are the women?"

The fault is Tolkien's, but even when Galadriel appeared her voice was lightweight, unmajestic, unmysterious, unconvincing. When the series was first broadcast Neil Hepburn described it in *The Listener* as "incredibly boring: I mean in the sense that I could not believe how boring it was." I wouldn't go that far: but I wouldn't have paid forty quid for it either. *The Hobbit* I'm afraid I found completely unlistenable, but then I also find the book unreadable.

Finally, though, there is also a well-produced boxed set of **Journey Into Space: The Red Planet**. In the same *Listener* piece Hepburn described this as "immortal cardboard, abidingly innocent, spouting magic hokum with total conviction." I'll go with that. I'll still heckle "where are the women" but only until about five minutes into the story, which is how long it took for me to be totally hooked. I have three copies of the boxed set to give away to the best (and by "best" I mean "funniest") three excerpts from *Lord of the Rings*, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* or *Journey Into Space* written in the style of any of the others. Under 200 words please, by **1st May 1992**, to "Journey Competition" at the main *Interzone* address.

(Wendy Bradley)

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The Best and the Rest of James Joyce

Ian McDonald

Aboard His Britannic Majesty's air-dreadnought *William and Mary* as it leaves the Command Holdfast buried beneath the cratered mudscape once known as London in the one-hundred-and-first year of the war are 112 ratings, 66 officers, and six highly important, highly secret passengers: Air Lord Blennerhasset, Admiralty Lord Van Loos, Marshall Valery-Petain, Director Ames, Sub-Academician Giorgio Joyce and his father, senior Academician James Joyce. Reinforced concrete bomb-proof doors open as *William and Mary* rises cautiously, every sense tuned, toward the perpetual rainclouds that discharge their poisoned drizzle over the mudfields of Staines. Despite two atomic cannon, a complement of ten turret-mounted 18-inch guns and a veritable arsenal of lighter artillery and rocket racks, the artillerymen standing by their weapons and the glider-marines ready at the launch tubes are nervous. They have heard stories of dirigibles, dreadnoughts even, surprised and destroyed attaining altitude by marauding Tsarist airships lying grounded, half buried in the mud. For the lynchpin of His Majesty's airfleet to lift unescorted, unprotected, into potentially hostile airspace...

They have long suspected that the High Command locked up in their War Room half a mile under Command Holdfast have gone insane: now they have proof. But His Majesty's Air Lords need not justify to the crew of *William and Mary* their decision that a lone dirigible might escape the attention a dreadnought with full escort would warrant. Their destination, the very fact that they are carrying passengers, have been kept secret from them. But seeing the cindered cities of the midlands slipping away far beneath their armoured glass observation bull's-eyes, they know that their course is northward. A combined services mission, perhaps, supporting the beleaguered 19th Army bogged down in melting permafrost north of Bergen, or a search-and-destroy mission on Tsarist submarine traffic across the Barents Sea. Maybe *William and Mary* has been sent to rendezvous with the remnant of the Royal Dutch Airfleet stationed at Scapa Flo Holdfast and destroy the Tsarist North Polar Fleet. In his armoured cubicle the Captain opens the envelope sealed with the wax sigil of His Majesty's Directorate and after reading and burning the flimsy within, calls a heading, altitude and velocity down the gosport to the flightbridge that will, in 18 hours time, bring *William and Mary* and its secret passengers north to Iceland, to the Keflavik Chronokinetics Research Facility.

In the summer of 1933 I was asked by a doctor of my acquaintance if I might examine a patient of his, a gentleman from Ireland of late middle age who had come to him complaining of persistent and severe insomnia. My doctor friend prescribed sleeping tablets but the patient, who I shall hereafter refer to as Herr J., complained that the prescription was ineffective and that the true source of the insomnia lay in a powerful and disturbing dream that recurred nightly, whereupon my colleague referred him to my practice. I was advised that the man, a writer of international repute, would not make the most co-operative of patients.

My first interview with the patient was at an outside table at a café on the Burkliplatz. The tetchiness against which my colleague had warned me made itself immediately evident in his response to my introduction of myself: "Ah yes, the Swiss Tweedledee, not to be confused with the Austrian Tweedledum." It was clear to me that the caustic witticism with which he leavened his subsequent conversation concealed a deep-seated discontent.

He was a tall, thin man, of protrusions and angularities. Behind the thick glasses he wore – he was a sufferer from persistent iritis – his eyes were an extraordinarily penetrating ice-blue. His hands moved constantly, making idle play with the table utensils. He was quite refreshingly frank about the details of his life, though more, I felt, from a mischievous delight in outrage: his first sexual experience had been at the age of fourteen with a prostitute on the banks of a canal. This had precipitated his lapse from the Catholic faith – an almost inevitable fall, I have heard, for the *intelligentsia* of his country. At the age of 22 he had left Ireland with his lover, Frau Nora B., and lived the following years as an artistic exile in Paris, Trieste and Zurich, during which time he produced his most notable work. He confessed to having been unfaithful to Nora B. only once; a short, tempestuous affair with one Martha Fleischmann of this city.

Eighteen months ago he had embarked upon a new, major, work, to be entitled *Finnegans Wake*, a "stream of consciousness" exploration of a single night's dream. After three months he had abandoned work on account of failing concentration which he blamed on insomnia caused by a recurring and vivid dream. Two months to the day after the first dream, the Travellers arrived and threw our affairs into disarray. He found himself no longer capable of working on *Finnegans Wake* and was convinced that the Travellers were the source of his dreams. Indeed, his attention

was continually being diverted from our table across the Burkliplatz to the large number of spectators who thronged the promenade with telescopes and field glasses, and from these spectators upward, to the focus of their observation, the hazy curtain of air, half hidden by thin cloud, beyond which the incomprehensible forms of the Travellers may occasionally be glimpsed.

"Dreams of falling, Dr Jung? Well, we all know what they mean," he said. "Dreams of flying? Doubtless, there is some handy psychological rebus for these too."

"I don't deal in psychological panaceas, Herr J.," I said. "You tell me rather what you think these dreams signify."

"A belief and a fear, Herr Doctor. I believe that the Travellers will soon leave. I fear that I want more than anything to go with them."

Righteous Rhythm Rocks the Musik Halls

A traditional sound from the Eastern Emirates of the United Kingdom is the new popular music craze of the basement clubs in the Capital. *Sarif*, a fusion of traditional Moorish music with Western Kingdoms electric instruments has emerged from the *kasbahs* of the cities of the Southern Counties to become the essential listening of the new youth underground, a new musical wave determined to sweep all before it.

Lyle Santesteban goes every week to the musik clubs in the depressed area of Vincastra where *sarif* is drawing packed houses to dance all night to the rhythms of Afrika and Islam. Escapism through music, or something deeper? "*Sarif* speaks to us," says Lyle Santesteban. "*Sarif* has something to say. That stuff on the wireless, the electric crooners, the neo-balladeers, they got nothing to say; it's all just love and romance and let's get married tootsie-wootsie. What's that got to do with life in the United Kingdoms, what's that got to say about Vincastra in 1902? *Sarif* is music of the street. *Sarif* speaks with the voice of the street. *Sarif* has something to say about being young, about being old, about being poor, about being rich, in a job, out of a job, family problems, arranged marriages, polygamy, sex, morality, God; *sarif* speaks to us."

Sarif's musical revolution is essentially a *righteous* one. The clubs and cafés that specialize in the new music serve nothing stronger than coffee. Says Haran Gomez, manager of the El Morocco Cafe: "Islam and *sarif* cannot be separated. And that means no alcohol, and certainly, no drugs. We catch anyone in the toilet taking a *kif*, he's not just bounced, we call the cops as well. What *sarif* is about is having a good time, hearing great music, dancing, meeting people, without getting blind drunk, smashed out of your skull, or into a fight. But it's not a wank. *Sarif's* got steel at its core, it's strong, like Islam. The spirit of *sarif* is the spirit of Islam."

James Joyce would agree. He is one of the most promising of *sarif's* rising stars; coupling social consciousness with intense verbal imagery and ingenuity. This seminal figure is in many ways an anomaly in an anomalous genre, originating not from the Hispano-Moorish section of the population which spawned *sarif* as a distinct form, but from the pure-breed Western Celts.

"It's a positive advantage," the twenty-year old boy from Hibernia East says. "I'm bringing together two separate strands of our culture, the Moorish and the Celtic; bringing a little North African soul and spiritual fibre into the Celtic, a little Celtic playfulness and imagination into the North African. The two cultures really have much more in common than you think, it's exciting experimenting with new ways of fusing Celtic melodies with Islamic rhythms, breaking down the structured lyrical system of ethnic *protosarif* into improvisational stream-of-consciousness passages. But there's nothing over-cerebral about it," Joyce adds. "It's dance music pure and simple, first and last."

Certainly, the Celtic-Islamic fusion makes James "Ched" (the Moroccan Arabic name for traditional folk singers) Joyce's sets at the El Morocco where he holds down a regular Saturday night spot stand out among an already outstanding bill that includes Ched Alayah and Ched Christo Dos Santos. His inventive, improvised vocals, the purity of his singing voice and the multi-layered complexity of his backing group leave the listener both beguiled and stimulated.

James "Ched" Joyce has recently moved from Soukh Recordings, a small independent company specializing in *sarif* and other ethnic musics, to Marconigram, the Kingdoms' largest; his first album for them, *Three Quarks*, is due for release early next month.

The city's greatest expert on the enigma of the Travellers is Dr Peter Pretorious, to whom I made recourse in the case of Herr J. for a layman's summary of the phenomenon.

In the absence of any sustained coherent communication between mankind and the Travellers, Dr Pretorious's theories were highly suppositional. The general consensus seems to be that our visitors are travellers not of the distances between the stars, as had first been thought, but of the distances between universes; the infinite array of potential other earths that modern physics suggests are created by the indeterminacy of quantum theory. The hypothesis is that the Travellers originate from a parallel earth that diverged from ours at the very dawn of the solar system; one in which matter was not gathered into discrete planets, but remained in an annular nebula around the sun and of which the Travellers, and the incomprehensible companion bodies with which they share their Enclaves, are the dominant life: the *humanity* of this alternative earth. Their colossal size and mutable shapes are products of evolution within the gravity-free conditions of the gasing; the size of such an organism being governed ultimately by the speed of transmission along the nervous system. Hence the forty-kilometre diameter spheres of gravitylessness they have created in those places they have chosen to arrive upon our earth: Brisbane, Sao Paulo, Vancouver, Freetown in Sierra Leone, Luzon in the Philippines, and here in, or rather above, Zurich. Such enormous creatures, Dr Pretorious informed me, could not hope to survive the effects of gravity. As for a means by which they might negate gravity, or even the method by which they travel with such apparent ease between alternate worlds, both he and the scientific world at large are at a loss to supply.

I mentioned to him Herr J.'s belief that the Travellers might soon depart. Dr Pretorius replied that recent observations through telescopes, and from aircraft flying as close as they safely dared to the immense pressure barriers that defined the Enclaves, indicated that the Travellers and their companion bodies were indeed undergoing physical changes into new forms that might signal an imminent change of activity.

Returning to my offices from the University, I called at the residence Herr J. shared with Frau Nora B. to leave a card with the *concièrge* and a request that he call me at his earliest convenience to make an appointment.

Eoin UiNiall reviews the new James Joyce album, "Agenbites of Inwit" (*New Musical Express*: March 29th 1911 edition)

Consider this man's quandary. In the wireless-defined universe orbit ten million frequency-modulation ghosts who have come to know and possibly love Joyce through his waxings on Marconigram. Yet in the dark streets shine the souls of the luminous few who have danced to glory with him up through the *sarif* clubs, soul survivors of the Saturday nights (as was your gentle reviewer, in what seems like a previous incarnation) when James Joyce held down a spot at El Morocco and the Virgin's Kitchen. Quandary quantified: these are two mutually exclusive camps. That they are not yet at war is due to the ministrations of their titular deity: Joyce himself. Though James Joyce on cylinder is a pale shade of James Joyce behind the footlights with five hundred watts of power on each shoulder – the extemporized, improvisational spirit of Joyce's work is a bird that pines and dies when caged – still a watered down James Joyce is better than no James Joyce at all.

So, as an exercise in squaring circles, how does *Agenbites of Inwit* fare?

Never let it be said that the man does not believe in value for money. Ten tracks are here, not one under six minutes in length. Roundabouts and swings; what you gain in danceability, you lose in singalong; there is no lyric sheet. Lyrics are superfluous; the titles ("Gas from a Burner," "The Dead," "Clashing Rocks") are themes for improvisation. Join the celebration of mutability: if you feel that on another day, in another place, if the band had one more or one less to drink, this would have been an altogether other album; that is Joyce's intention. Songs in the key of possibility: what you are listening to is just one of a spectrum of possible alternative *Agenbites*. If this is a deliberate strategy by Joyce to unite both the dance-floor hero and the wax junkie under the banner of boogiedom, it is successful; this will be filling the floors well into the next decade.

All the familiar Joycean techniques have been *Bras-soed* to a fare-thee-well: the medium rare, *al dente*, yet *together* punch of his instrumentalizations; the verbal and lyrical bravura, like a rather well arranged firework display *just for you*, the concrete-hard, almost architectural *rightness*, the mining of new gems from the overworked lodes of *sarif* and ethnic genres. If there is a sense of progression, it lies in a search for spiritual understanding, a theological touchstone to transmute this tarnished age to, if not



gold, at least lamé. The popular press, in its brief moments of relevance between Dal Riada spruce forest and the nail on the outdoor toilet door, have nudged and winked at James Joyce's interest in the mystical religions of the North Afrikan *safidis*, and if this quest for a Holy Grail reaches a climax in "Ulysses, Telemachus, Eumaeus," the whole thing is mercifully saved from toppling into terminal pomposity by the impudent, shamelessly danceable "Stogged."

The final track, "The Inner Organs of Animals," leaves one hungry for more, with a tang of faintly scented urine on the tongue, and eagerly anticipating the next cylinder. Clubland and dubland will bop till they drop and then discuss post-modernism and the punk ethos over pools of seventy-percent proof vomit on the toilet floor. Few cylinders warrant the epithet "seminal"; James Joyce stands unique among popular musicians as one who (to date) has produced nothing but masterpieces, and looks set fair to continue to do so. And you can dance to it. There's presence, and progress, in this cylinder; and that rates five stars by me.

Senior Academician James Joyce is uncomfortable at the formal dinner that night at the Captain's table. His white frock coat and high-collar shirt are drab and contemptible among the military's synthetic golds and carmines and purples. Even the sombre black and silver of the Directorate outshines him. He is acutely conscious that his thick pebble glasses mark him genetically inferior to the eugenically engineered military and political castes. He does not enjoy the enforced informalities of shipboard life, he does not enjoy being pushed into an intimacy with these superior castes. Son Giorgio seems at ease, weaving across strands of conversation from military to political to scientific; father James finds himself longing for the company of his peers at the tachyon facility. Over ersatz coffee, the threads of conversation draw inevitably toward the War, and how it might be won.

Air Lord Blennerhasset stoutly advocates the strategy of mass bombardment of the Tsarist Holdfasts by air-dreadnoughts armed with atomic cannon.

"Crack them open like an egg!" he says. Death-light shines in his eyes, or perhaps the grainy illumination of the bulkhead bulbs. "The enemy annihilated, the war won, in less than a week!"

Marshall Valery-Petain, clinging with his French Territorial Army to the handful of coastal holdfasts and revetments that are all that remains of his homeland, is dismissive of the new atomic artillery. He thinks it is over-vaunted. The ultimate weapon has always been, will always be, the man on the ground, the Bloody Infantry.

Giorgio Joyce, respectfully, disagrees with both. "Atomic artillery, massed waves of infantry, both are like a blunt cudgel compared to the sure, swift, untraceable scalpel of Chronokinesis. The ability to change an enemy's history without him ever knowing that you have done so, that is the ultimate weapon."

"Sub Academician Joyce of course, speaks as our first potential Chrononaut," Director Ames says, a pinch-faced, bulbous-headed man with luminous violet eyes, dressed in the uniform of the elite Steel Guard.

A subaltern serves ersatz whisky. James Joyce excuses himself from the table and beckons for his son to follow him outside onto the airdeck. *William and Mary* travels wrapped in thick cloud as a precaution against detection. Father and son walk the steel balcony that runs around the perimeter of the dreadnought; to their left, the curving boron fibre hull, to their right, a dimensionless gray limbo. They pause over an engine housing, whisper under the threshing of the impellers.

"That was reckless," James Joyce says to his son. "To mention the infinite mutability of history in company such as this."

"Military? If it doesn't involve attrition rates of over five hundred a minute, I might as well not be speaking."

"Ames is no Military. He may not be an Academician, but Directors, even if they are Steel Guard, have some capacity for speculative thought. If he begins to suspect that it is not just our enemy's history that is mutable and untraceable, but our own also..."

Speed unchanged, heading unchanged, altitude unchanged, concealed in its cloud-layer of mystery, *William and Mary* bores on over the slate-cold sea.

(Sleeve notes from the cylinder "The Best and the Rest of James Joyce: Collected Recordings: 1902-1922")

Imagine. I know it's hard. I know it's a thing to which you are not accustomed, you who have parted with your pelve and pence for this cylinder that claims to be the Best and the Rest of a man called James Joyce. I know you are impatient to hear just what James Joyce thinks constitutes his Best and Rest (Old Light Through Old Windows). But try. For one moment, try and imagine the Rest.

Imagine a world where our United Kingdoms and Emirates are not a maternal clutch of three islands off the coasts of Africa and Spain — imagine Home Islands that lie, say, off the North coast of France, imagine a Dal Riada, say, consigned to the cold waters beneath Greenland's southern tip.

Got it now? Try it again. Imagine a world where the cylinder that rests impatiently in your sonogram will never be heard, will never have been, a world where James Joyce is not a musician, where there are no wirelesses, no live bands, no televisions, for the thermionic valve, the transistor, the cathode-ray tube, the microprocessor, have not been invented.

Imagine the world turned upside down, where north is south, south north, where the twin spires of Africa and South America reach toward the polestar.

Imagine the world turned inside out, an earth that is a bubble of air and light and life in an infinity of dark, lifeless rock, where the moon and stars are a perforated veil of darkness about a sun that is a blazing atom a few hundred miles above our heads.

You have it now. Fun, isn't it?

Imagine a world, imagine worlds, where men, or what pass for men, may step from world to world, possibility to possibility, with the ease that you cross the room to throw the play switch of your sonogram.

Enough? Too much for your imagination? Time now at last to surrender the cylinder to the needle and settle back in the privacy of your headphones. To lay down the Best, to say that better will never be

found, is to deny the Rest. But who is to say that the Rest might not be better. You have imagined just a hair's-breadth of the Rest; the possible worlds that are held within the contemplation of God by the exercise of His free will. For the exercise of choice, be that choice human or divine, creates worlds of undoing that might have been had we, or He, chosen otherwise; infinite choices, infinite worlds brought into existence by our lowly, daily acts of ablution, defecation, copulation, mastication. Consider the responsibility. With each step you take to cross the room to fit this cylinder into your sonogram a world may be created, humdrum worlds each a footstep different from ours.

This is the teaching of the Al Afr sect. Let not a footfall go unconsidered.

Got that?

Screw philosophy, let's dance!

James Joyce has a recurring dream. He is alone, quite alone, dressed in a heavy rubber gas and radiation suit, flapping in webbed shoes across the mudscape that extends from Edinburgh to the Caucasus. He stumbles without aim or purpose through tangles of corroded wire hung with rags of rotted fabric, through hulks of guns and tanks and tracked war machines, through the cavernous interiors of land dreadnoughts, once tall and proud as battleships, stogged to the waist in mud; stumbling, through the faintly luminous fog that gathers in the shell craters, ever faster in an effort to keep up with his ludicrous, flapping feet, stop himself from falling, falling, into the mud, until at last his flapping feet catch on a snarl of wire or a chunk of rusted concrete, and he falls. He puts out his hands to save himself, but they plunge up to the elbow into the mire. His gloved fingers feel an embroidered cap badge, a piece of domestic thermoplastic, a porcelain doll's head, a water flask, a military honour, a silver picture frame, a scrap of cloth. Then in the dream his hands are suddenly bare, and the mud between his fingers has a fibrous, grainy texture. He knows then that the gritty graininess is the powdered brick and stone and steel of the great cities of Europe, the stringy fibrousness the rotted bones and blood of 300 million men, gently mixed into mud by the rain that falls upon the battlefield.

He dreams that he hears the voices of those 300 million, and more: the hundreds of millions who once lived in those drowned cities, the men and the women and the children, calling out to him from their dissolution beneath the mud.

James Joyce has never thought of himself as the material from which traitors are made. Born in the 29th year of the war to a prosperous mercantile family in the city that now lies in fused ruins above East Hibernia Holdfast; by education and temperament his inclination lay toward the arts; to literature. In moments of lassitude in his Academician's domicile under Keflavik Holdfast, he imagines himself writing about that city of his birth in such detail that, should the war ever end, it could be reconstructed out of its ruins from his book. By the 41st year of the war the British Empire had already embarked on its transmutation into leaner, fitter, more ruthless Britannia, and James Joyce understood instinctively that there was no place within the new order for navigators of the

stream of consciousness. It was an easy decision to become an Academician, a temporal physics specialist. The only other choice available to those born outside the privileged castes was to become another digit of Great Britannia drowning in the mudfields of Saxony. Perhaps that is why he became a traitor, because reshaping history is the only way he knows to rebuild that city in his imagination. It is the only way he knows to apologize to those calling voices beneath the mud.

“This, Dr Jung, is the dream that afflicts me night after night. Always the same, never varying in the slightest detail, projected with utter clarity and vividness.

“I am a passenger aboard an Alpine railway train, like those that take tourists up the Rigi, or Pilatus. I am in the last carriage of all, which is a glass observation car; glass walls, glass roof. The observation car is quite full; there are passengers from all parts of Europe and the Near East. Most of the women are smoking Turkish cigars. Nora is there too, sipping a frothy white cocktail of a sticky, glabrous consistency through a straw.

“I notice that the mountains through which our train is travelling are peculiarly rounded; strangely smooth and curvaceous for Alpine peaks, and each is surmounted by an erection of some form or another; a small stone cairn, a cross, a gazebo, a revolving restaurant.

“The train arrives at its destination: a tunnel inside a mountain. Everyone but I seems to know where we have arrived. Porters in extremely tight uniforms seize my bags, whirl me along, *this way, Herr J...if you please, Herr J...no time to lose, Herr J...* Everywhere, porters and passengers, rushing. I cannot see Nora. I ask one of the porters where Frau Nora is – strangely, as I ask that question, I know that we have arrived at the hotel.

“The hotel is built on the top of a mountain and all its outside walls are made of glass. Indeed, much of the hotel interior; the ballroom, the dining tables, the grand staircase, the health hydro, are also made of the same clear, smooth glass. The room I have been given overlooks a lake. Paintbox blue, the lake, encircled by the smooth, succulent domes of the mountains. There are pleasure boats and pedalloes abroad on the lake; I ask my porter if they are available for hire. A look of concern crosses his face; no, he says, they should not be out on the lake because of the dolphins. I look through the glass wall and see squadrons of dolphins diving through the blue lake water. The jolly-boats and pleasure-craft make for shore with all haste but a few are too slow, too far from the jetty and are capsized by the leaping dolphins. Their leaps grow higher and bolder, the dolphins are hurling themselves clear from the water twenty, thirty, forty feet. As I watch I realize that all along I have not been in my room at all but in the residents' saloon where the other guests have gathered. A woman with an oversized shoe for a hat cries, ‘Look, oh look at the dolphins,’ and we all look and see that the dolphins have, in one immense leap, broken free from the water and are soaring into the air. They circle the glass hotel, turning and flashing like silver in the sun, and we notice that they are changing form, elongating,

extending into shapes like zeppelins with flukes, fins and beady eyes.

"A voice cries out; *we can do it too, look*; and a woman with a red-tipped Turkish cheroot climbs onto the back of a glass sofa and steps off. She's flying, up round the ceiling, around the chandeliers. The other people in the bar see her and want to join in, one after another they climb up onto the furniture and step off and fly with her around the room. I go with them, it is very easy, all one has to do it climb up on the furniture and step off. But it is taking that one step...Nora is the only one still on the ground. She's dressed in a skin-smooth dress of silver fish-scales. The windows of the Glass Hotel all burst open and then we go flying out of them, up into the air, with the zeppelin-dolphins, and a great light engulfs us all and I wake up."

Corvettes and gunboats marked with the shield and trident of Britannia escort *William and Mary* to its landing cradle in the Keflavik Holdfast hangar bay. As the concrete blast-doors close over the quarter-mile long shell of the dreadnought, its special passengers are whisked by tubetrain to the Chronokinesis Facility 20 miles distant. The car rattles and sparks along its tunnel. Senior Academician James Joyce explains the theoretical basis of chronokinesis and tachyon physics but his explanations of faster-than-light particles that move backward through time are quite incomprehensible to the militaries. Director Ames alone displays a semblance of intelligent understanding.

"The physics itself was quite straightforward; the problem lay in generating a stream of tachyons at the correct initial velocity so that they would come to rest-velocity and deposit our chrononaut at the correct date," James Joyce is saying as the rail-car arrives at the Chronokinesis Facility Station. Waiting on the dingily lit tiled platform are his fellow Academicians, fellow conspirators. Academician Retief, the historian, leads the party along dripping tiled tunnels into the bowels of the Facility. The corridors throb to a pulse of power.

"Merely the atomic pile that powers the bevatron," Academician Fisk, the Particle Physicist reassures the mistrustful militaries. "To rotate our chrononaut back to 1917 requires a tachyon flux with a velocity in excess of 30,000 C."

"What is the significance of 1917?" asks Air Lord Blennerhasset.

"The year in question was a time of unparalleled success for the then Grand Alliance and of uncharacteristic weakness in the Tsarist Empire," Academician Retief says, his voice barely audible over the rising swell of power. "Indeed, our sources reveal that the Empire was close to collapse. A revolutionary group, the Bolsheviks, subscribers to the political philosophies of Marx and Engels, sought to overthrow the Imperial family and establish a proletarian state. Large sections of manufacturing and the armed forces had been infiltrated, indeed, the army was on the verge of widescale mutiny. That they did not succeed is due entirely to the assassination by an Imperial agent of their charismatic leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Leaderless, the Bolsheviks were rapidly purged and eliminated by the Imperial security police."

At the entrance to the antechamber of the Chronokinesis Unit, Giorgio Joyce leaves the party. His father bids him farewell, clasps his son's hands within his own. He would shed tears, but Britannia does not believe in tears. For once he is gone, he is gone forever. The technology that might bring him back will never have been created. All that can be seen of the chronokinesis chamber from the anteroom is an open airlock door. The militaries seem disappointed. Doubtless they had expected yawning chasms filled with man-made lightning, stupendous devices crackling with power, searing beams of energy. Only Ames seems to appreciate the significance of what lies beyond the airlock door.

"Your belief is that if you can prevent the assassination of this Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the Tsarist Empire would crumble under Bolshevik assault, and be forced to sue for peace," he says, nodding slowly, slyly, like one chess master in appreciation of another's skills. "In effect, the war would have been won 37 years ago."

The militaries in their ludicrous uniforms are dumbfounded. "Except that is not the truth," says an unexpected voice from the door into the antechamber. Giorgio Joyce has entered the room. He is dressed in a red pressure suit but has left off the helmet. "Is it, Academician Retief? No, the plan is to send a man much further into the past than 37 years. Is that not so, Academician? In fact, to send him one hundred and one years into the past, to the Crimean Incident that was the root of the War. In fact, his intention, the intention of all the Academicians gathered here, is to end the War before it ever began, to re-shape history so that there is neither victor nor vanquished, indeed, that neither the Tsarist Empire nor Britannia came into existence." From inside the pressure suit Giorgio Joyce draws a heavy revolver.

"Why so horrified, Father? Are you not proud that your son is a loyal and dutiful citizen of Britannia, ever vigilant to root out disloyalty and treachery wherever it may be found? Including the treasonable behaviour of certain members of the Keflavik Chronokinesis faculty. And you invited me, pleaded with me, begged me to be your chrononaut!" His wire-framed spectacles glitter with reflected fluorescents.

"The Chronokinesis Project is cancelled as a threat to the security of Britannia!" screams Director Ames. A thin rope of creamy drool has leaked from the corner of his mouth. "The facility will be dismantled and its staff disbanded. All Academicians here present are under arrest. Air Lord Blennerhasset, you are ordered by the Directorate to proceed forthwith on plans for the wholesale atomic bombardment of the Tsarist Holdfasts!"

And the blighted, poisoned mud that has been piling up night upon night, year upon year behind James Joyce's eyes pours out of his skull in a drown-wave that will entomb the whole world. Militaries, Director Ames, fellow Academicians, his own son, stand immobilized and mired in mud as, with a speed no one would think credible in a man of 72 years, he darts past the gun in his son's hand to squeeze through the airlock door and slam it behind him. Wheels spin, dogs engage.

Bullets carome outside but James Joyce knows to within a fraction of an inch the tolerances to which

this door was manufactured. Of the tolerances of his own body, how long it can survive unprotected in vacuum, what level of radiation it can withstand, he is less certain. He rests the heel of his left hand on the "Airlock Cycle" button. The steel chamber shudders to the power of the bevatron smashing fundamental particles into the wave of tachyons that will sweep him into the past. Visions swim, before his eyes: tachyon ghosts of other times, other possibilities. The gulf of the years yawns before him and he sees that it is deeper than any of his colleagues had ever guessed, not one hundred and one years deep, but deep as all time. At the bottom of the chasm is the earth, still unformed, fresh and molten from the forge, shifting, restless, waiting the hammerblow that will give it solidity and definition. That event, he understands, may be as small as the touch of a single footprint upon it. All time, and all space, are his to mould. The world can be any shape he wishes it to be. Infinite alternative geographies.

"So be it," he says. He fills his lungs, clamps lips shut, pinches his nose with his fingers. He closes his eyes. His left hand slams the button and in a blast of decompression James Joyce is hurled into the tachyon flux. And swept away.

It seems clear to me that Herr J.'s dreams are not the projections of seductive alien intelligences, but rather products of the *angst* of losing Nora B. to younger, fitter, sexually attractive rivals. His doubts over his own fidelity after the affair with Martha Fleischmann, coupled with his peculiarly Irish sense of religious guilt, are transferred onto Nora B.; that recurring dream of his, so ripe with phallic, vaginal and mammary symbolism, is so clearly a sublimation of his fears of failing sexual potency.

Treatment in such cases of low self-esteem I have found to be straightforward and successful. I was eager for Herr J. to begin therapy immediately but my telephone calls to his apartment went unanswered, my telegrams unacknowledged and when finally I called in person at his apartment on Strehlgasse I was informed by the *concièrge* that Herr J. had not been home for the past three days.

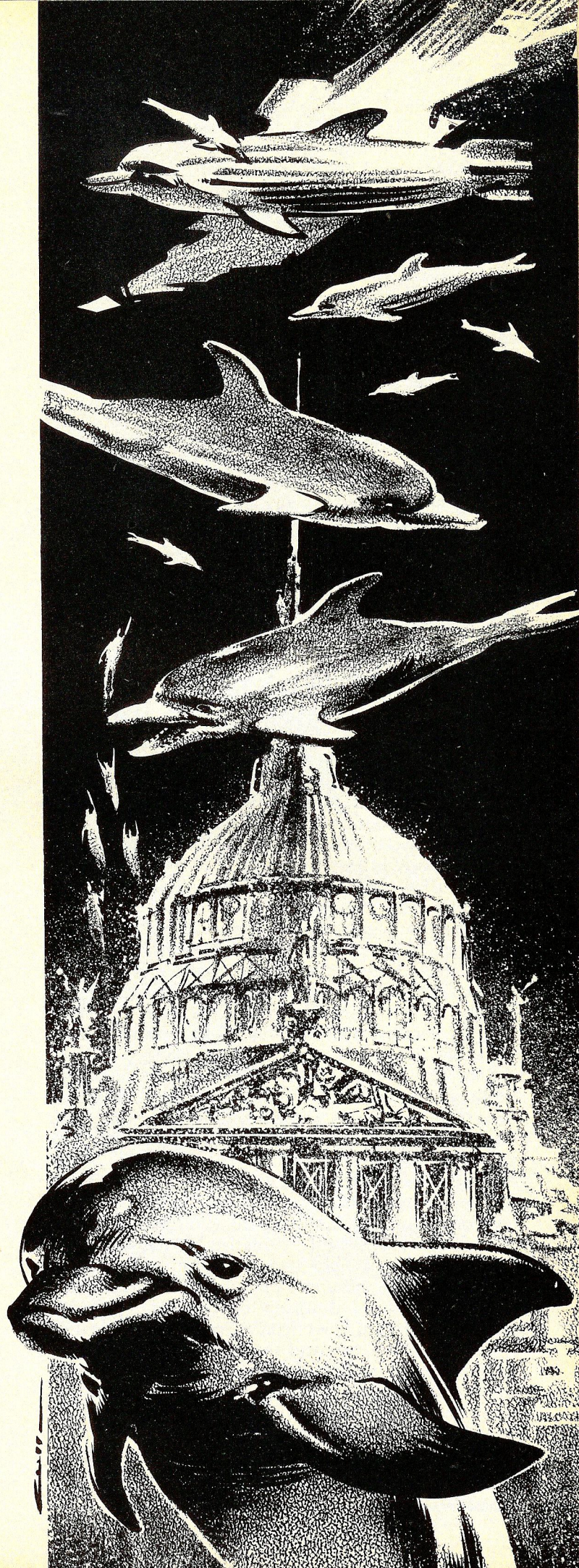
Thank God for whatever whim it was, conscious or otherwise, that moved me to return to my office via the lake front. The crowd, always in evidence, was extraordinarily dense this day. The trams could hardly pass for the press of people; they were packed onto the none-too-safe balconies of the lake-front buildings; the most foolhardy elements had climbed lamp-posts and tramhalts. Around the pleasure-boat jetties, where the crowd was thickest, the general hubbub rose to a clamour. Patrons of the Burkliplatz Café were standing on the table-tops, craning to see. I asked a waiter the cause of the frenzy.

"Have you not heard, sir? They are leaving us."

In that same moment I saw, in a moment of pretur-natural revelation, the face of Herr J. close by in the crowd at the jetties; his thick, wire-framed spectacles dazzling in the sun. I went to him. Together, we were swept onto a steam side-wheeler already packed to the plimsoll line with babbling passengers.

"Herr J.!" I cried over the din of excited passengers. "What are you doing here?"

He did not seem the least surprised to find me at his



side. "The Rapture, Doctor. Is come," he said, strangely distracted. "And the dream. The testing thereof."

He passed me a pair of field-glasses. As I focused them upon the shivering curtain of the Enclave, he continued: "See, Doctor? The Companion Bodies, that we liken to airborne trees, or deep-sea medusae; they are absent. Disappeared. Gone ahead to who knows what unimaginable other Zurich to prepare the way." I did notice that the Travellers seemed to have assumed a definite arrow-head shape, striped and mottled with many colours.

The pleasure boat had joined the great fleet of craft major and minor that had assembled to witness the Rapture. Virtually anything that would float had been pressed into service: punts, motor launches, horribly overloaded sailing dinghies, clusters of pedalloes roped together, sections of pontoon. The paddle steamer's steam horns warned the lumbering, overburdened small craft away from our bows. The density of the lake traffic grew as we approached the lowest point of the globular Enclave. Herr J. was almost beside himself, leaning perilously over the rails. Every eye, every lens, was directed on the sky. There at the centre was a curious, almost reverent hush.

"Now we shall see, Herr Doctor," he whispered. While every eye was fixed on the sky, in a trice he had stripped himself of his outer garments and climbed onto the rail as if to dive into the water.

"No, no, don't you understand, man?" I implored. "It is impossible, quite impossible. The dream, your dream of the Glass Hotel, is not to do with the Travellers but of your own fear of losing Nora to the attractions of a younger, more virile man. It is the dream of the fear of your own inadequacy, Herr J."

"Such convenient answers, Dr Jung," Herr J. said. "But perhaps in this dream the hidden meaning is that there is no hidden meaning. This time everything is exactly what it is seems to be."

With those words he dived into the cold waters of Lake Zurich. Murmurs of surprise came from the spectators around me, in an instant changed into a sigh of amazement. I looked back to the sky, and saw the ending. The interior of the bubble of gravitylessness ran with rainbow-coloured light, like the sheen of oil on water. Strong beyond his years, Herr J. cut on through the waters. Some others, seeing and comprehending, tried to follow him, threw themselves from the upper decks. The Enclave began to spin. Like clay on a potter's wheel it elongated into a funnel of light within which the Travellers moved, its lower end reaching closer, closer to the surface of the lake, whipping up the water to spray and foam. I shouted a warning to Herr J. but I was one voice among a multitude. The waves and spume broke over him, the whirling wall of light engulfed him. A dark tear appeared in the radiance, a rent of infinite darkness. Through the rent I glimpsed the Travellers' destination. As if looking down from a great height, the outline of the Black Sea and the suspended pendulum of the Crimean peninsula. The Travellers launched themselves into the tear and were consumed. In the same instant the Enclave burst with a tremendous thunderclap of air.

Clouds sailed serene and uninterrupted over Lake Zurich.

Of Herr J. there was no sign whatsoever. And no sign was ever found, though the Lake was several times dragged at Frau Nora B's insistence by the city police.

The optimist in me likes to believe that he was indeed taken when the Travellers transited between universes, dragged along in the metaphysical slipstream, that even now, as I write these casenotes, he is finding a foothold in whatever version of our world it is we glimpsed through the tear in reality. But what I cannot reconcile is why he did it. What was it that made him trust his dreams and embark on such a mad scheme? All I can offer is that I, like Herr J., am a man in his late middle years, and men of our age have always needed some notion of heaven.

(From an interview in *WorldWeek* magazine: 26th July 1930, conducted with James Joyce at his home in the hills above Tangier by Gwynnedd Suarez.)

We're sitting here on a patio by the pool-side, it's 86°, your valet has just served us mint tea, below us are the Straits of Hercules; an idyllic setting; it's six years since your last cylinder "Finnegans Wake"; do you now consider yourself to be in retirement?

I would say rather a man taking time over his life. Certainly not retired. God forbid. I may well cut more cylinders. Certainly I've at least three more works in varying degrees of potentiality in me. But it's a question of timing.

Do you feel you want to distance yourself from the general bafflement that greeted "Finnegans Wake"?

No. Not at all. I had complete faith in *Finnegans Wake* as it was released. So did the producers and the record company. I still have. They still have.

But it was a radical departure from your previous recordings.

Every recording I have ever made has been a conscious attempt to be a radical departure from its predecessors. To limit yourself to one mode, one style, one way of doing it so that people can say, aha, yes, this is Jimmy Joyce, this is what we like, let's have the same again only more so; it's death to music, and worse, death to the soul. Whoever put music in the hand of the market researchers and public relations people deserves a particular kind of personal hell. I want to push hard at the limits of what can and can't be done within as tightly defined a genre as popular music. I want to explore the... the potential for mutability, for other ways of doing it, within the genre constraints.

Hence the preoccupation with free will and alternate worlds on the jacket for the "Best and Rest." I gather you weren't happy about that cylinder's release.

I wasn't. I'm still not. To a certain extent, I am not totally happy with any of my recordings because they limit the music to one thing and one thing only, and not a set of potential things at different times thematically linked together.

Those notes were written at a time when you were becoming involved with the Al Afr sect: between the "Best and the Rest" and "Finnegans Wake" was a period of several years when you studied under the Sidi Hussein, and the influence of Al Afr belief was evident in that cylinder. Yet here you are in your comfortable, might I even call it luxurious? home

contemplating new recordings: are the Al Afr years a period of your life you consider conclusively behind you?

By no means. Faith is not something you can step out of like a pair of shoes. I have no regrets about the years I spent with Sidi Hussein at the University of Fez. So, I wasn't touring, I didn't cut a cylinder until *Wake*, but I don't consider the time was unproductive. No time spent in the company of remarkable men is ever wasted. With the Al Afr I experienced things that have reshaped my life.

Could you expand on that?

There is a sense in which religious experience, any transcendent experience, is essentially uncommunicable. But I'll try. One of the tenets of Al Afr belief is that, as a consequence of his free will, God creates, has created, will create alternate worlds, alternate universes, alternate humanities parallel to yet separated from our own. In the Al Afr whirling trance, I experienced a...crossing, no, nothing so precise as that, a *leakage*, across the God-barrier between those other worlds. It's hard to explain properly. There are creatures there, in between the universes. I can't explain them, they are incomprehensible to us, yet they are as human as you or I. But they have felt the touch of our presence and responded. They are coming to us, searching across thousands upon thousands of possible universes to find us and join us. The reason I left the order was to try to explain that experience; that attempt was *Finnegans Wake*, and, to use your own quote, it was, at best, misunderstood.

But you still sympathize with Al Afr belief?

As I said, you don't step out of faith. At the moment, I am trying to establish retreat and study centres in the Home Islands for, well, anyone really, who needs time and space to re-evaluate their lives and places in this world. Prepare themselves for the coming of these travellers. Because they most assuredly are on their way. These are the days of miracle and wonder, but we are human and can only bear so much miracle and wonder at once.

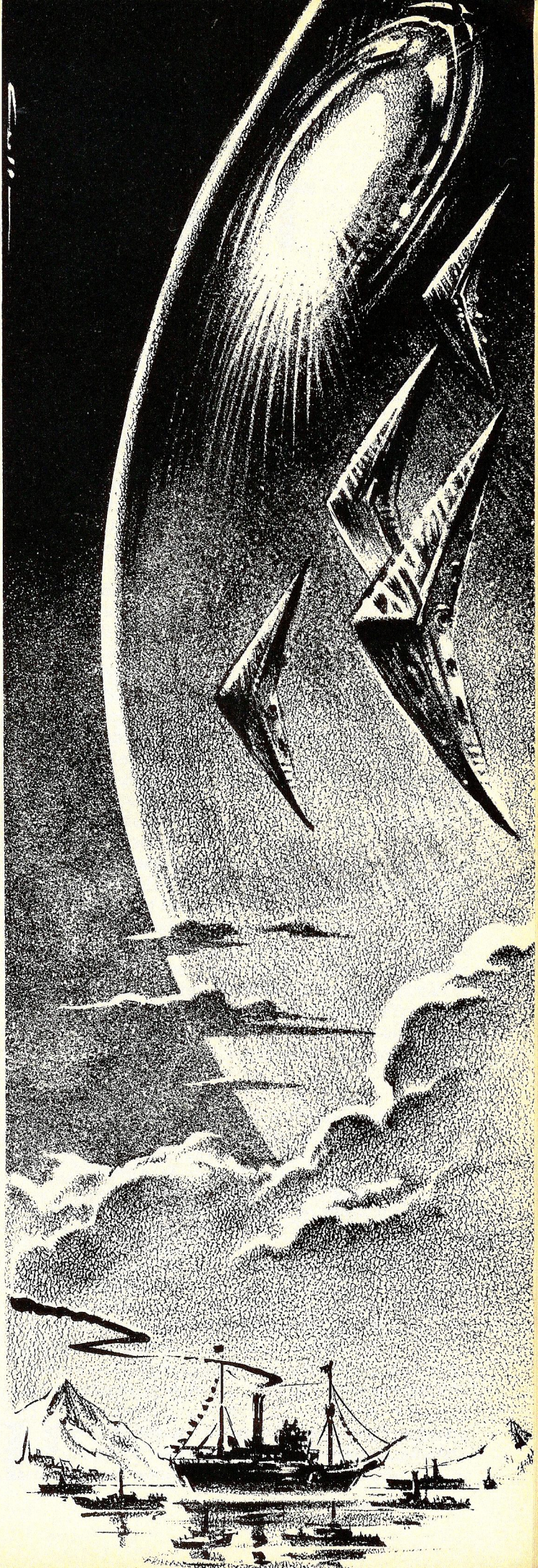
And plans for the musical future?

Well, as I intimated, I have ideas for a new collection; I'm going to take a few months off and travel through Sub-Saharan Afrika and learn the musical language of the people there. There's a tremendous, vital, musical heritage down there almost totally unexplored which deserves world attention. After that, my plans are less formalized. Maybe go back to pure, plain *sarif*, just a backing group and a musik club. It has a certain righteous appeal.

So you still stand by the motto you used on the sleeve notes for "Best and Rest"?

Screw philosophy, let's dance? Well, I'm 48, and that's an entire geological age in popular music, but I think it's a pretty good motto, yes, I do, yes.

Ian McDonald has contributed to *Interzone* just once before, with his story "Listen" (issue 32). Meanwhile, he has been building an enviable reputation as one of Britain's best new sf/fantasy novelists. His most recent books are *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day* (1991; now available in the UK as a Bantam paperback, £4.99) and *Hearts, Hands and Voices* (1992; out from Gollancz this month, £14.99).



The Careperson

Graham Joyce

Someone in the squat could still read, because I found a few pages of an old *New Guardian*. I was using them to light a fire when I saw the ad. In fact I'd already touched the lighted match to the corner of the paper. I had to flap it out against the grate, burning my fingers in the process, but the page was still readable. The newspaper was over a week old, but the job advert was up my street.

Up my street? It practically had my name on it. It was just that I'd been out of circulation for more than two years, after the fiasco with Sasha and the Carriage Kids. Two years and what had I got to show for it? A nasty bout of hepatitis, and a shared room in a Chelsea squat full of tattooed psychos who couldn't figure how to use a garbage bin.

You learn things, however. I learned that two years of crying and drugs and booze and squalor wouldn't make Sasha come back. Slow learner, that's me. Slow learner.

I telephoned the NFC to check the job was still available, and then looked up a friend. I managed to borrow a two-tone, which everyone in Carework was wearing at the time, plus enough ECU for a decent haircut.

The interview was set up within days. I sat in the reception swallowing ersatz coffee offered by a rather superior secretary, waiting to go in. There were no other candidates around. This sort of job could only attract the experienced desperate, or some overambitious tyro greedy for high wages and a name. Well, I'd got the name ha ha!

A photocopy of the original advert lay on the coffee table.

The New Federation of Carers Bureau requires a
CAREPERSON

To work with SASKIES

CQC qualification essential, as is in-depth
experience of working with feral children.

This is a new project. The successful candidate
will need to be a self-starter able to operate
without backup in all inimical environments.

Salary negotiable, circa ECU 75000

Plus danger remuneration ECU 19000 plus health care.

I loved that bit about health care.

Practically all of my experience had been with Ferals, though very little work had been done with Sewer and Subterranean Kids. Only the recent outbreaks of violence and the forthcoming Euroelections had prompted any kind of response to the killings.

As far as anyone could guess, kids had been living in the sewers and decommissioned underground

lines since before the turn of the century. At least, there is a tabloid report dating back to 1994 about kids being found inhabiting the London sewer system. They were popularly supposed to be children of the homeless, living in cardboard boxes after being turned out of institutions to face the vicious tooth of "care in the community"; and so they were, many of them children of people who couldn't cope with looking after them, their numbers swelled by pre-teen runaways.

They lived by stealing, errand-running, prostitution and robbery. That is, until the vigilante gangs cleaned them off the streets. The vigilante gangs were copying the solution adopted by their spiritual brothers in Latin America; when I say cleaned the streets, I mean they killed them. Children's bodies were left hanging under flyovers and Thames bridges. *Pour encourager les autres*. Encouraged, the children took to the sewers, living there for some years until they were flushed out.

The kids were making raids from their sewer bases and who would go after them? The air down there is enough to make an Aids virus wince; and you could get Weil's disease simply from the condensation settling on your skin. Those babes survived in stolen biker's leathers, cyclists' filtration masks and visors. At least that was what they were wearing when almost a hundred bodies were flushed through in the 2012 scandal.

Oh, you can't blame the government. They tried hard. As they pointed out, they'd floated some five thousand waterproof leaflets along the sewer systems warning of the exact date and time of Operation U-Bend. Somebody forgot to tell them that none of these kids had ever been taught to read a single word. Out they came at the other end, floating in the scum and detritus gathered at the filter-gates, small bodies in bloated, black leather suits. Like dead dolphins in an oil slick.

The Saskies could hide from the vigilantes and the hoods, but they couldn't hide from a government with an election to win. The survivors moved out of London, under cover of night. They moved north into the abandoned complexes of the industrial heartlands, the Midlands, the North-East, places where the locals were less inclined to kill 'em. Weird little colonies sprung up anywhere they could find a nest for a few months.

That's where I came in.

I'd been doing some conventional care work with granny bashers and cat-torturers – though they actu-

ally did some pretty bad things too – when I met Sasha. We'd both graduated in Care, but with different backgrounds. She was sassy, street-mystical, full of ideas; I was earnest, that's about all. I believed in care work.

Care work was actually a conflation of what used to be called social work, youth work and community work, but most of it was with the young because that's where the crisis is. Funny things, labels. We had an anti-social society, so we had social workers. No community, so we had community workers. And we couldn't bear to spend five minutes with our kids so we had youth workers. Now, because nobody cares about these problems, we have care workers.

That's the alternative title for the NFC. No Fucker Cares.

"Certainly we're impressed by your record. Particularly with the Carriage kids. I remember that report – very impressive." It was Gibson interviewing me, no panel, full authority. Government man in a grey suit and iridescent, radiating tie, peppering his talk with streetverbals so I'd know whose side he was on.

"No direct sasky sperti. Will that out-take you?"

I stayed formal. I don't like his type and I don't like to play their chameleon games. "I have the experience. The Leicester Carriage children were originally London subterranean; so no, I don't think I'm likely to be wrong-footed."

He dropped the pose. "Whatever happened to your co-operative on that project?" He snapped his fingers, trying to recall her name. Then he quoted the media byte that most used to get up Sasha's nose. "Care glamour."

I looked away. He saw it and changed the subject. "One last q. Err, question. Where have you been these last two years, Andy?"

That familiar touch confirmed the post. "Writing a book on care-work, Mr Gibson." I smiled.

Gibson levitated an eyebrow. "Before you accept this job, there's something you should know. We've already had one worker on the case. Chas Brewer. Christian Care Fellowship. He went down there three months ago and disappeared."

The CCF. Great. Right-wing, evangelical. Spiritual shock-troops. "Authorities know about this?"

"They're paying for you to follow him. Not public knowledge. Still interested?" I nodded. He stood up and thrust out a hand. "Then welcome aboard."

Within three days I'd read the reports, studied Brewer's photograph, and I was ready to go operational.

I was clipped over Coventry and we landed inside the compound seven miles north of the city. The mine had been closed before the turn of the century, and was quiet as the grave. The clipter set me down by the pit-head winding gear before flickering into the grey skies overhead.

It was an old pit. Twin towers straddled the cage-heads like giant, old ladies' spinning wheels. Beneath them stood a lamp room, windows blanked with black dust, and a dull concrete construction, the old shower and locker rooms. I realized I was being watched from the head. I had an appointment.

Armstrong could have stepped out of a period photograph. He was about seventy years old, and a stereotypical olde-worlde miner: dayglo shell-suit,

white trainers, single ear-ring and a Julius Ceasar haircut. He had one of those huge faces nicked with the blue scars of coalmining; as if someone had scribbled on it with a ballpoint pen. He also held over one arm a pump-action Molby Stinger, uncocked.

"Get much call for that?" I asked affably.

He ignored the question. "I'm told to take you in as far as the North 42 and the South 78. After that you're on your own, cocker."

"Any idea where they get in and out?"

"That why they pay you 100 thou? To find out?" I looked at him. "I get 25 ECU a day for walking around with this Molby. Me and two others, on shift. That's all I know."

I wasn't going to get into class politics. "Got my radios?"

"Right here." He handed me the two sets I'd requisitioned and showed me his own. Then he led me into the old lamp room, where I was kitted out with helmet, lamp and power pack.

"You a Smoker?" he asked. Thinking he was asking for one I offered him a snout, but he confiscated the whole packet. "Not now you aint."

He also took my matches. "You check the kids like this?"

It was supposed to be a joke, but he looked at me oddly. I remembered that in another mine not twenty miles away, same field, a colony of Saskies had blown themselves apart in a methane build-up. Armstrong handed me my electronic "canary," and said nothing.

He shifted a giant industrial lever and beckoned me into the cage, slamming the gate. Then he tapped out a few buttons and the cage dropped, very fast and into total blackness, almost a full kilometre. Armstrong led me into the airlock at the bottom, depressured, and out the other side.

It was hot down there. We stopped, and I flashed my lamp around. The pitch blackness I'd been prepared for, but not the mournful, low moans of a subterranean wind prowling through the tunnel.

"Everything you asked for is over there." Armstrong indicated the gunmetal crates: a food dump, bedding, spare power packs, first-aid gear, gifts for the Saskies. There was another sound I hadn't expected. Crickets. Lots of them. I filled my backpack selectively, and I was looking for a hiding place to stow my spare radio set when something swooped in the blackness, fanning my face. I jumped back a metre.

"Canaries." All I could see was Armstrong's grin. He took delight in my edginess. "You'll have bigger things than that to worry about."

"Canaries?"

"Hundreds of 'em left down here. Breeding. No-one had the heart to kill 'em. All white now. Not a bit of colour in 'em."

I held up my electronic "canary." "Didn't this make them obsolete?"

"Cautious people, miners. Batteries die, circuits leak, readings sometimes lie. One thing you can trust in this world is a dead canary."

I was getting a bit tired of Armstrong taking the piss. I gestured up the tunnel. "Let's get on with it."

He escorted me to Pit Bottoms numbers 1 and 2, and to the mouths of the districts he'd mentioned earlier. He didn't need a map but I was

already struggling to understand the spider-web complexity of the districts. The manriders were out of commission, and we had to walk. The amount of abandoned machinery down there was incredible, everything from pick-axes to Panzer laser-cutting machines. Kilometres of conveyer belt. My lamp kept flashing on miners' graffiti etched on the walls in indelible chalk.

SCARGILL IN GAOL, ICKE IN GOAL, WHAT HOPE?

I stopped for a breather. "What's that mean?"

"Forget it."

At Bottom 2 Armstrong gave me a verbal summary of the galleries lying ahead. "South 78 goes three miles, 79 goes two, a parallel chamber, headings every twenty or thirty yards, both sides, eighties is flooded completely and sealed, 81 open, 82 blocked by a fall from an old upperchamber – medieval monks mined this once, did you know that, cocker? – 83 you can forget, where the retreat mining started..." I nodded, pretending to take it all in. I had to convert all this into sensible measurements, and I could see he didn't give a stuff whether I grasped it or not. "Think you'll find your way back?"

I thanked him for his efforts. He hesitated before leaving me. "Listen, cocker. You really ought to have a piece." He offered me the pump-action. "Take the Molby."

I shook my head. "Never use 'em. Never have." The Molby Stinger was a Danish riot-control weapon, medium force. Down here it would be a killer.

He nodded briefly. My helmet lamp picked up something in his eyes, and I knew instinctively that he, and others like him, were feeding the kids and helping them survive. "Good luck," he shouted, his voice echoing as he trudged back along the tunnel. Then he said something odd before his light disappeared. "And watch out for the priest."

I was alone, and I felt it. After Armstrong had gone there was nothing but the low moan of the underground wind, and the weird chitter of crickets; that and the echo of my own boots scraping the dirt floor. I went to work immediately.

You don't find kids in these places; you have to work at making them find you. Dozens of patrols had already been sent in by the authorities, and all they'd come back with was a retarded five-year-old too simple to hide properly and unable to yield any helpful information. I adopted the same strategy Sasha and I had used with the Carriage kids.

Euro-Rail had dumped hundreds of old railway carriages on a breakers' yard in Leicester; the yard went bust and because of the asbestos dangers inherent in the process the municipality couldn't afford to complete the work. Result: six hectares of closely packed carriages stacked seven high. Perfect living accommodation for a colony of displaced Saskies looking for a home, turning it into a warren, making holes and rope-ladder passages between the units. The municipality would have cheerfully torched the carriages, but they couldn't risk the asbestos fallout. So they employed two workers instead.

We went in in the spring, commandeered one of the carriages, and fell in love. By high summer we'd won the kids over. We had them eating out of our hands. Sasha said it was because they could feel this

love – our love – radiating vertically and horizontally throughout the carriages, that they wanted to be part of it, that the soul goes to its point of greatest need, and this was theirs.

But maybe we had points of different need, because our ideas began to diverge. I believed we were there to win concessions for these abused children, to bring them back into the mainstream, to improve the quality of lives. Sasha started to have ideas about living outside the system. She'd been infected with a missionary zeal, saw herself as a leader of this tribe of dispossessed angels. She saw in it the chance to develop a new moral code. I started to see in her the glitter of the mad prophet.

Meanwhile I was negotiating the re-establishment of safe institutions. When Sasha fell ill I got the children transferred to healthy, caring places where they could get an education, a hygiene programme, contraception, a destiny, a chance to make it in the world. She never forgave me, called it a betrayal. In some ways she was right. The new institutions were underfunded, under-resourced and staffed by sexual predators. I checked the figures three months later: ninety-seven per cent of the Carriage kids had run away, returned to sewers and other hell-holes. Like this pit.

Fuck it; what's the point. Now I just do my job.

I started hanging the gifts on the walls at two-hundred-metre intervals. Processed food. Chocolate in bright silver paper. Small soundboxes playing street-ho, some of which I left running softly. That's it: leave gifts, ask for nothing in return, don't look dangerous, don't look weak.

It was three days before they made their move.

I'd run into trouble two or three times before then. Once I got lost and ended up wading through water, unable to find a way back. It must have been raining overground, because the gallery started filling up fast; then just as quickly the water level went down again. Another time I stumbled against a giant girder and a rock the size of a football came out of the darkness and gashed my arm. Then my electronic canary started singing on a build up of Black Damp, marsh gas, just as my power pack was fading.

I'd made a bed at the entrance to South 78 district and gone to sleep. In my dreams white canaries wheeled and dived and metamorphosed into bats and back into canaries again. When I woke I was tied up, like Gulliver. Someone was pulling my moustache.

I opened an eye. "Hi," I said.

My own lamp was shining in my face. It was hard to tell, but there were about seven of them. Two black kids with locks were rooting through my pack, four coal-black white kids sat staring. The eldest, an Indian girl about twelve years old in outsize bike leathers, sat on my chest while a toddler was still trying to pull out my moustache by the roots. "Get me some water," I said sharply.

The boys stopped rooting. One of the girls had a Stanley knife resting on the back of my wrist. The Indian girl was in charge: she nodded and someone brought her my water canteen. She took a mouthful and gobbled it in my face.

"That's better. Now bounce junior; he's giving me a sore lip."

She slapped the toddler's arm, and he left me alone. The girl with the Stanley was looking just a bit too fascinated. "Shall I nick him?" she said, Scouse accent. She got the nod and nicked me a deep one on the back of my hand.

"I bring you these gifts, and you slice me. Bad karma to you."

"Don't bad karma me no giffs," said the Indian girl. "We never axed no giffs." Her eyes were weird. They oscillated in the dark.

"Still Bad K." Superstition had got me out of scrapes before.

"You got K," said one of the black boys. "Where you draw 'at scar on your face?"

"Kid like you gave it me in a carriage one day."

"We know bout the carriages," said the Indian girl. "Don't scud us no carriage."

"Yeh," said one of the other kids, "don't scud us no carriage."

They'd heard something. I didn't know how they connected it with me, but it didn't look good. "You blades know a man called Brewer?"

The Indian girl's eyes flared. Suddenly she looked like a vengeful Kali in the dark. The light went out, I heard her shout *hup!* and next I knew I was being hoisted on a stretcher, lifted in the air and jogged down the passageway in pitch blackness.

They carried me for over an hour, executing a number of rightangle turns, some of which I sensed to be decoy. We took a heading off a main district, and it narrowed to a height of two metres. Then there was some difficulty as the stretcher was passed over rubble and through a narrow aperture. There were lights on the other side, Davey lamps hanging in a ring and more kids sitting around smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. They'd broken a hole through to an old working. For the first time I was seriously worried about gas. It wasn't my only worry. The kids all stood up, and there were suddenly a lot of Stanley knives. My own lamp was flashed in my face, and they came to look at me.

"Him?" said the girl I'd come to think of as Kali.

A redheaded boy stepped forward and looked at me closely. All I could see was the pancake of coaldust on his face. The kid also had a bad case of nystagmus: eyeballs oscillating wildly, not uncommon to Saskies living in dark places. He'd been down here a long time. "Naw. That ain't him."

There was a sudden release of tension. Some of them sat down again. Then the redheaded boy with the swivelling eyes blurted, "But I know who he am!"

I stared hard at the kid. He was about nine years old. Something familiar behind that coaldust. "Jake? Is it Jake?"

Jake was a kid from the carriages. Just a nipper then, Sasha and I had sometimes let him sleep in our bed when he had nightmares. It was more than I'd dared hope for.

Jake looked thoroughly confused. He looked over at Kali, and she nodded almost imperceptibly, permitting Jake to cut my bonds with his Stanley knife. From that moment on the others seemed to lose all interest in me. They relaxed and settled back into small groups.

"Who did they think I was, Jake?" I rubbed my wrists.

"Where's Sasha? This is the first time I ever seed you solo and no Sasha."

I had to tell him what I never told Gibson. "Jake, Sasha went a bit crazy. She had to...she had to be locked up. Yep. That's it."

He hung his head. Ginger Jake. She used to love that kid.

"You shunt 'a com down 'ere, Andy. This ain't no carriage scene. Too heavy for strummers like you and Sasha. They won't let you go easy. This puts me in a box, for real."

"You holding another careperson down here?"

Jake paused before answering. "No."

"You sure of that?"

"Don't scud me, Andy. I ain't a kid any more." No, I thought, you're nine. "We ain't holding no-one."

"Who did they think I was? When you came to look at me?"

"Oh, yeh. Heard of the priest?"

I shook my head. Jake rolled a snout, lit up and offered it to me. I looked up and saw a pair of white canaries twittering on an overhead girder and hoped it was ok. He blew smoke down his nostrils. "You're eyeballin' the only Sasky ever got away from the priest. That one's a killer."

"Vigilante? Down here?"

"Naw. He ain't no vigilante. He gunna save your soul." Jake choked on his own cynical laughter. Then, sourly: "Just like you and Sasha."

"How you getting in and out?"

"That's information."

I gave him a look which made him ashamed. What did he think I'd become?

He lowered his voice. "These tunnels connect 'bout a dozen towns and villages. We break old seals. Into old drift mines. We got detonators, explosives, the lot."

"Sounds a dangerous game." I recalled that old workings were often sealed off because of gas or flooding.

"Lot of kids gone to heaven carrying a detonator, yep. But the priest, he wants us there fast. So I was coming back from a raid overground and I twisted my foot, fell behind the posse, yeh? Next thing I's out like a light and come round staked out. The priest standing over me, whispering weird shit."

"What's he look like?"

"Wears a cyclist's mouthmask. An' a miner's helmet. But the eyes. Them eyes is mad. Know what he does? Kills kids and lays 'em out for collection at the bottom of the winding gear."

"That Armstrong. He helps you, doesn't he?"

"Not your business, Andy."

I knew it. I'd seen it the first day. Him and others. Like some people feed urban foxes. Leaving food for the Saskies. Otherwise how would he know about the priest? That's why Armstrong wanted me to carry a Molby, not because of the kids.

I tried to remember everything I could about Brewer, which wasn't much. He wouldn't have been the first careworker to loop the loop. "What's he say? This priest?"

"Weird shit. This world is hell. Grown-up is hell. Kids have the spark. He gunna light the way to heaven. Talks ya for three hours afore he takes yer number." Jake wound his finger near his skull, spirals of madness.

"So how d'you get away?"

Before Jake answered, something dropped like a stone, two inches from my nose. I looked down. It was a dead white canary.

I scrambled to my feet. "The ciggie, Jake! Put it out! We got gas!"

Jake looked unperturbed, took another draw on his homerolled snout. I saw a lot of other faces turned towards me bearing expressions of contempt. Jake flicked his head. I looked up at the roof. Dangling from a girder by the backs of his legs was a grinning white kid with a shaved head. He had another couple of dead canaries in his hand, and he tossed one at my face. I sat down again. Jake looked as though he felt sorry for me.

"They ain't too switched on by carefakers."

"No."

"Anyway. The whispering priest. He shone a lamp in my face for three hours. Then I knew he was gonna light me to heaven. He's got a silver cross. Only it ain't a cross, it's a dagger, man. Andy, he's just about to draw the red smile on Jake's throat when something stops him. Was a rock fall some way down the tunnel, lot o' dust got blown up. He just looks at me, zif God stopped him, yeh? What I figure. Anyway, when the dust settles he's out of there. Nothing but the wind. Lay there eighteen hours before one of the sisters found me. Spooky."

"At least you're still kicking."

"What you here for, Andy?"

"I want to take you all out." Jake suddenly looked very tired. "Hear me out, Jake. There's an election coming up. See the meta-politics of it, Jake, remember like I taught you? We got deals going. Lot of people unhappy with this Sasky thing. Safe warm houses. Read-skills. Look at these nippers: look at their eyes. Nothing a doctor can't fix."

"Been down that tunnel with you before, Andy. Nothing at the other end."

"I know, I know. But you can milk it, maybe two or three years good project time. Then cut and run. That's politics. What can you lose?"

It was the old, old, careworn argument. Jake said nothing. But I could hear the word *freedom* echoing in my ear. Sasha's voice from the Carriage days.

"Freedom!" she used to unfurl the word like a flag, so that anyone within earshot might rally to it. "Look at these kids," she'd say. "You think they've got nothing! But they're richer than us! They can think and feel and move independently! We're just educated units of the combine, sent here so those bastards can sleep easy. Well I don't want them to sleep easy; I want these kids on their conscience. It's their sacred destiny, to live in these dark places and make the others itch. That's what freedom is: being a living conscience." Who could resist her beauty, her ferocity?

"Yeh," I said angrily, "freedom to lie down in a sewer, get pregnant at ten, hatch out the old diseases, rickets, tuberculosis!" It was Sasha I was shouting at, but it was Jake enduring it.

Kali came over and joined us. "This is Devi. I'm her old man." Jake put his arm around her in a loving gesture which could only have been copied from me and Sasha.

Devi spoke. The Kali-fire had softened. "You won't out-take Jake. We're established."

I changed the subject. "The priest," I said. "I know who he is. It's a man called Brewer. I'm going to help you get him."

They stared at me, their eyes jerking in the darkness. Jake stood up. "Give us a minute, will you?"

They moved away. They had radiocomms, and I heard the system crackling as they spoke to others. In a few moments they came back. Devi returned my helmet, lamp, my electronic canary and my kit bag. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Just follow us."

Neither Jake nor Devi would yield any information. I didn't know if we were on the tracks of the mad priest or what. We walked for about an hour up an incline, waded through a flooded cavern and crawled on hands and knees for two hundred metres. There were rope-ladders into old workings overhead. Finally we came out in a large, echoing chamber, a siding for coal trucks rusting on equally rusty rails. There was a gaping hole in the far wall big enough to climb through, and they made me go first. I passed through the hole into yet another tunnel. They didn't follow.

"We want you to read for us what it says on the wall up ahead. Where the lamp is."

Sure enough I saw a Davey lamp hanging about thirty metres away. There was a message tacked beneath it. When I got there it said: JAKE SAYS NO HARD FEELINGS - BREWER.

"Wha...?"

I turned my lamp back on the hole I'd stepped through. There was the man I recognized as Brewer from the photograph. Only his face and one arm were poked through the hole and he was waving goodbye. His head disappeared and within a few seconds there was a minor explosion and a fall of rocks. When the dust settled, the hole had been sealed by the rockfall. I was on my own again.

Once Jake would have weighed my words like gold bars. Now he was nine he was ready to betray me. That hurt. I sat down for a while, not knowing which way to go.

I switched off my lamp to save power, took the Davey and headed down the inclining tunnel. Nothing looked familiar, and I figured these were much older workings. It was hot. I started to work up a sweat. The weak light from my Davey skittered off walls damp with water. I started to have a bad feeling, and was about to retrace my steps when a brief light flickering ahead encouraged me on. The light went out, but I continued until I caught sight of it again. And then a third time. After two or three hours of this game, I could have kicked myself. It was nothing more than my Davey reflecting off wet walls.

Two days later I'd exhausted myself chasing shadows, and I was still hopelessly lost. I sat down and let my eyes close. When I woke up I was shivering. My cut hand was puffed and swollen, and I was feverish. I didn't know how much time had passed.

I finished the water in my canteen. I knew it was stupid, but I was burning up. I drifted in and out of sleep. When I came to there were three men, old miners like Armstrong, sitting against the far wall. Like

me they seemed done in. They sat in silence, unmoving. After a while, one of them lifted a rock in his fist, and tapped it weakly against a steel girder, slowly.

"Armstrong," I said loudly. My voice echoed in the gallery.

The miner stopped tapping, and the three of them stared at me. One stood up and moved towards me. Then I lost consciousness again. When I came to the miners were gone. This time there was someone else shining a light in my face. All I could see was a filtration mask above a clerical dog-collar. The priest, whoever he was, had bandaged my infected hand.

"Why did you have to come here?" The words came from behind the mask in a strangled whisper, but even then I knew. I think I'd known since Jake told me how he'd been allowed to escape. I switched on my own power lamp in an act of unnecessary confirmation.

"I prayed and prayed it wouldn't be you."

"Prayed?" she whispered. "You never used to pray."

"We are in hell. This is hell. I am a minister to souls."

I was hearing it for the third time. Sasha knew who I was, but somehow didn't connect. She spoke to me in long, whispered diatribes, gazing into the darkness at a point just beyond the range of her lamp. The old rage had burned out, but had been replaced by something much more sinister.

"I love these children. I help them. They will be starbursts of pure light. Death is only the flint, sparking their way. I am the hand that strokes the flint. I release the divine spark. I send them winging, unscathed, to heaven."

I sat in awe as she paced back and forth. She cupped a silver cross in her hands at her waist, stroking it. The cruel blade tapered to a point. I was desperately looking for something to say that might call on past loyalties, something to give me purchase on a soul that had come apart like fog: *hey babe, remember making it on the carriage one afternoon and we looked up and saw a dozen smiling faces watching us? Hey and remember...*

Something warned me not to try. She exuded an unholy terror, and I feared the beautiful strength of her madness. I was afraid it might contaminate me. "Thank you," I said, "for dressing this wound."

She looked confused, and stooped to stroke the dirty bandage; a gesture somehow appalling in its tenderness. "We are corrupt matter. Putrescence. The spark within us is engulfed, extinguished. Unless we can be saved, while still pure. If we can find a deliverer." She shook her head. "It was already bandaged when I found you."

It was the first time she'd connected with anything I'd said; and yet if she hadn't treated my hand, who had?

Suddenly my electronic canary started whistling. I scrambled to my feet. It was giving a high Firedamp reading. "Methane build up! We gotta get out." I hurried down the tunnel and the LED advanced. "Other way! Let's go!"

She only looked puzzled by my urgency. "You don't understand," she said, fingering her dagger/cross. "It's not in our hands to escape the inevitable."

I grabbed her roughly by the arm. "Come out of it

Sasha! You don't know how many joint-tootin kids there are waiting to touch off that methane cloud. Now!" I'd lost my fear both of her and her blade.

I bundled her in front of me, and we marched down the tunnel, lamplights jogging in the darkness. She was muttering under her breath, something rhythmic, prayers or incantations. Her head was a gallery full of strange, mutated white birds, but I knew I could never abandon her. Yes, I still loved her.

When it was safe I stopped her. Suddenly I had the answer. I could make things as they were, and I told her. "We're going to get out of this place. Together."

"Together?"

"That's right, Sasha. We're going to make it like the old days. We'll find a project, something with meaning. You and me, and loads of dirty-nosed kids who need the care and the love. We should never have left the carriages." I grabbed her arms and she stiffened. "Exactly as it was before things went wrong, right? There's loads of need out there. You'll get well again!" I searched her eyes for comprehension, for signs of hope. "All we have to do is find the way out."

She looked at me across an abyss. "I know the way out," she said.

She led me a long march through intersecting tunnels. At last we passed some familiar graffiti on the wall: SCARGILL IN GAOL. We were approaching the airlock. I felt an overwhelming surge of optimism, a yearning to see blue sky and breathe the air overground. Sasha faltered.

"I'm afraid."

"Don't be. I'm right with you."

I took her hand and went ahead of her. She released my grip but she was breathing on my neck all the way, still whispering. Suddenly in front of us a bright light flashed on and from behind it a voice called out. "Look out, cocker!"

I turned swiftly. Frozen in the light, Sasha gripped her silver cross with both hands high above her head. Then the cross was slicing through the blackness, coming down on me in a vicious arc. It never reached me. I heard the double hum of the Molby as Sasha was thrown against the wall by the impact of the ball bearings.

Armstrong was running over. "I didn't want to," he shouted. "I didn't want to!"

He'd saved me, but at that range the Molby was lethal. Sasha lay crumpled under the rusting wheels of an abandoned truck. I took off her helmet. Underneath, her hair had been cropped, Joan-of-Arc style. I held her head in my hands.

"It's a woman," breathed Armstrong. His hands were trembling.

"Yes. It's my wife."

Gibson frowned, shaking his head at my growing list.

"Plus a health care team, a literacy unit and two residential care workers for each cohort. That's the deal. And long-term employment in the project for the older kids who come out with them." I was determined to get something for Jake and Devi, at least. "Say no, and they don't come."

"But the quality of accommodation you're demanding alone..." he protested.

"Piss off, Gibson. There's ministerial interest in

this. All you gotta do is pick up the phone. Are we dealing?" Gibson vented a huge sigh.

Before returning underground, I told Armstrong about the mystery of my bandaged hand. The doctors had told me someone had saved a lot of complications. Armstrong got his charts out. He wanted me to be specific about where it had happened.

"Here," I said. "Same place Sasha found me."

"You're certain?"

"Pretty certain."

"There was three of 'em?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"You ain't the first to see 'em. Or to be helped."

"You've seen them?"

Armstrong shook his head. "Three good lads. There was a roof-fall in that chamber. 1978. But I know good men who've seen 'em since."

He wouldn't be drawn. Miners have a taboo against talking about men killed underground.

Next day I was back down the black hole. I left messages everywhere for Jake, knowing the illiterate children would have to run them back to him. Then I waited.

He turned up, as requested at the entrance to North 78 district. I persuaded him to lead me to Brewer, but only after telling him I'd seen Sasha, and she didn't want him to stay down the mine. It was partially true.

Brewer, I knew, had gone feral, same as Sasha had in the carriage days. Not uncommon. A different reality takes over; targets change and you don't want to go home. I suspected Brewer had monitored my visit all the way, and he was going to be my biggest obstacle to getting the kids to surface. But I had information on him.

Jake delivered me to Brewer, but not before showing me their efforts at farming in a high gallery off 84 district. They were raising mushrooms, and dwarf wheat in sandy soil under artificial light. So this was Brewer's big plan. I didn't have to say anything. The results were meagre, and Jake knew it.

When I found him Brewer was lying on a filthy sleeping bag under a couple of Davey Lamps. Two small children, about six years old apiece, snuggled down with him. He looked sick. Another kid sat with a water canteen at the ready. I could see how much love the kids had for him, and I felt a disgraceful envy. I listed the concessions.

He put on his spectacles. They made him look donnish, crazy in that place. Light reflected in the glass and I couldn't see his eyes. "Empty promises," he spat.

"It's already in place."

"You can't trust them. I've been in this game longer than you. You're just a pup."

I objected to that. "Have you told these kids, Brewer? Have you told them how long you've got?" I brandished a medical report and, rather theatrically, handed it to Jake. "Brewer's got no future here."

"Cancer," said Jake.

"Six months, maybe a year. You've got nothing here, Brewer. Nobody's got any future here. This is no life."

He shot me a look of distilled hatred. His hand shook. "Don't trust him, Devi. Jake. Don't trust any of them. More than one way to take a person's soul. Remember that."

"We're gunna have to roundtalk," said Jake.

"Do we sit in?" said Brewer.

"No," said Devi. "This is roundtalk. Oldsters out. Sorry, Chas."

The call went out and kids started streaming into the gallery. There must have been over a hundred all told. Brewer and I waited.

Jake and Devi came back. "Situation runs this way," said Devi. "Bout a dozen want to lie on the coal here with Chas. Jake will lead the others out. Deal is you scud upstairs they's all gone. We don't want 'em backcoming for them as stays on the coal."

I looked at Brewer. "It's a deal. I'll tell them you're all out. What about you Devi? What's your position?"

"I'm for staying here on the coal. But I'm also stuck on Jake. So I'll go with him. But only 'cos he gives you pluspoints." She gave me a burning sort of look, the Kali aspect again, to say *if this goes wrong*...

Devi and Jake led them out. I radioed ahead and got them to send down the cage. I ushered them through the airlock and into the cage, twelve at a time. Jake and Devi went up with the last groups. Before it was my turn I raced back down the passage and added some graffiti about hope.

I entered the last cage with the stragglers. I clanged the gate shut, hit the signal button, and we were whisked up at speed. We emerged from the winding shed, blinking into the sunlight.

Something was wrong. Where I'd expected to see a hundred coal-black kids joshing and chattering in the yard, there was only a phalanx of armed police. About a dozen transporter vans with barred windows stood at a short distance. I could see they were crammed with bodies, and already the kids in my cage were being bundled towards the vans. Gibson was standing by with two or three official-looking types.

I marched up to him. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Everything's in hand," said Gibson. The first of the vans started moving away. "You've done a good job."

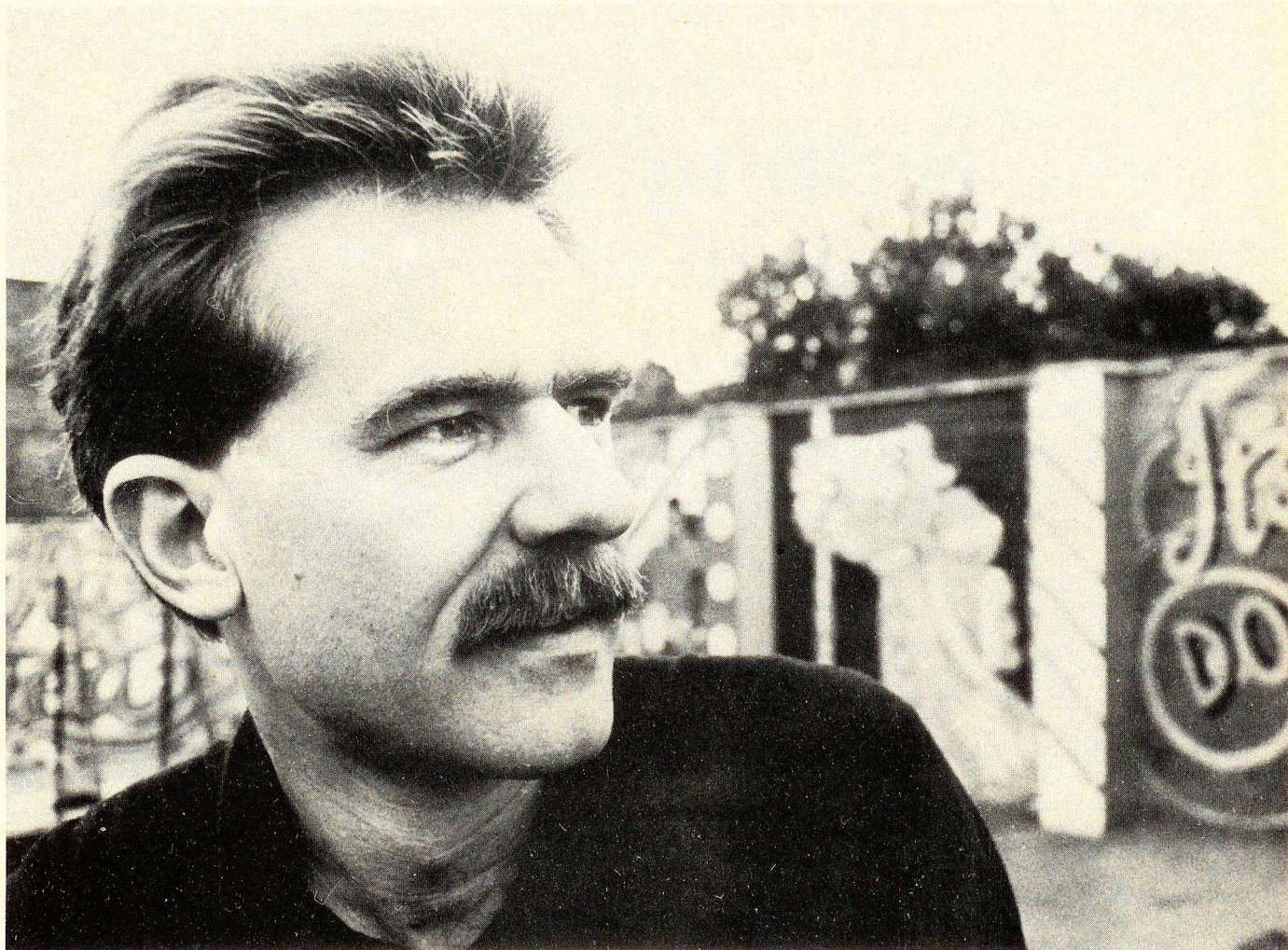
"What job? This is way out of order! This isn't what we agreed!" Gibson and his colleagues turned their faces away from me. I started to run towards the vans.

"Stop him!" someone shouted, and three police officers stepped forward to block me, automatics levelled at my legs. I looked helplessly around for support. Armstrong hung back by the winding shed, shaking his head. In the last of the vans I saw black-faced Jake and Devi looking at me though the window bars as they were driven off.

Within three minutes, the police were out of there and Gibson and his colleagues were jumping into a clipter. I gave Gibson *the look*. "What's the matter," he said, "we're paying you enough aren't we?" Then the clipter was a stuttering white dot in the grey sky.

Defeat forced me to the tarmac. I sat there, head in my hands, contemplating what I'd just done. Eventually Armstrong took me into his shed and gave me a cup of tea. I was too stunned to speak.

"Know what your trouble is?" he said, pouring a mud-coloured brew from an old pot. "You get too involved. That's your trouble."



Graham Joyce (above) is the author of a debut fantasy novel called *Dreamside* (Pan, 1991; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 51). Other books will follow. A former social worker, he lives in Leicester. "The Careperson" is his first contribution to this magazine.

J.G. Ballard (see pages 6-10) was one of the first authors we published in *Interzone*, and his novelette "News from the Sun" accompanied our debut issue as a special-offer chapbook. He last appeared here with two brief vignettes, "Neil Armstrong Remembers His Journey to the Moon" (issue 53) and "A Guide to Virtual Death" (issue 56). Those apart, "The Message from Mars" is his first new short story to be published since the success of his non-sf novel *The Kindness of Women* (HarperCollins, 1991). He lives in Middlesex.

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¹ *Locus* Nov. 1989; ² *Locus* Feb. 1990; ³ *Locus* Feb. 1991

Ripping Yarns

Stan Nicholls speaks to Storm Constantine

Storm Constantine has a confession. "I was a right little liar as a kid," she admits.

"I was awful because I'd make up fantasies and tell them to adults, who'd believe them. Then I'd get found out and land in enormous trouble. But I didn't realize it was wrong. They weren't horrible things, they weren't nasty fantasies or anything; I just made up stories about people we knew."

Well, fiction is only another name for creative lying anyway. "Exactly," she agrees, "and at least it stops you lying in real life!"

"I must have been making up these stories before I was six, but the memory is so vivid because of the punishment I used to get. Actually, I think it's bad that children get punished for that sort of thing, because it could very easily kill the storytelling instinct. It didn't with me, fortunately. It's still a compulsion. I have to tell stories."

But it wasn't so much fiction that captured her young imagination. Her first love was Egyptology. "Yeah, I was really into mummies and pyramids, and I remember inventing adventures about a dog who went back in time to ancient Egypt. I think it was the fantastical element that appealed to me rather than the science element. That developed later.

"The first science-fiction writer I read was Michael Moorcock, when I was about twelve. I got into him and it just blew my mind. I bought *Knight of the Swords*, or something like that, and I couldn't believe that somebody was writing this sort of stuff. I rushed out and got everything he'd ever done. Of course reading him led me to other writers, and eventually I read *Lord of the Rings*, although I have to say I didn't like it very much. There was no sex in it! Everyone said, 'It's marvelous; it will change your life.' I was waiting for the earth to move and it never did.

"But before discovering people like Moorcock I was reading Greek and Norse myths, and our own British myths, of course. The supernatural mythology of Britain intrigues me. That was the foundation of my interest rather than science fiction or fantasy."

Was it always her ambition to be a writer? "Well, off and on. When I was

in my mid-teens I was really keen on the idea and wrote all this disgustingly purple prose that thankfully will never see the light of day. I was into people like Tanith Lee by then, and thinking, 'I can do this.'

"Then I started working for a county council. Up until then the jobs I'd had were for private industry and I could do a lot of my writing in the office; I used to do all my work in the morning and be free to do what I wanted in the afternoon. Once I started working for local government I discovered the awful truth – you had to pretend to be working even when you weren't. And as I had such a busy social life I found it hard to write in the evenings. My writing lapsed for six years, between the ages of about twenty and twenty-six, and it was only when I got a better job and bought my own house that the interest came back. I could see thirty galloping towards me and thought, 'I'm going to write a book, damn it.'"

When she came to write that first novel, *The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit*, volume one of her "Wraeththu" trilogy, she had no idea how to get it published. "But then I was very, very lucky. You might call it fate, I don't know, but I was in the right place at the right time.

"What happened was that I went to Andromeda bookshop in Birmingham with a friend, who was the manager of a band I lived with, and I said, 'Go up to the counter and ask them how you get a fantasy book published.' So he went trolling up and gave the pitch. Dave Holmes was behind the desk. He said, 'If you haven't got an agent you can't get a book published and unless you've got a book published you can't get an agent. Tell her not to bother.' Really dismissive, sort of thing.

"But there was a rep from Futura in there at the time who overheard the conversation. He said to my friend, 'What's the book about?' My friend was wonderful, he really had the gift of the gab, and he did a great selling job on it. This rep said, 'Get her to send me a few chapters and a synopsis. I'll take them to [editor] Richard Evans and see what he thinks.' Which he did. Then I got a letter from Richard Evans saying he wanted to see the rest, and while

he was reading it I did a rewrite. He said he wanted certain amendments and most of those I'd already covered in the rewrite. It was really that easy."

The "Wraeththu" books (1987-89) were followed by *The Monstrous Regiment* (1990). It tells the story of Corinna, a young woman living on a planet originally colonized by feminists who have created a matriarchal society as chauvinistic as the patriarchy they fled from.

"I was very disappointed with *The Monstrous Regiment*. I was going through a difficult time, both with the publishers and in my personal life, and hence I don't think the book got enough attention. It needed more work.

"I can tell you something about what inspired me to write it. I'd been involved in what was I suppose a consciousness-raising group, for want of a better term, and it was very witchcraft-based. There was this woman running it and coming on with all this stuff about equality and sexism. But it was bullshit. Because she was such a cow to the women in the group, and she destroyed people; she could reduce them to tears, and worse. I thought that was really terrible. I was cross about it and took it all very personally and got into conflict with this woman. Then I thought, 'What would it be like if women like that were in charge?' That was where *Monstrous Regiment* came from. It was an angry, hurt book.

"I know a lot of it was a bit over the top and I shouldn't have been quite so vitriolic, because it sounds as if I'm anti-feminist, which I'm not at all. It's just that it was taken from real life, it was my comment about the situation I'd been involved in. It needed to be more measured. The points I wanted to make should have been gently teased out. I mean, it was like slapping readers around the face. I cringe when I read bits of it now.

"It's funny, but to me *Monstrous Regiment* was like a first novel in a way, because Artemis [the setting] had been with me for ten years and I knew it inside out. I'd written poetry about it, I'd written short stories about it, but when I came to write the book it was really torn out. Maybe it was difficult because it was in the third person,



Storm Constantine (second from left) with a few friends, on the occasion of the *New Worlds* signing at Forbidden Planet, London. Left to right, the others are: David Garnett, Jackie Gresham, Jay Summers, Simon Ings, John Clute, Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, Charles Stross, Kim Newman, Ian McDonald, Matthew Dickens.

which was new for me. I'd always worked in first person before that."

There was a sequel, *Aleph* (1991), but there will be no further volumes. "It was the end of my contract with Macdonald and my relationship with them had broken down significantly, so I didn't want to have to do another one. I'd moved to *Headline* and they were doing so much for me. My stuff was taking off with them and the enthusiasm from the editorial, publicity and marketing people was marvelous.

"But *Aleph* was enjoyable to do. It was my ripping yarn really. It's not got any great message in it, it hasn't got a lot of my philosophy in it, but I enjoyed writing it. It was fun to do. It was lightweight, but I think it stands up better than *Monstrous Regiment*. I don't envisage doing any more. It's all wrapped up with pain for me. It was a painful time in my life and everything was really shitty. But I wouldn't mind doing something else in the world of *Burying the Shadow*, the book *Headline* have just published."

Burying the *Shadow* (1992) grew from her interest in Angelology, Hermetics and Enochian magic. "I wanted to do a story about fallen angels. I've always been fascinated by the legend that angels came down and taught mankind about science and art and spirituality. I've also wanted to do

a vampire book for quite some time, so I thought I'd combine the two.

"I had it that it was more of a science-fictional idea than a biblical one. These angels come from another world where they had rebelled against the leaders. They escape to Earth and have to drink human blood in order to survive. They are made of different stuff to us, you see, and on their own world they fed off each other.

"So they demand a tithe of blood in return for art, medicine, science, astrology, magic – everything. They bring consciousness to Earth in a way, and that was the deal between the two races. Then of course, mankind being what it is, once it's got the knowledge it resents the tithe and turns against the angels and drives them out. The novel starts a few hundred years after that."

Constantine displays a wide knowledge of occultism in her non-fiction on the subject, and occasionally expresses controversial views about religious beliefs, on one occasion stating that God is a fiction. "Well, that's what I believe. I've been through all the business; I mean, I started off being a Christian I suppose. But as I grew up I became more interested in the dark side of things, and in magic and spirituality. Eventually I ended up in a coven. But before long I was thinking, 'This is a pile of shit. It's just Christianity with a different terminology.'

"The trouble with pagans is that they happily believe in all these supposedly wonderful examples from the past. You know, the Eleusinian mysteries, the Norse and Celtic myths and our own witchcraft tradition. They're going back into the past and they are trying to hoist it into now and use it.

"My feeling is that we need something for the future, we need something forward-looking. There's no point using the symbols and magical paraphernalia of the past. We need new things. I'm not suggesting you throw the baby out with the bathwater, it's just that people into neo-paganism are using the old god images. Why not invent your own? They would have just as much power.

"My own studies, and research for my work, have led me away from strict religious beliefs. You can create your own belief system and make it as real as you want it to be. You can create your own gods and goddesses and use them. I think they are expressions of our deepest selves and our desires and needs, and you can externalize them and empower them and use them as a focus to achieve magical results."

Is this attitude reflected in her writing, in the sense of it being a kind of channel for her world-view? "Yes, my writing is part of my magical work, I suppose. It sounds terribly twee to say that, but so much energy and intention goes into it. If I wasn't writing, if I had

a 9 to 5 job, perhaps I'd spend half my time dressed up in a robe! My work is my magic. That's what I do.

"I'm a great believer in positive thinking, and that has a part in the creative process for me. I need to feel the atmosphere of the world I've created, I need to smell it. I need to have the sensual experience of it. I have to be there. Those images definitely come before the story.

"So I have to get to know the world for a while before I can write about it. In fact when I'm into it I find it hard to come out. It's like you've got all these doors and you know the words are on the other side, and you open one and think, 'No, I don't want to go that way,' and shut it. You always worry that you're never going to find the key to the right door. It's like that for me."

It doesn't always come easily. "I've got a beautiful work room. It's perfect for me; it's huge, it's all wood and dark red Victorian carpets, with books everywhere. I love it. But sometimes I go up there and I just cannot write. Whatever little muse sits on my shoulder is absent, and I think, 'Oh my God, it will never come back.' I get in this spiral of guilt and fear about not working. Then one day, puff!, it's back and just pours out. I think to myself, 'Why was I ever worried?' Then a few weeks later it's not there again.

"I'm not really very organized in my writing. My ideal situation when writing a book is to just crawl my way through it gently, exploring the world, and do multiple redrafts to knock it into shape afterwards. A bit like making a pot; take some wet clay and slap it into shape.

"I like the revision process best. The first draft hurts, it's like breaking rocks. It's horrible. I really hate doing first drafts. Hate it. Partly because I'm always worried I'm not going to be able to get my thoughts down. You've got this wonderful image in your head, an idea that's totally wordless and formless, and getting that into language is so hard."

One way she gets things flowing is from feedback on her work in progress. "I've got a couple of friends, and my partner Jay of course who's a writer himself, and we're like a little cabal that reads each other's stuff. Actually, one of them isn't a writer, she's a reader, and in some respects is probably the best judge of our work. She can tell if there's holes, whereas the writers tend to pick up on the technical problems. So I'm very lucky in having those people to give me a different perspective on my work."

This has helped her realize that there are certain running themes in her books she wasn't necessarily conscious of when writing them. "You have your particular obsessions that recur. You work things out, you

exorcise things, and I think the obsessions change and the themes change but there will be a noticeable thread running through. But I'm not aware of this when I'm actually doing it, only when I read the stuff again.

"And yes, I do re-read my work, although I shudder a lot doing it. I like to see the progression. When I read my first books I'm aware of a kind of innocence in them which I think I've lost. I've become a bit cynical. I knew nothing about the publishing industry when I first started out and I had very rose-coloured spectacles. I've become a little cynical about everything and that innocence is missing from my work now.

"When you're writing for a living and you see the things that go on in publishing it does affect you in a way. It changes your work. It matures the work too, it's not a downer thing completely, but there's a certain childlike quality that goes, and I think it must happen to nearly everybody. The first novel you write is so magical, it's a rite of passage, and it's all the things you've ever wanted to say that you had to get out. It's the initiation into being a writer. And you can never do it twice."

Nevertheless, writing, Constantine believes, can occasionally affect the real world. "It sounds terribly corny to say this, but I think writers can influence reality in a very strange way, and I personally don't like to have downbeat endings to my work. It's all right to explore the grimness and horrible-ness and cruelties in the text but I like to have a bit of an upper ending. It makes me feel better. I have a sort of instinctive feeling that I like things not to be too doomy. There has to be a bit of hope.

"When I look around me I see injustices, I see cruelties, wars; although I see beauty as well of course, and there is an urge inside me to turn that into another history, to catalogue what I see, but in a fantastical way. The impulses that come through my perception, the way I see the world, I want to talk about. Perhaps try to change things a little bit."

And science fiction is the best vehicle for this. "It's a wonderful genre, it really is. It's underestimated. And the thing that annoys me so much is people's attitude towards it. For example a woman came to interview me recently, and said, 'I'll confess this is the first science-fiction book I've ever read. I was amazed it was so accessible. Are you different to other writers in this way?' I said, 'No. You could walk into any bookshop and pick up a dozen sf books you would enjoy just as much. Science-fiction writers don't just write about spaceships.' The majority of people still think it's all Flash Gordon. Science fiction takes society and the world by the throat and

dares to examine things. Not all of it, let's face it, but the very good writers do.

"It's annoying that there are so many people writing formula sf that obviously sells. It's sad in a way because other writers who are desperately trying to earn a crust feel they have to stick to those formulas to one degree or another. I try to avoid formulas where possible. There's far less ground-breaking goes on than might happen if readers were more experimental. Because I'm sure the writers want to be. But at the end of the day you have to think about living and paying your mortgage.

"I also think sf is about what's happening now. Which is what I try to do. You might sort of project it to its logical end in your eyes, but really you're talking about the present, because nobody can predict the future. Could anybody foresee the rise of the home computer, for example, twenty years ago? So whatever you talk about, you're talking about now. You just put it in an alternative scenario."

Research is important when working in the field however. "If there's something you don't know then you go and find out about it. You've got to know a certain amount because readers aren't stupid. They can tell if something hasn't been decently researched.

"I think that was one of the errors in my first trilogy; the fact that I knew so little about science, and reading that now I can see what people mean when they say, 'You could have made the science behind it more convincing.' With hindsight I can say, 'Well, yes.' But I was very new to the scene then. I was on a high having finished the book and it was all very wonderful."

But does it matter that much? After all, she isn't writing science fiction. "No, it's definitely not hard stuff. But I feel more comfortable if it at least has a hinge, if you know what I mean. I don't like long scientific expositions, but I do like the odd bit of science here and there."

Not that Storm Constantine will necessarily write nothing but sf in the future. "I'd find it difficult to write an all-out, gutsy, slashing type of horror novel, but I'd quite like to write a supernatural book, which might have horrific elements in it. But I don't think I'd write an out-and-out serial killer sort of novel. I would prefer the style of Shirley Jackson, for example, whom I love. *The Haunting of Hill House* especially. It took me three tries to watch the film of it right through to the end.

"I've got a secret desire to write a magical reality stroke mainstream novel. The stuff I did for *Midnight Rose* [packagers of various Penguin/Roc fantasy anthologies] has opened my eyes about that in a way. The three stories I wrote for them are more mainstream

I suppose than things I'd written before. I really want to do more of that kind of thing. I used to prefer novel writing and hated writing short fiction. But because it's the bread and butter in between the cakes of novels, and I've had to write lots of short fiction, I've grown to quite enjoy it. Although my short stories do tend to be rather long; I rarely write anything under eight thousand words.

· "In fact Midnight Rose helped me in a lot of ways. Even though the books are shared-world anthologies, the worlds are so good to work in I've loved every minute of it. I was really happy working for them, which I thought I'd never say. I was a bit scornful about shared worlds before, having worked for Warhammer [Games Workshop]. I confess to having done one Warhammer story."

Despite the problems, she has no doubt that the writing life was tailor-made for her. "Not having to work for anybody else is a great plus. I'm not a person who takes orders happily. I suppose I'm a wolf rather than a sheep. I like responsibility. I like to be the one in charge, but not having had any formal education it's rare to find jobs where I'm in that situation. I'm my own boss and nobody tells me what to do. Which is wonderful. I haven't got to dread getting up in the morning and experiencing that sick feeling in the pit of your stomach when you're walking to work and visualizing murdering people you work with."

Are there any disadvantages? "Poverty."

Storm Constantine's books are published in the UK by *Headline* – although older titles came from *Macdonald/Orbit*.

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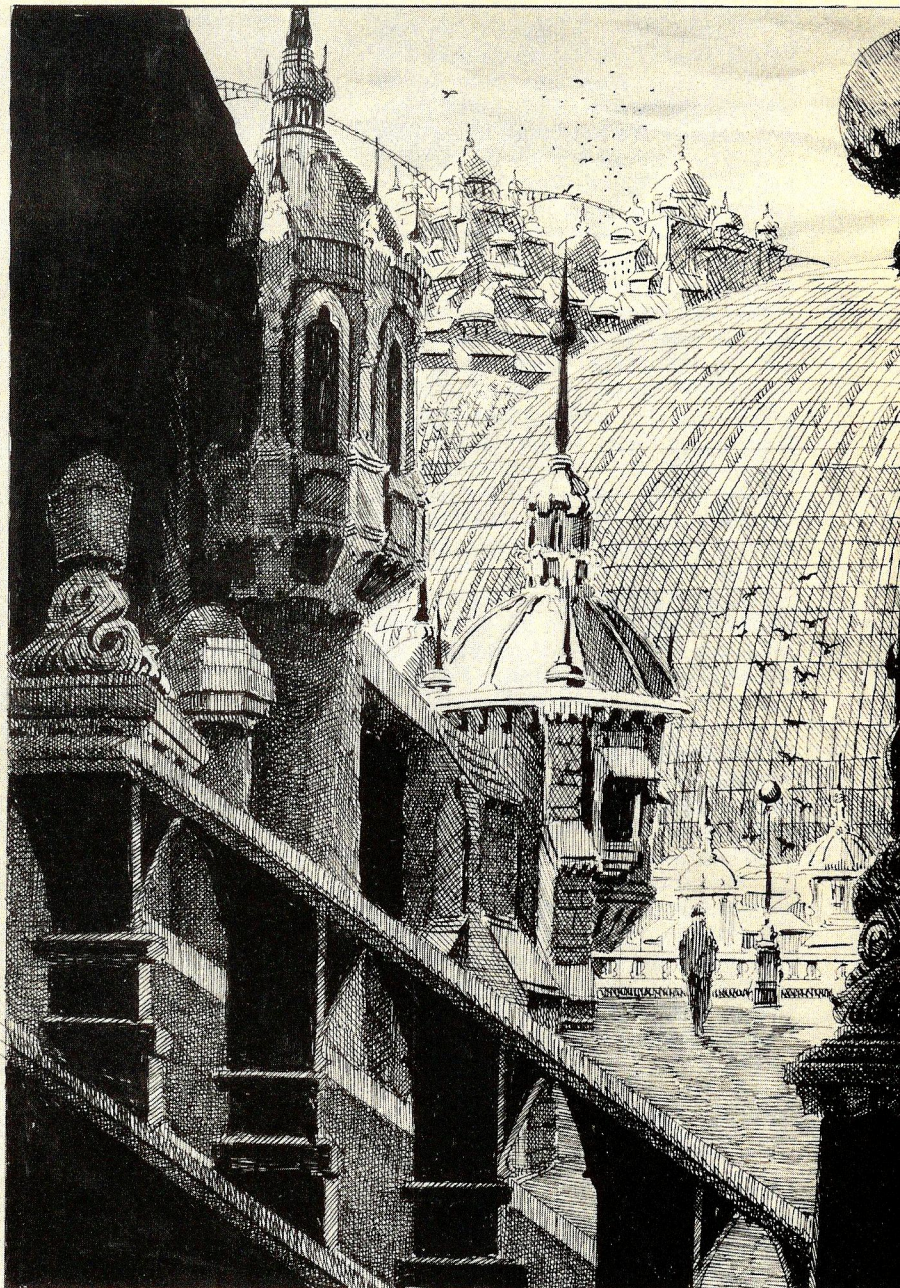
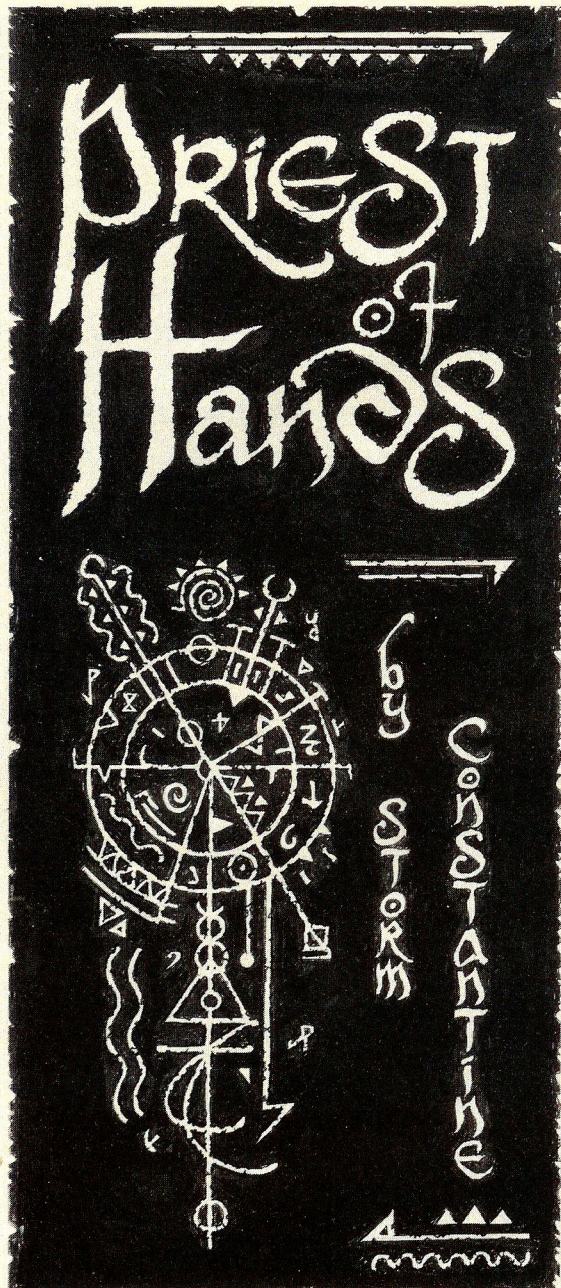
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The flying city is unthinkable ancient. As its tidal shadow dapples the land beneath in a groping, amoebic procession, the city too is always reshaping. As an idea, it is pursued by diverse minds. As a form, it is burgeoning with diverse bodies; inhabitant and visitors. Ground-dwellers cluster like abscesses on the hempen ladders hanging down like entrails from the city's belly. Many make the climb. What they find in the city depends entirely on what they have recognized within themselves. Some see only the weaponry – long abandoned – and they speculate. Some see the maps on alleyway walls; the maps don't tell them where they are, but simply indicate somewhere for them to go to. Some gravitate to the humid forest that flourishes beneath a range of glass domes. Hidden among the trees, there is a lake. It has flooded only once; during a storm, when the highest panes of the domes shattered. Market stalls surround the forest in a hectic ring. The hub of hot leaves and noise and animal smells is surrounded by wide radials, slanting upwards, away from the city

centre. These are the avenues of commerce, lined by businesses; some with buildings of their own, some without. The avenues are crossed by a warren of narrower streets; the habitat of performance, ideas, experiences and knowledge. The higher the street, the loftier and more abstract its creativity. On the next tier up, the family homes and civic buildings are to be found. The highest building is lair to an unconscious militia of social valuers, and from here a soul might rise to the stars, into dreams. Wide-winged birds soar frenziedly around this building – indistinct scraps of white among the rusting iron scaffolding – as though startled by a threatening sound. The only sound that startles anyone in this city, however, is the whirr and chirring of the birds.

Within a tiny room of one of the dwellings, halfway up the second tier of the city, the glimmering light of tiny floor-lamps blossoms gently around the silhouettes of two people; one a young priest, kneeling; one a dead man, flat on his back. The priest is tired – his shoulders are slumped. He has been working hard.



Whenver the priest concludes a piece of work, he is often asked a question by a disembodied voice in his memory, someone who never really asked that question, of whom he cannot gather up the pieces and recognize. The voice is too close, as if a whispering mouth is pressed up to his ear. He can almost remember the warmth of breath pouring along the nape of his neck, and a fragrance of birdwine in the air.

"What do you get from this?" The question seems to assume he has to have some kind of intense motivation, or be party to an agreement. His lips echo the question but he never has an answer.

The job done, the question done, he packs away his trappings; neatly and without haste. He turns off the music maker, hanging on the wavy pound of the skin-bell, the delicate rapid chime and hum, as it fades on the memory of a harmonic. He picks up the sleepy-jar that contains a blue powder as light as dust, as fibrous as thick hair that has been finely diced. The music-maker and jar go into the bag he hangs over his shoul-

der. Then the rest of his equipment goes into a silk scarf; plain black with a fringe. These things are a glove made out of fur and a glove made out of snakeskin. The snakeskin is always wearing thin; its scales shed themselves too quickly. He is always having to order a new one, because people like that glove a lot. He leaves the tiny lamps behind; a gift, for remembrance. The scarf is stuffed into a pocket of his trousers. Tidied, and ready to leave, he then draws the sheet up over the body on the bed. The dead face is usually smiling.

Relatives and loved ones tend to sidle into the room some minutes after his music has faded to the silence of death. "May we give you something?" they ask, through white lips. Their eyes are reddened, but from the effects of intoxicants rather than grief. They will contain their grief until he goes away. The relatives often want to give him some kind of payment, as if to appease the limbs and fingers of the Death Woman, keep her far from their doors for a while.

He smiles at them gently when they ask him this.

"Not now," he says, reaching out to touch an arm, a shoulder. Then, he walks out of the house. He is never part of the mourning process. His name is Ays. He is seventeen years old, he is a Priest of Hands, and he lives in a city named Min; a city that always flies.

What does he get out of this? Sometimes, Ays asks himself that question again as he saunters back to his own community, in the honeycomb warren near the Temple itself. That he should receive some kind of gratification seems absurd. A job is a job. Each to their own crack in the stone. Death does not frighten him, of course; perhaps that is one of the rewards. Nobody has to pay for his services because the talents of Temple priests and priestesses are part of the community amenities.

Ays has been indentured to the Temple all his life. He does not know who his parents are, but likes to believe they were city-hoppers who, having stayed in Min for a while, had fulfilled their fiscal obligations by delivering a child to public service. Not many people who have been born in Min ever abandon it, because they would miss the sensation of flight. They know that relocating to a passing ground city would leave them feeling empty. Sometimes, nagged by the receding effects of the drug in his blood, Ays has experienced an urge to travel, but it is always slight. He and Min are part of each other; its wood, clay and iron seem like his own flesh in another form: his sensory organs are extensions of the city's heart: his work is a manifestation of nurturing concern for its inhabitants. He believes that to be apart from Min would be like dying for him, and no gloves of fur and snakeskin could stroke away the pain.

Ays lives on the second tier of Min and his chain of narrow rooms snakes rockwards towards the city's warm heart. The main room, in which he relaxes, eats and entertains friends, is at the front of the chain, and has round windows that let in a clear natural light. His kitchen area is small, a curtained niche in the main room, but also boasts a window. His bedroom and bathroom, further back, are lit by gas lamps; he never lets the lights go out. The walls of these rooms are of rough-cut rock, the porous morphacite of which Min is constructed. Ays has hung coloured rugs on his walls, except for the one where a pale and sparkling vein of thremite runs through the rock. This, he has lit to best effect. At night, when the lamps are low and starlight comes like a spear through the window, the vein of thremite seems to move. Ays likes to watch it with half-closed eyes.

Back in his own setting, he removes his pale ritual clothing, and dresses himself more comfortably. Not that his uniform is uncomfortable in itself, but he would feel odd doing mundane things while wearing it; not sacrilegious or heretical, just insignificant, as though he wasn't really there at all.

There might be messages waiting in the shute of his auroscope; news of another commission, a few words from a friend. The shute is connected to the city network, a tangle of tubes through which the voices of the people whisper and hum, relayed by the passeteers, invisible presences stationed in hanging cubbies along the network. A system of mirrors relays the image of the caller, but the voice is never theirs;

they are a gesturing ghost ahead of their stolen words.

Ays keeps his auroscope mirror in his living space, balanced in a long-legged dish. Other people fix theirs to the wall for safety, but Ays likes to see it standing there, poised on the edge of destruction. Light from the window comes in behind it, entering the silvered scales that make up its deceptively smooth surface. It directs splayed beams of light into the room, which look as if they are searching for something hidden within the walls that Ays has never found. If there are no messages in the shute, he blows into the tube hanging down from the wall, to open a passage to the Temple. "All finished," he says to whichever Brother or Sister appears in the mirror, half obscured by a disjointed window view.

"Another commission just came in. Can you take it?" they might say, or "Nothing else for you today."

If there is no further work, He always says, "Not yet."

And the Brother or Sister might smile thinly. "It is, of course, impossible to predict... We'll call you."

"Till then." His communication finished, he closes the tube to break the connection and flicks the mirror with his nails to tilt it around a little. He doesn't want any bored passeteer spying on his privacy. After this, he goes to wash his hands. He takes his snakeskin glove out of its wrap and holds it up to the light for inspection. Sometimes, if it has reached that state where it is as transparent as a soul, he tosses it into the waste channel straight away, (where small scavenging mammals will drag it off for tidy consumption), and orders another. "Skin me a snake," he says to the auroscope. It usually arrives within an hour, delivered by shute.

Min flies low over the yellow land, and Ays is out walking after his work is done. Above his head, the city is an abstract pattern of angular metal skeletons, clutching at gentler wooden shapes, that look like the silhouettes of vast mechanical devices. The high buildings are all connected by a branching network of covered bridgeways that hang their shadows over the lesser roofs of stone and clay below. Winds whistle in the suspension ropes overhead as he walks the narrow streets. The skyline ahead is dominated by a cluster of huddling glass domes, around which a mass of birds are soaring and diving. Among the ragged flocks, cagekites bob and dip. They are the skycraft of small, agile children who, windblasted with nets, are poised to capture the birds.

Ays strolls down a steep rampway, out of the natural light, into the intestinal stone labyrinths of the inner and under city. He is fond of walking there, following the rise and fall of the circling paths. He descends a throat-like tunnel of orange light that leads him out into one of the cold, blue-white crystal chambers, where Min's water is stored. Towering, pale ranks of moist, fleshy fungus grow quickly in the breathing dark amidst the patter of scurrying claws. Despite the whispers of furtive activity in the shadow, Ays finds these chambers very tranquil, and he has need of tranquillity today. He cannot dispel the image of a young boy he had to visit earlier. The boy was only fifteen years old, his sickness pernicious. Ays has had to burn both of his gloves. Still, his work was necessary. The boy would have died whether Ays had

visited him or not and had at least been eased into death in the proper manner. Ays tells himself this calmly, several times, but it's difficult to dispel a nagging uneasiness. After a few moments' quiet meditation, he leaves the Heartplace of the city and directs his steps rimward.

Ays is often drawn irresistibly to the city's rim, where he can watch the dark shadow of Min crawl hungrily over the ground beneath. The rim has its own community. Some people sit along the rails, telling stories to the passersby; others paint or write, inspired by the vertiginous view, while others merely stand against the rail, staring silently at the ground below. Ays has his own rim ritual. People know who he is and allow him a few moment's solitary privacy when he arrives. Eventually, when they judge the time is right, the rim-watchers – young and old alike – come to lean against the rail beside him. They might share their food with him, if they have any with them, and then ask him jaunty questions about his work, even though they know he is honour-bound not to answer them. Ays remembers their faces; he likes their company.

As he mounts the wide worn steps that lead to the observation rails, he becomes aware of a strange, fluttery feeling in his belly. At first, he thinks this must be yet another unwelcome reaction to his most recent work. Then, just as he has found a comfortable space for himself along the rail, the youngest rim-watchers all start jumping around, pointing out over the rim. Ays recognizes the disturbance in his body for what it is: precognition of displacement.

He squints his eyes against the blood-and-daffodil light of the sinking sun, and can see that, down below, one of the ambulatory ground cities has become static, a diamond-shaped leviathan, balanced on its apex. It has been travelling along a deep valley between softly undulating hills that are misted with lavender flowers and dark green shrubs. Steaming waste fluids are splattering down from the motionless city's pipe-coiled underbelly, puddling in the torn and muddied earth. People can be seen slipping down rope ladders hanging from beneath the city; others are already scurrying around in the valley, gathering whatever plants and animals they can find before their city recommences its lumbering journey. Ays peers through one of the many public telescopes situated along the rail, and notices a cluster of brown canopies on the slope of one of the hills that advertise the presence of a terranaut camp. Terranauts are a secretive, nomadic race, who cause the cities to move by planting lines of crystalline pilot-stones in the ground, which the cities are mysteriously compelled to follow. By arranging the stones in a significant pattern, the terranauts can also cause the cities to halt. The mysteries of the pilot-stones are guarded fiercely, so that only the terranauts understand how and why the cities obey the stones' invisible power.

Ays can see that there is a thick ring of pilot-stones around the city beneath, which has clearly caused the stoppage. As he scans the landscape with his telescope, Min is drawn towards the panting city beneath and hovers over it, smothering the distant streets and towers with its shadow. Min has no option but to pause for a while as well. Everyone that Ays knows takes these conditions for granted, even though, when

the cities stop moving, strange things can happen. Displacements occur – distortions of things, time, or people. Some people think that during a displacement terranauts travel unseen between the cities, but no one knows for sure. A few Minnians, like Ays, have the ability to predict displacements, rather as others can predict the coming of storms. The Temple is pleased Ays has this ability; it is as a much part of the regalia of his work as the music box, the jar of blue and gloves.

Ays returns home to await the displacement. As usual, he sits down in a chair to prepare himself for it. He feels the tug when it comes, a crystalline gurgling in the flesh – it is the only way he can describe it to himself. It reminds him of the thremite; he feels like a vein of brightness in starlight. Afterwards, just a few moments later, Ays blinks, and finds the shade over the gas lamp opposite is now in the shape of a glass lizard. Before, it was a simple globe. He approves of this change. The furniture has altered its colour slightly, but has undergone no drastic modifications. The rugs beneath his feet feel a little softer perhaps, and the quality of the light is different; faintly pink.

In the bathroom, it is a different story. The bath is full of baby lemurs, a softly undulating foam of fur. Ays smiles and puts his fingers against his mouth, wondering whether he should strip off his clothes and climb in among them. A bath of fur might feel quite agreeable.

He ponders, quite wistfully, how he would feel if one day, after a displacement, his bath was full of terranaut; a lean, young male with long, black hair. Ays is intrigued by terranauts, even though he has never seen one close to.

During his meal, the auroscope chimes, not only to advertise the arrival of a new glove through the shute, but also to indicate an incoming call from the Temple. He flicks the mirror into position and uncaps the tube, taking his new glove from the delivery slot as he does so. He is not annoyed at being disturbed. The very nature of his work means that his days can never be planned.

"Here," he says to the Sister in the mirror.

"Brother Ays, a commission," she answers, her mouth moving ahead of the words. On this occasion, the paseteer speaking is male.

"Location?"

"A transient's hostel... Thoroughfare Steep Steps. The hostel is called Resting on the Hop."

"Oh." Ays raises his brows at her image, to show her that more information is required. "A transient? That's unusual."

"They came in with the displacement."

This is more unusual than Ays thought. "What, climbed up to us?"

The Sister shakes her head. "From the report of their condition, it would seem unlikely. We can only assume they were caught in the displacement unwittingly and transferred here, perhaps from the city we're over. I expect it's a traveller."

Ays walks around to face the mirror squarely, trying on his new glove for size. "And they're dying? How odd!"

The Sister nods. "An unexpected failing, true, but

the hostel patron feels that we should offer his guest all of the city services, yours included."

Ays looks at his fingers in their new snakeskin glove and flexes them slightly, watching the scales glimmer. "I'll go right there," he says. "Oh, I need food for tonight. Any chance of a shrine slipping out for me? Seeing as I'm working..."

When the message reaches her, the Sister raises her eyes for a moment, manifesting wry patience. This is not an uncommon request from Ays. He makes no secret of the fact that he is impatient with the market. Lesser minions can shop for him; he is a prestigious person, after all.

"Leave a list out," says the Sister, "and the wafers. I'll see what I can do."

Ays blows a kiss at her image to show appreciation. "Blessings, Sister."

The Sister shakes her head, smiling. "I hope it will be some time before I need your blessings, Brother."

So does Ays. He quite likes her.

Evening is coming down. Ays puts on a thick coat of hempweave before going outside, because there is a chill breeze squirming through the streets of Min. He puts as many of the baby lemurs as he can comfortably carry into a large embroidered bag, which he carries over his shoulder. Mounting the steps to the third tier, he pauses for a moment to let the wind snag his hair and gazes out towards the rim and the dark horizon. Min has moved on. There are no cities near, no sign of life at all, other than a few root bladders, half deflated and empty of passengers, drifting on the air currents to a final, distant landing and decay.

Ays feels excited and intrigued by this new commission. Wanderers, travellers, transients – whatever name they are known by – are always mentally abnormal in some way, because as the cities themselves travel constantly, to leave home for a while and find your way back again is a difficult task. If being unconcerned about that isn't abnormal, what is? Generally, transients are individuals following bizarre and esoteric quests that most people could not even begin to understand, never mind be sympathetic towards. They have forgotten their homes, their origins, and even if they haven't, are ignorant of where their homes might actually be. Some are mystics – a category Ays prefers to think his own parents must belong to – and some have important, but mysterious, purposes. Terranauts, of course, are eternal wanderers, like the cities they lead, but no-one thinks of them as abnormal. However, barring unforeseen accidents, visitors to Min rarely need the attentions of the Temple. Transients who are ill generally migrate instinctively towards the special sanatoriums where they can be properly cared for. If they are lucky, their feet will lead them to a suitable place before it is too late. These sanatoriums are found in ground cities having a reputation for inordinately frequent displacements. Quite often, after a displacement, a person might find they are no longer ill. True, it is also possible for such people to disappear completely from their current location's reality, but most invalids think this is a slight risk worth taking. Ays thinks his new commission must involve someone who has fallen sick unawares, or perhaps he'll find they are one of those

extreme crazies who simply doesn't care what happens to them. He also considers that it might be possible he'll have a real live terranaut on his hands. Do terranauts ever have accidents, he wonders.

Resting on the Hop, a narrow wafer of stone, nestles between two more imposing hostelries whose facades are clay-scaped with concealed amenity-pipes. As a contrast, the Hop's wall is braided, almost carelessly, with rubbery heat conduits that sprout from the pavement, breathing the warmth of Min's heart to the water tanks and cosy-stones of the inn.

Inside, the proprietor is waiting for him, and after a formal greeting, offers him a biscuit and a mug of curds to augment his strength. Ays' stomach is already full, but he respects the ritual and takes a single bite and a single sip. He offers the man the baby lemurs, for which he is grateful. All of his mantises have disappeared with the displacement.

"How urgently is my attention required here?" Ays asks.

The man frowns. He doesn't know. "Retching," he replies and makes a harried gesture with his hands. "Blood. Foam. Refuses a physick. Says no-one can help."

"I see. Perhaps you had better introduce me right away."

The proprietor nods and precedes Ays into a shadowy, upward-sloping passageway. Lighted bowls of oil set into the wall do very little to dispel the gloom, but the atmosphere is oddly homely.

"Came in with the displacement, I've heard..." Ays says to the broad back ahead of him.

The proprietor grunts an affirmative. "Found on the street outside. No currency and no indication of a name."

"The sickness could be infectious," Ays says, a slight note of censure in his voice. The inn really should have called in a physick, whatever protests had been made.

"No, the rats were already trying to get at the meat. They know whether flesh is bad or not."

Ays cannot contest that. "Are you sure he's dying?" He has to ask.

The man turns round. "He? It's a woman. As to the rest, you'll see."

The proprietor takes Ays into a room that is hardly more than a cell, and was perhaps once a bone-cupboard, but it is warm and the oil-bowl is freshly fragranced. The bed is extremely narrow, because of the confined space, but the sheets are glaring white and the downy-sack plump. Within it lies a dying woman, her breath liquid in her chest, her face yellow and damp. Ays has not come too soon, it seems. He becomes aware of the proprietor standing just behind him in the doorway, the man's deliberate silence. He is hoping Ays will forget he is there, because he wants to watch the priest at work. People always want to watch. Ays has no personal aversion to this, yet somehow feels instinctively that his work should remain secret, like the moment beyond death itself. He looks over his shoulder at the spectator until he closes the door and goes away. Then, he unpacks his equipment.

He opens the lid of the music maker and a thin sound comes out like a question. He puts it on the

floor. He takes out the sleepy-jar, the picture on its lid long worn away. When the lid comes off, a thick scent spills out into the room and he pokes his fingers into the swirling blue dust within. Next, he unwraps his gloves. Snakeskin for immortality, of the soul, the essence, the invisible bird of spirit. Snakeskin for the place beyond life. Fur for protection by winter beasts, earthy reality; the luxury of fur, its sensuality. Ays knows his symbols. He puts some of the sleepy mix inside a sticky tissue, and rolls it into a narrow cylinder, which he lights with a flare-pin. He takes the first lungful of smoke, sucking it down into his body, closing his eyes, visualizing the silvery-purple haze sinking into his blood. The effect is instantaneous; the world flexes around him. The thin sound from the music-maker becomes briefly strident; an insect din. Expelling smoke through his nose, he draws on his glove of fur, over the fingers of his left hand.

"I am Ays," he says to the woman lying on the bed. Her eyes are closed, her face expressing no pain, although fluid leaks between her lax, yet bitten, lips. For a brief moment, Ays wonders whether she is already dead and reaches out to touch her with his ungloved hand. She looks at him. The eyes are surprisingly clear. What is she dying of?

"I am from the Temple of Mother Darkness," he says.

"They sent for you." Her face is that of a mature woman, perhaps someone fifteen years older than himself, but the voice is young. Ays feels as if, even though he is staring right at her, he cannot exactly see her. What does she look like? He does not know. He only hears her voice.

"Yes," he answers. "I am here to travel with you for a while."

She sighs and her mouth smiles. "Then I must be dying."

Ays squats down beside the bed. He can see she is looking at his gloved hand. "What is your sickness?" he asks.

The woman screws up her eyes. "It is... a fading," she says, in a soft voice, and then a flicker of panic twists in her eyes. "Where am I? Why am I here? What is this place?"

"Hush," he says, putting his ungloved hand on her shoulder. He can feel, he thinks, a fever heat. "You are in the flying city of Min. Are you a traveller?"

"I don't want to die in an unknown place," she says. "I don't want to die at all."

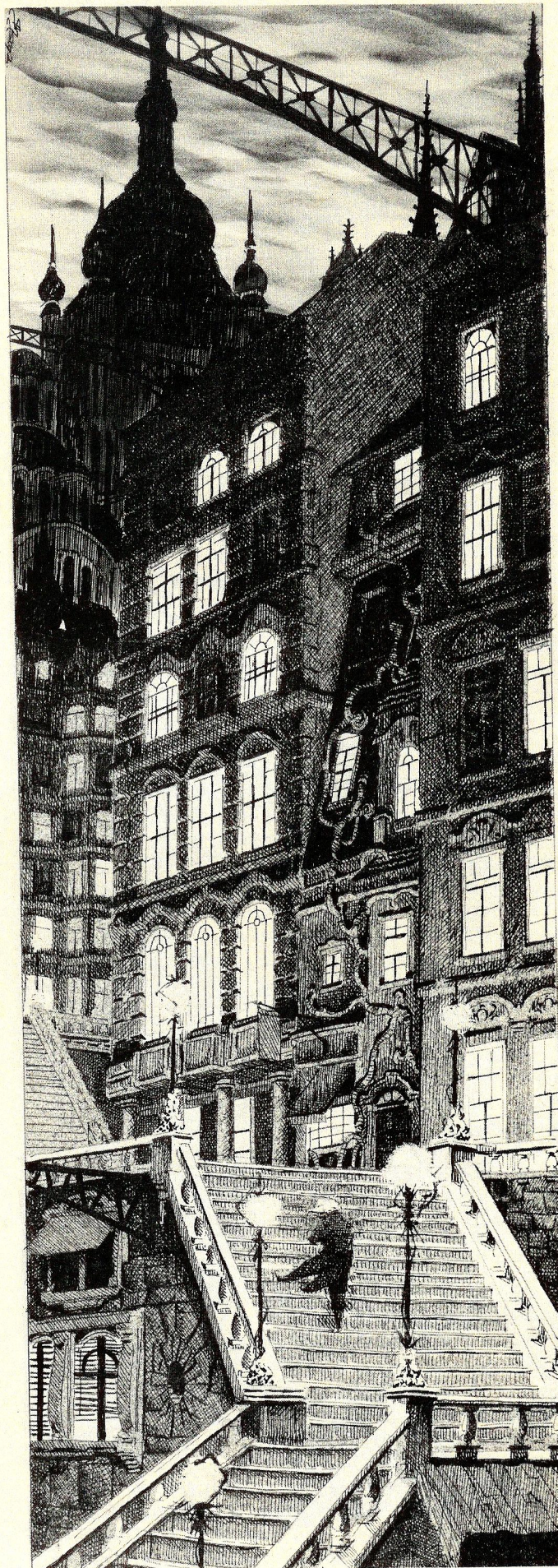
"That is why I am here," he murmurs gently, "to help you die. That is my function. I soothe away the terrors of it."

The woman laughs weakly. "You cannot do that. I am a stranger."

"It makes no difference," he says. "Lie back. Be still."

He draws the downy-sack away from her. Beneath it, her thin, damp body has been dressed in a clean, woollen nightshirt, which he guesses has been donated by the Hop's proprietor. As is the custom, the body has been bathed and oiled, ready for his attention. The dying woman's hair has been tied neatly back behind her head. As a priest, he is not to be bothered with such sordid tasks.

Before he touches her further, he offers her the burning sleepy-mix. She stares at it for a moment, forcing



him to say, "Go on." Then, she smiles and takes it from his hand with thin, shaking fingers. With some clients, he has to put the smoke stick in their mouths himself, they are so far gone, but not with this one. She screws up her eyes as she inhales. She inhales very deeply, almost with gusto.

"You are kind," she says. "You cannot imagine how thankful I am for this."

An unusual remark. "Part of it," he says. "That's all." He gently pulls the smoke stick from her mouth. "Not too much. Not yet."

"You are a beautiful boy," she says. People often say that. He smiles.

"Part of it, that's all," he says.

She lies back, blinking, and he presses the glove of fur against her belly. It will feel like a cat rolling over and over. His animal hand traces the line of ribs, the hollow, the torso's throat, beneath them, the rippling landscape of stomach and loins.

"A city that flies," she says. "Yes, I have heard of it."

"Mmm," he says, "be still." It is uncommon for them to want to talk. He does not like them talking.

"There are stories too of the Sisters of Midnight who live there," she says, ignoring him. "Those that come with the hands of a beast, a snake, to lift the spirits from the weak."

It is time to give her more sleepy-mix, clearly. She takes the smoke from him; her eyes are dark now, the darkness of midnight. She watches him as he strokes her, as he strokes her further away from life. He is full of a sleepy haze. He is a body of smoke. The music maker hums upon the floor, curtains at the tiny window tremble in a breeze and he is empowered by the stillness of his art, called up from the core of him. He sways, lets his hair fall upon her, stroking away her life. Listen to me, beloved, listen to the rhythm of my blood, my calling.

It is time for the glove of snakeskin.

The moment is stillness itself, as he peels away the glove of fur. It falls to the floor; a beast sucked of life. A skin without quickening. His left hand squirms into the scales, and the air is full of curling smoke. She is watching him, watching him, the essence of her condensed into her eyes.

As he touches her lightly with his fingers, she makes an unexpected sound. It is a crystal sound that cracks across the sound of breath, of the music, of the infinitesimal hiss of the smoke.

It is the sound of laughter.

Ays feels as if he is made of glass, some brittle substance, and her laughter cracks him. He feels the power of his skill drain out from his body, out like a thin, rancid liquor, down through the cracks in the floor.

He cannot even ask a question.

"I am sorry," she says.

Sorry? Sorry?! She speaks! She should not speak. He realizes he can no longer work; she has made him a thing of comedy, of bathos. The snakeskin glove is resting on her belly. When he looks at it, he has to snatch his hand away, because he cannot bear to see it lying there. It looks ridiculous.

He sees her glance at the smoking stick where it rests against the lid of the tin, its glowing tip held away from the floor. "The herb of Mara Hela," she says, with some reverence. "I should have known I

should have known I squeezed out into reality here for a reason. My god self must have been with me, if not my thinking mind."

"Who are you?" Ays asks sharply. She knows. She is a terranaut; she must be. Lean and dark, long black hair, talking of bizarre ways of travel. She does not look so haggard now. Perhaps this is the realization of his dreams. He had not expected it to manifest as female though.

The woman puts her arms behind her head and smiles at him, but she does not answer his question. From her mocking expression Ays has to accept that she is no dream creature of his. "The herb is fatally toxic, but of course you know that, don't you? And the little helping hands of Mother Darkness train themselves to resist its effects. They are addicts. You are an addict. How quaint."

Ays is shattered. Doesn't she know that? What is this creature? Why is she doing this? Why isn't she dying, as she should be, held in the arms of Hela's cloud? How is she different from other people?

"You were never ill," he says.

Now he is angry. Somehow, the anger helps restore his dignity. He stands up, kicks the music-maker with his left foot, stops it singing. He scrunches up the gloves and roughly stuffs them into his pocket along with the black silk scarf. He takes the smoking stick and sucks from it himself. The effects are no longer tranquilizing and dreamy, but disorientating. He feels sick and dizzy, but he won't give any more of it to her.

"Are you a terranaut?" he asks her. The question seems silly, as if he'd asked her whether she was a ghost.

She grins. "I'm a traveller," she says. "I have knowledge which enables me to move around in ways you'd find unusual, I suppose."

"What knowledge?"

"Secret."

"Are you a priestess?"

"No."

Ays cannot contain his humiliation. "You let me work on you! You weren't dying! You mocked me!" He feels absurdly violated.

She shakes her head. "No. I was dying. Really. I am a toxicate. The most unlikely events stranded me in a no-city place. There was no sustenance in that wilderness, no Hela. Only death, because I need Hela to live - like you do."

Ays stares at her. This cannot be true. The smoking mix is the secret of the Temple of Mother Darkness. Its herb grows only in the garden of the outer shrines. This is impossible. "You are lying," he says. "The herb only grows in Min. It was created here."

She shakes her head slowly, still smiling. "No," she says. "Before Min flew, it must have taken its herb stock from the ground below. There is a place, pretty Ays, called the Womb of Hela, where the herbs grow high. I lived in that place and thought I learned to control the bitter lady. Now, she controls me, but life can be sweet in her kingdom."

What she says might well be true. Ays has no way of proving it, one way or the other. He realizes he might as well give her more of the smoke. She is not going to pass from this world today, that is certain. As she inhales, he wonders what he should do now.

This is unprecedented in Min. No one survives a visit from the Priest of Hands; no one. Ays almost suspects she's manipulated the displacement to reach here deliberately, but that too is impossible. No one can manipulate the displacement; it is all random. No one except a terranaut perhaps.

He narrows his eyes at her. "So, what's your name?" "Eleanore," she says, around a circle of smoke.

Later, as he has no other option because, by surviving his attentions, she has surrendered her soul into his care, he takes her away from the hostel with him. The inn people are afraid of her; she has conquered death, in their eyes.

Back in his rooms, Ays gives Eleanore a pallet on the floor as a bed. The remaining baby lemurs have taken over in his absence, stealing what was left of his food, blinking, round-eyed from behind the furniture. "Stay there," Ays says to Eleanore, pointing at the pallet. It feels as if he has yet another animal to stay. Like a slim, elegant dog, Eleanore curls obliquely into a posture of meditation and then watches him unblinkingly as he calls the Temple. Will they help him? No. Are they embarrassed by this exemplary failure? No. They are simply not interested. It is his problem, they say, and the mirror goes dull before he can protest. He is rudely reminded of the freelance nature of his work.

Eleanore makes his home feel small and self-conscious, although she is happy to sit on the pallet and smoke her way through the contents of his sleepy-jar, while playing with the lemurs. She is a wiry, strong-looking creature, swathed in a veil of thick black hair, which she shakes about often. The Temple, avoiding confrontation, does not balk at Ays' terse order for extra supplies of currency wafers and Hela. He sends them a dozen lemurs in return.

Eleanore will not answer questions with any sense, and sometimes pretends to have lost her memory. She has been with Ays for a whole day and he cannot sleep with her so close. No woman has ever slept in his home-space. He suggests she might like to be lowered to the ground in a passenger basket to resume her travels. She frowns and does not answer. What can he do? She is his responsibility now. She has attached herself to him like an infection. Surviving the call of Mother Darkness, she has become part of him, the Mother's erring son. Ays knows this and it does not please him at all. The extent of his displeasure is illustrated by his sense of relief when the unavoidable inventorian comes to call.

Madam Abey is accompanied by a pillar of ledgers, which are held together by a leather strap and transported upon the head of an acolyte. She carries a rolled bundle of parchment charts beneath her arm.

"A miracle..." she begins, as Ays lets her in and indicates his guest.

"Not a miracle," Ays replies, "but *that*. I suppose you have an interest."

The inventorian nods and minces up to inspect the exotic specimen Ays has acquired. She is a grand figure, in elaborate robes of green and yellow linen. Eleanore watches her blandly. Ays realizes she is not like a dog at all. "I am Hagar Abey," the inventorian



announces, as if the name should mean something to Eleanore. Eleanore smiles but does not speak. Madam Abey turns to Ays. "We have consulted the records," she says, in a lowered voice, "and there is no information to compare with this."

"I am not surprised."

Madam Abey snaps an order at her acolyte, who withdraws a notebook and pen from a jacket pocket; very carefully, so as not to upset his cargo. The inventorian puts down her charts on Ays' table, and then, lacing her fingers before her, begins to dictate some notes in a strident voice. She gazes at the ceiling as she pronounces, defining Eleanore as a lean-bodied female, whose eyes and general physique correspond to the celestial house of the Dusk Dancer. Her posture, she supposes, suggests a natal moon position in the house of the Cowled Snake, but she might be mistaken. Reluctantly, Ays concurs with Madam Abey's diagnosis, although his knowledge of the heavens is confined to the public predictions and character listings posted in the markets every three days.

Next, Madam Abey clicks her fingers and her acolyte produces a complex instrument of metal bands, bone vanes and struts, with which his mistress can measure the circumference and diameter of Eleanore's head. She feels Eleanore's skull for reprehensible lumps, signifying psychosis, and prods in her mouth to inspect her teeth. She pulls down Eleanore's eyelids and pinches her cheeks and sweetly-tilted snub nose. Eleanore submits to all of this quite passively, although she refuses to stand up for any more measurements, so Madam Abey is forced to make a shrewd guess.

The inspection over, Madam Abey unrolls her charts, chooses one representing the human body, and marks it with various glyphs, thereby transforming the anonymous chart into a depiction of Ays' unwanted guest. Very soon, it will be filed away in the Inventory and probably never looked at again.

"You have to accept responsibility for this person," Madam Abey says.

Ays sighs. "I have already done so. Haven't you noticed?"

"Tradition dictates that should you save a soul, the soul becomes yours." The Inventorian peers at Ays intently.

Ays shrugs. Eleanore's soul is not a commodity he desires to own particularly. "She was doing something before she came here," he says, "perhaps we should be assisting her to resume that, whatever it was."

"I wasn't doing anything," Eleanore says, speaking for the first time since the inventorian arrived.

Madam Abey gives Ays a significant glance.

"Have some lemurs," Ays says, putting a couple on the acolyte's shoulders.

Madam Abey shakes her head. "I have two bears in my solar that came in with the displacement," she says.

After the inventorian has left, Eleanore asks Ays who the visitor was. It is the first question she has asked him about Min since he brought her home, and he is strangely encouraged by this new development. Perhaps she will also rediscover an interest in her former life if he indulges her. He tries

to explain about Madam Abey, but it is difficult for foreigners to understand the Inventory and its minions. It doesn't really have a function; it just is. The inventorians are always hurrying around collecting information. Ays tells Eleanore they are like lice, or fleas, but he thinks this conveys the wrong picture.

"Min is lunatic," she decides. "It was founded by lunatics."

She is quite wrong; so much so, Ays has to sit down and talk to her about it. "No, Min was built by a coven of philosophers," he says. "They wanted to withdraw from the world and see the world at the same time. It's quite simple. They were astrologers too and over the years they evolved into the Inventory."

"And where did you evolve from?" she asks, grinning.

"Well, people came in with the displacements, I expect, or else mystics just came visiting. The city was called something different in the beginning."

"And what will happen to you when your crazy city falls from the sky?"

Ays stands up. "It will never fall from the sky!" he says. "Are you really so stupid?" When he's not actually working, he has difficulty being patient and tolerant with people.

"So how do you think it stays up, then?" she asks, taking a generous pinch from his sadly-depleted sleepy-jar and rolling it into a smoking stick.

Ays has the impression she is attempting to mock him; she with her smoke-scrawled grin and Dusk Dancer eyes. "If you know anything at all, you will realize that only the terranauts really know the answer to that," he says. It is very difficult to keep his voice pliable; it sounds as stiff as his clenched jaws.

Ays can't take Eleanore with him when he's working, but neither does he feel comfortable about leaving her alone in his rooms. Compromising, he decides she can sit with the relatives of any clients he visits. This is not very kind of him, he knows, because Eleanore has a tendency to stare at people too long; a habit which might be a prickly deterrent to spontaneous grief. Perhaps someone will complain about her to the Temple, thereby forcing them to acknowledge his problem. He does not feel particularly desperate, only rather stunned. How can his life ever settle itself with this large Eleanore-shaped absurdity in it?

They are walking to Ays' first commission since Eleanore intruded into his life. She seems to be taking an interest in Min, as Ays feels she should, because to him it is a very interesting place.

"Where do you get your water from?" she asks. "Do you lower a vast appendage to the ground below and suck from the lakes?"

"No, we take water from the clouds," he tells her. "There is a reservoir within the city and when there are clouds in the sky, we fly up to milk them of moisture."

"And you trawl the sky for seeds with enormous nets, no doubt, for food," she says.

"We have hanging gardens," he says. "And farms within the heart itself where fungus grows."

"Such an efficient community!"

"Here is the house where I have to work," he says, wishing Eleanore did not grate on his nerves so much.

The family are surprised by Ays' companion. He does not attempt to explain her presence but simply tells them she will be sitting with them while he works. Eleanore cheerfully makes herself at home in the most comfortable chair and announces, "Death! Who needs it?!" She rolls her eyes and tosses her head; the family do not respond, but they glance at Ays anxiously. He makes a careless gesture with his hands. Perhaps they will think Eleanore is part of some new ritual being tested by the Temple.

A mature woman leads Ays to the room of his client, where the air is hot and stale with sickness. He finds an ancient male, withered and yellow, quite worn out with life, who is calmly ready to die. It soothes him to work. He can forget his dilemmas in the haze of Hela, performing so brilliantly that the old dog's flame is extinguished, not with the habitual sigh or faint gurgle, but with a loud and ecstatic whimper. Ays hears the relatives gasp outside the door. Then there is another sound: laughter. Eleanore is laughing – loudly and without restraint. Ays cannot bear to look at the dead face on the bed and throws the sheet over it hastily.

There is no offer of gifts, not even a question about his work. The family are glad to see him leave the house. They do not even thank him for the lemurs he has given them.

So begins the undermining of Ays' vocation. When he mentions to Eleanore that laughter is perhaps inappropriate in the presence of the dead, she only shrugs. "I have to bring you with me on commissions," he says, "so at least have the courtesy to contain your offensive mirth."

"You don't have to bring me," she says. "I could stay in the cave." She always refers to his home as a cave.

"No, you can't," he says.

"Why?"

"You just can't."

She pulls a face. "Oh, well."

The next time he is working, Eleanore whistles a tune between her teeth in the adjoining room. Ays is astounded at how loud and piercing a whistle can be. It is a sound quite at variance with the haunting serenade of his music-maker. The grieving wife is plainly angry at Eleanore's intrusion. Ays attempts to explain, but the woman's face is stone, her mouth a thin crack. It is obviously better just to leave quickly.

"No laughter, no whistling!" he says to Eleanore as they walk back home. "No harsh noises at all. I mean it! Or else..."

"Or else what?" she asks, striding jauntily along beside him, a smoke-stick hanging from the corner of her mouth. She is about an inch or two taller than him.

Inspired, Ays takes his sleepy-jar out of his bag. "You don't want to know," he says and shakes the jar under her nose. The message sinks through her blithe mood.

"Oh, I see. No harsh noises," she says.

Feeling somewhat less anxious, Ays takes Eleanore without qualm to his next commission. Now, he has the edge over her. She will fear him withholding the sleepy-mix. He feels almost warm towards her as she sits herself cross-legged on the floor and adopts a pious pose. The family will think she is augmenting

his work through performing some serious contemplation. He should have known better. Just as he is changing gloves, a reverberant hum vibrates through the house. It is a sonorous meditation mantra, resonated so well it sets his teeth on edge. He has little doubt that the teeth of the resident family are similarly discomfited. He dare not imagine their accompanying mood. Although sacred, the humming is not a suitable sound to accompany the extinction of life.

The first complaint to the temple is made.

"Ays, we humbly request you leave your guest at home when you work."

"Brother, I will not leave her at home. She is unfamiliar with the customs of Min. I am attempting to rectify that."

"Ays, we realize your predicament, but must stress that this transient's place is not at your side while you're working. You must steel yourself to leaving her behind, no matter how attached you are to her."

Attached! How dare they! "I see your point, Brother," he says coldly, "but as you know, this person is now my responsibility. I am concerned she might damage herself if left alone... Perhaps I should leave her at the Temple with you?"

There is a pause, followed by a terse response. "We will adjust your work schedule to accommodate your responsibilities."

Ays' commissions become fewer. All his clients are people who live alone. Consequently, he begins to spend more time at the rim, Eleanore in tow.

"Where do you come from?" he asks her, a nonsense question, but he feels she has a definite origin somewhere; she is not just a feather blown upon the winds of displacement. She is something else.

"I am part of infinity," she says, "like you," and smokes his sleepy-mix.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Just tell me to leave and I will," she says.

She must know he cannot do that. Why can't he? Is it merely superstition? "Do you want to stay here?" he asks her.

She shrugs. He hadn't really expected an answer.

"What do you get out of this weird job of yours?" she asks. "How can you put your hand down the trousers of all those decrepit old goats? It's disgusting!" She is laughing, of course. How dare she insult his art! He does not even bother to answer, but walks away along the rim-rail.

She follows and stands humming behind him; he has turned his back on her. "Look, I have to work," he says, in a low voice, punctuating his words by slapping the rail.

"Why?" she asks.

He is unsure how to answer. Nobody has to work if they don't want to. Min supports everybody. "It's my life," he says, lamely.

"Your life is other peoples' deaths," she says, and laughs.

"Look at it like that if you want to, it's none of your business!"

"Your life is a perversity! And you enjoy it!"

He turns on her then. "I've had enough of your insults! You've barged into my life, you've upset my living pattern and have deeply offended the relatives of my clients! Have you no sense of decency?"

"No," she says, "only of the grotesque. Tell me to fall over the rail of Min, and I will. Why don't you? What is this stupid idea you have that you own my soul, or whatever it is you think?! You're crazy, and I'll stay until you tell me to go. It will do you good. Stupid belief system!" She laughs again and hops up onto the rail, holding out her arms to balance herself. Ays' flesh freezes. She raises one foot and wobbles. "Well, Priest Ays, do you condemn me to death, or not? There are ways to die other than by the smoke of lovely Hela. If you're quick, you could give me a short fondle before I fall."

"Get down!" he screeches, without dignity of any sort. Other rim-walkers are looking at them. He can see astonished faces, and hands clutching throats, out of the corners of his eyes.

"Ah, you don't want me to die, is that it?" she says.

"No, of course I don't want you to die!" It is not exactly the truth, but he is grateful when she jumps back to the walkway.

"Neither do I." She has the audacity to take his arm. "The air in this city of madness is surprisingly good for the soul," she says and inhales deeply. "Break out your sleepy-jar, Ays, it is a time for euphoria!"

He could withhold it from her. He could. But he doesn't.

He feels as if his bones are made of the same stone as the bones of Min. He feels them groaning inside his flesh as if they are being stretched. He is still working—just—but there is something missing now. Something has been taken from him. He's not sure what it is. He keeps hoping he will wake up one day and find Eleanore gone. And yet, her face, which from the first instant he saw it seemed oddly familiar, has become significant in his life, a part of daily routine.

"What do you do with the dead?" she asks him. "When your job is finished? Is there a burial ground in Min?"

"No," he says. "The bodies are wrapped in a membrane of fungus skin and lowered over the side of the city. We believe they sink into the ground. Perhaps they do."

"Or perhaps scavengers take them," Eleanore says. "That can happen, you know. Some people get very hungry, and will eat anything."

"You are absurd!" He should hate her, and has been trying to, but whatever disruption she has caused, he enjoys looking at her expressive face, her long, mobile hands. With so little work, there is plenty of time for him to talk with Eleanore now. She tells him about the cities she has visited, and he can see and smell them through her voice. She is bored with Min; he is sure of it. Her world is far bigger than his. He wonders if she dislikes him. Perhaps she has no feelings at all.

One evening, they are sitting upon a stone bench at the rim, surrounded by wilting telescopes, watching the sunset. Eleanore deftly prepares a smoking-stick as Ays kicks the bench and sniffs the cool, fragrant air. "Don't you see how you encourage death?" Eleanore announces into the comfortable silence.

Ays feels weary, and cannot summon the energy to argue fiercely. "Our ways of dealing with death are civilized," he says. "That's all."

Eleanore lights the smoking-stick. "Oh, yes, very

civilized! So, tell me how you think death works here on Min, then."

Ays shrugs. "People just die, Eleanore, as you nearly did."

"Oh, that was only fear!" she announces airily. "I don't actually believe in death. None of my people do. Of course, intense pain mixed with fear, or fatal injury, would very likely kill me, but that episode in the hostel was simply a ritual, an imitation." She raises one eyebrow and glances at him sideways through a tangle of hair. "Perhaps I might have died if you had not been so beautiful or, even more likely, if you hadn't given me some blue."

"You have unusual beliefs," he says. "Anyway, who are your people?"

Eleanore grins sheepishly. "I'm not supposed to tell, but it has a lot to do with stones."

"Then you are a terranaut! I knew it!" He swiftly attempts to smother his rather joyous expression. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't important."

"Wasn't important?" Ays laughs at that. He realizes Eleanore has bestowed a privilege upon him. It must mean she trusts him. "Don't any of your people die of old age?" he asks.

Eleanore shakes her head. "No. But tedium has claimed a few. As long as we displace ourselves regularly, we stay fairly youthful. In the cities, people convince themselves that one day they will die. Death is a way of preventing overpopulation, I suppose, but we have found that people tend to breed less if they free themselves from their personal death sentences."

Ays frowns. "It can't be as simple as that."

"Well, no, I suppose it isn't," Eleanore agrees. "However, examine your role in Min for a moment. You bring death to those who expect it. Why do they expect death? Because some physick has told them to? Has life itself driven them to desire it, or has someone else been courteous enough to inflict that desire upon them? Whatever the reason, the result is that you are called in. In my eyes, that makes you nothing more than a cold-blooded killer whose activities are sanctioned by the citizens."

"I've never thought about it like that," Ays says. He is listening to her unorthodox ideas simply because she is a terranaut. If she hadn't confessed her identity, he knows he would have been arguing hotly with her by now.

"I don't believe it," Eleanore says gently. "You must have dreamed about the principles behind your work, at least. Anyway, do you expect to die?"

Ays squirms uncomfortably on the bench. "I'm not sure. I can't help feeling different from the people I work for, but then all of us indentured to the Temple feel we are different. We are encouraged to feel that way."

"Is that an answer?"

Ays stands up and rubs his chilly arms. "I don't want to think about it."

Back in Ays' rooms, they sit down to eat their evening meal. Ays feels numb and exhausted. He knows that, in the light of what Eleanore has told him, he should be experiencing slightly more impassioned feelings. His desire to meet a terranaut, now that it has happened, appears to have become

lost within the fog in his mind. He looks up as Eleanore speaks his name.

"What?"

"You look tired," she says.

"I *am* tired. Tired of this situation! I want my life back. I don't feel real."

Eleanore rests her chin in her hands and stares at him steadily for a few moments. "The game was good," she says, "but I'm tiring of it too, now. Tell me, what was it that made you take me in like this? Are you really so dedicated to your beliefs? Do you really think you are responsible for my soul?"

Ays sighs. "No...yes...I don't know."

"I *am* going to leave," she says.

"I thought so." He knows that, despite the disruption she has brought into his life, he will miss having her around. It's as if some opportunity he couldn't recognize has slipped past him like a shadow.

"There is somewhere I have to go," Eleanore says. She puts her hand in her pocket and rolls something onto the table. It is a piece of stone, a strange mineral; it looks burnt and it is veined with a glittering, metallic substance.

"A pilot stone?" Ays asks, amazed. "You have one with you! Surely, that's not allowed!"

Eleanore places her open palm over the stone and rolls it around beneath her hand. "Look, you don't have to believe all the myths associated with my people. As a privilege, and because you are a friend who saved my life, I'll let you into a secret: most of the stories are lies."

She is not laughing. There is not even a hint of a grin on her face. Ays realizes she is serious, for perhaps the first time since he met her. A shiver ripples down his body from head to toe.

Eleanore reaches out and touches his hand. "We could hitch a ride from the next city we pass over. I could fix it so we displace together. We could go anywhere. What do you say?"

"No! Min, my work, my home, the Hela..." She is asking him to go with her. She really is - isn't she?

"The first three are irrelevant. The fourth is easily catered for. I told you it was unusual circumstances that caused me to end up in the middle of nowhere. It was an accident. All I had was this" - she tapped the pilot stone - "and a withdrawal problem. I had to displace blind, from nowhere to somewhere. It wasn't easy. Luck brought me here..." She sighs and smiles in a charming, melting way. "I like you Ays, and I think you'd like me, if I let you get to know me."

"You are an arrogant, conniving nuisance," he says.

She shrugs. "I know, but think of what you could see with me. You don't have to be one of the little people now. You could ride the cities like I do, even slip in and out of a billion universes if you wish. This is a serious offer, Ays, and a rare one. The probability of it being made to a boy like you is unfathomable. Whatever you think of me, consider the opportunity I'm giving you. Wake up."

Wake up? He is a part of Min, a part of the stone. Has Eleanore succeeded in chipping him away from it? He cannot tell. If he goes with her, it will not be for the wonders she can show him. It will be for the eyes of a Dusk Dancer; nothing else.

Before he goes to sleep, he lies in his bed listening to the noises of the city. He feels as if he has never



heard them before. Does this mean he has somehow slipped outside the organism of Min? Or is that simply an excuse for his decision? He dreams of pilot stones, rows and rows of them, marching into infinity. They glitter fiercely in the sun, and a hundred cities, like little motes of dust, tumble round them in the air. Now he is among the colliding cities, jumping from one to another, feeling the tug of displacement with each leap. It is intoxicating. He looks behind him, and there is Eleanore juggling pilot stones. She throws one to him and it flies into his open mouth. He swallows. "Wake up," she says, and the world turns over.

Gasping to wakefulness, Ays immediately senses her presence in his room. He turns his head to the wall and closes his eyes. No woman has ever shared his bed. But then, he has never met a woman like Eleanore before. He throws back the downy-sack in invitation.

Ays' gloves flap on the wind like little birds; one of fur, one of snakeskin. They fly away from the passenger basket, heading out into the wilderness. Ays has released them to the wind. Min is a monstrous shadow overhead; he looks up at its receding bulk with streaming eyes. Eleanore puts her hand upon his arm, and he reaches to touch her fingers. Everything has changed. Yesterday, they would never have touched one another.

"Adventure, Ays," she says. "Life."

He makes a noise, unsure. He's still confused as to why he's doing this. It feels as if he has no choice. He holds out his hands in front of him and examines them carefully. What will they do now? What will their purpose be?

"Don't think about it," Eleanore says, misinterpreting his thought, or perhaps not.

"I cannot think at all," he says.

"You should be glad," she says. "Experience your new freedom. I can't understand why you did that work. It's bizarre. What did you get out of it? There must have been something. Tell me. I want to know. I want to understand."

"Distance," he answers. "That's all, and sleep."

"You're awake now," she says, and with a final squeeze of his arm, turns around to look down over the side of the basket.

He became responsible for her soul. He became part of her, and there was not enough room inside him for Min as well. Is he really awake? He doesn't know. Maybe he has just exchanged one crazy dream for another. Maybe he can never wake up.

"I thought we would travel by using the pilot-stone," he says.

"Not yet," Eleanore replies. "There is a secret to the stone, a secret you must learn before we use it. I cannot tell it to you; you must discover it for yourself."

"If we are together, then we should have no secrets," Ays says. He feels uneasy.

Eleanore reaches out to touch him again. "Sometimes there are secrets that we don't know we have, Ays. The secret of the pilot-stones is one of those."

"But how will I find it? I don't know how or where to begin. This just isn't fair, after everything I've done for you."

"Well, precisely. What have you done for me?"

"Brought you back from the death."

"Bought me, or brought me – you also did something else, something that anyone can do."

"How can I know?"

"What is your question, your personal question? Everyone has one and, more importantly, what is your answer to that question?"

Ays remembers. A memory that was never real, a fantasy, an intimate dream thrown at him by his profession. The question never concerned his job at all, he can see that now. It was the fantasy itself being questioned.

"Well, Ays?"

"Desire is my question. My answer, desire."

Eleanore smiles and places her hand in his. Ays feels the pilot-stone, held in her palm, linking their flesh.



Photo of Storm Constantine by Sheer Faith

Storm Constantine is already becoming a legend in her own lifetime – see the interview by Stan Nicholls which precedes the above story. She lives in Stafford, and "Priest of Hands" is her first piece to appear in *Interzone*.

A Welcome from the Zones of Thought

John Clute

Ten years ago when *Interzone* was pregnant in a heterogeny of bosoms, Vernor Vinge was a husband. Time flies. Ten years ago, polishing up the romantic pash of her planetary-romances in strokes both wide and slow, Joan D. Vinge had already won a Hugo or two for stories like "Eyes of Amber," which seems nowadays so deep-sunk into the past with its archaic interventionist pieties (now safely dumped), and had already published *The Snow Queen*. Vernor, who had been her husband, had written something called *The Witling*, and a couple of other titles it was significantly hard to remember, though there was also a novella somewhere called "True Names" that sounded like a sleeper, and he taught somewhere: mathematics, or computer science, something *hard sf* and remote from anything the instigators of *Interzone* were (wrongly) presumed to have the slightest interest in. But suddenly this all seems long ago. Suddenly it is 1992, *Interzone* is a magazine whose origins are shrouded in the abyssal mists of the Age of the Iron Lady, and Vernor Vinge has just published, in *A Fire Upon the Deep* (Tor, \$22), a space epic so intensely pleasurable that we begin to rewrite our memories, we begin to think of Vernor as the Vinge. He has never appeared in *Interzone*, but that may have been our fault. It is not, however, our fault that no excerpt from the current novel was ever published here — had in fact any excerpt ever been submitted, which it was not — because *A Fire Upon the Deep* does not work in little bits.

This being a festive occasion, an occasion for praise, for the conveyance of good wishes between Zones of Thought of opposite poles (or so some readers might phrase the natural relationship between *Interzone* and large-scale hard sf), this might not be the best time to start up again on an old campaign, and to attempt, once again, to pound into the thick skulls of those who like what we don't like our sense of the delusions of hard sf in general, but what the hell. In brief, then, let us suggest that two of the more irritating assumptions generally held by the technophile fantasists who write hard sf are these: 1) the assumption that, because they know something about one of the hard sciences, they are entitled to ignore any scientific principle they wish to, so that it is possible to describe a fantasy with dwagons and ftl ships and rich, telepathic superjocks as hard sf; and 2) the assumption that because they actually know how to describe something describable, like the surface of a star — which is far more than most of us have ever managed even to attempt — they are therefore entitled to assume that they have acquired the gift of description; that everything they write about

is clear and accurate, a claim which is easy to test when you're talking about the surface of stars, but impossible when you're trying to describe anything more complex than language: which is, of course, almost everything else; that the human beings who appear in their stories are as fully described as it is possible to describe human beings: which, given the fact that human beings are not in fact fully describable by other human beings, may be true enough: but that's not what hard sf writers are on about: they think their descriptions are not only all you get but all you could ever need. Hence the proliferation throughout hard sf of protagonists who literally cannot be told apart — for they share the same insufferable hollow-man Competence, the same derisory problem-solving contempt for the stutter of being, the same profitable Winner's-Gloat of adoration for Private Enterprise.

A Fire Upon the Deep — the proof copy on hand is subtitled "A Novel from the Zones of Thought" — may not entirely dodge the dangers of assuming that the world is describable in babytalk, but is set so far into the future, and so remotely distant in time and space from any possibility of human hegemony, that its human characters seem almost inconceivably remote from the "bumptious" mammals who appear throughout the theological utterances of John W. Campbell Jr and his acolytes today. Aeons hence, as we might have guessed, the universe contains species far more uppity and neotenous than us. It is certainly true, all the same, that *A Fire Upon the Deep* is in some sense the kind of book that hard sf writers like to write. Any scientific speculation in its pages is pure nonsense, created to help the story onwards: and a good thing, too. A Vanity of Competent Folk does inhabit one of the long dovetailing plotlines, but their position, way down the Great Chain of Being, gives their Competence a proper Playdo context. And it's certainly true that the book is packed with aliens

whose alienness depends upon the sort of tinkertoy species intricacy Rube Goldberg bequeathed to Larry Niven who gave us the Puppeteers who are the direct begetters of Vinge's Stroderiders, artifactual creatures (like most hard-sf aliens) whose existence represents the solution of a very special problem: unlike homo sapiens, whose mammalian bipedalism seems somehow normative, even here, in this otherwise superbly unpatriotic tale. And it is also true that god-like beings can be found in the text speaking through ravished simulacra: they are called Powers, and inhabit the Transcend, and one of them is the Sauronesque Enemy of all sentience who sets the story going, deploying an icy stakhanovite terribilita through minions who spout socialistical-sounding crap (those Americans who have not committed suicide because of their medical bills are so good at making fun of visions of the world based on community rather than the ravening, monad, entrepreneurial self), but again Vinge dodges paying more than lip-service to the hard sf political litany loyalty-oath rag.

And he does, in fact, sidestel most of the more inhumane readoffs of the hard sf novel as a form. It is, in the end, clear that he knows exactly what he's writing — a work of fiction, which is nothing like the world — and that he understands very well what is entailed in writing a real novel which is also a hard sf novel, a novel which is nothing like the world but which must somehow play at conforming to certain canons of describability. To conform to those canons in 1992, two problems (at least) must be faced down: the hard sf novel must somehow solve the problem of the size of the universe, because the universe is much too large to drink neat, and the laws which govern it are inimical to fiction; and it must solve the problem of information, because it is very difficult to conceive any surviving world more than a few years hence which is not governed by dances of information beyond our ken — hence perhaps the quietism that suffuses

Cyberpunk; hence perhaps the large number of tales coming on the market in which our human plots turn out to be moves in a computer-run game-world. In *A Fire Upon the Deep*, Vinge has created one solution that solves both problems. It is not entirely new. Poul Anderson, in *Brain Wave* (1954), long ago established a model for fictions which treated the universe we experienced, and the mental tools we used in experiencing it, as being subject to special-case limiting conditions. In *Brain Wave*, in other words, the universe took the shape of a dramatic irony. It is the same with *A Fire Upon the Deep*. We give away very little by describing the irony-recollected-in-tranquillity which governs the book, for it comes complete with an elucidating galactic map into which the solution is embedded.

Our local galaxy, in Vinge's novel, is divided into four zones. The innermost of these encompasses the galactic core and a good hundred billion stars, and is known as the Unthinking Depths; here the speed of light is an absolute, and no complex technology is possible, because of the entangling stumblebum coat of flesh of the world. Surrounding this zone, and containing quite a few billion stars, is the Slow Zone; here the speed of light remains an absolute, but some technology is possible due to a partial unleashing of the speed and cogency of physical interactions, atomic and subatomic (or so I thought I understood). But sentient technologies remain impossible to build or sustain, there are no AIs in the Slow Zone. This is the zone in which Earth exists, or once existed — no one seems any longer to know or much to care — in a saving paralysis of slowness, deep sunk in safe exclusion from the searing glare of true intelligences. *A Fire Upon the Deep* only reaches the Slow Zone at a moment of climactic terror: for no one could ever wish to live there. Surrounding this zone, and the volume of space in which almost all of the action of the book takes place, is the Beyond, which is vast in compass but includes far fewer stars. Here the speed of light is not an absolute, and can be exceeded. Here it is possible for machineries and sentiences to be manufactured and to take cognizance of their tasks, for in the Beyond it is possible for genuinely significant amounts of information to be gathered, compacted, conveyed, assimilated. Here, skating over the slumbrous safety of the Slow Zone, millions of civilizations, including waif biota from old Earth, have existed for billions of years, each of them adding to the data archives, to the flow, to the overwhelming density and volume of the theoretically knowable. Finally, surrounding the Beyond, is the Transcend, where the Universe is permitted to know itself through the self-

explorations of Powers, who reside there in an intolerable access of clarity: but who can't get at us down so low.

These Powers, who represent the natural state of self-knowledge of the universe as an information system, cannot descend into the Beyond without considerable loss of selfhood, and are barred utterly from the nether regions. Throughout the novel, therefore, a systemic quid pro quo operates: omniscience entails exile from the realms of flesh; but safety from Powers similarly entails exile from true sapience. There is longing both ways, and intercourse, up and down the zones, which fibrillate in the mind's eye as though they were real, as though the galaxy's myriad transactions were isomorphic with the myriad transactions of organic life. It is a structure into which a myriad tales could nestle, each nudging its niche, each transacting furiously. *A Fire Upon the Deep* is, therefore, a dawn book, a pioneer's vade mecum. Its plot, after one forgives it of some Idiot Retards, sails swiftly from the highest to the lower depths, down the organon of the galaxy like surfing.

We begin in the Transcend, where a human-dominated interstellar civilization of the Beyond called the Straumli Realm has discovered an archive planet, which it hopes to ransack for ancient lore. Unfortunately, the archive contains in its banks a billion-year-old Perversion which, once again activated by the unknowing humans, destroys its discoverers, their entire civilization, and thousands more. This causes intense gossip throughout the vast expanses of the Beyond. However, a counter-agent has also been activated and put aboard the sole starship to escape the archive planet or the Straumli Realm; this ship plummets to the very edge of the Slow Zone, and lands on the unknown Tines World, inhabited by a group-mind species whose doglike individual members dance together in intricate telepathic concords but become moribund idiots when separated into singletons, and where all the remaining humans bar two small children are killed by one faction of this ambitious but technologically crippled proto-civilization. Meanwhile, a Power in the Transcend creates a human star sailor out of ancient genes and data (he reminded me of Hethor in Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*) who, along with the rest of the central cast, plummets downwards after the first ship in search of the macguffin countermeasure, so they can save the universe. Minions of the Perversion track them. There are space battles, and huge sacrifices of life. On Tines World the two children learn about their captors in scenes drawn out too much once in a while, but with such evident pleasure that the Idiot-Retard plotting that

encourages these minor longueurs is easily forgiven. And surrounding all this brouhaha is the flow of data, the presentation in asides and flashes of insight of the size and age and complexity and presentness of a galaxy it is possible to dream of believing in, as you read. The plot dovetails in the end, according to schedule, and without scanting any necessary emotional and kinetic points along the way. By the end of the book we are ready to start again. We want to wear Vernor Vinge's new galaxy again, like an open sesame woven of the stars, the levels, the knowledge that the knowledge exists, the knowledge that it can't get us. It is, in the end, a deeply usable book. *A Fire Upon the Deep* hums with use.

Short Note: Presumably it has also been designated a hard sf project, but of course the *Man-Kzin Wars* shared-world enterprise owned by Larry Niven, and packaged these days in a series of franchise anthologies, no more resembles scientific speculation than Scrooge McDuck resembles Donald Trump. Volume four of the sequence, **The Man-Kzin Wars, Volume Four** (Baen Books, \$4.50), is something of an oddity, containing as it does one tale by Greg Bear in collaboration with S.M. Stirling (it is chilly but unremarkable), and one novel-length story by Donald Kingsbury, 240 pages long and worthy of separate publication: but perhaps the contractual terms of this enterprise preclude singleton spinoffs. In any case, Kingsbury's novel, which is entitled "The Survivor," presents the life story of a "cowardly" Kzin caught in the latter stages of the Kzin empire's disastrous attempt to invade that patch of the galaxy called Known Space and inhabited by a whole lot of spunky "bump-tious" homo sapiens, whose "monkey cleverness" always, "as is traditional" (which is how the blurb puts it), wins out. Kingsbury's Kzin, small and pusillanimous, survives through cleverness, through learning, through experimentation upon captured humans. It is an extraordinarily bleak, swift bludgeon of a tale, and the last scene is an earned shocker.

Too bad Kingsbury dressed it in sheep's clothing.

(John Clute)

Compulsive Obsessions Mary Gentle

The exact reason why obsessive-compulsive disorders prove such a useful field for the writer are much better left uninvestigated. Our desire for the metronomic inscription of so

many words a day, for example, has an uncomfortable amount in common with the compulsive numerology of Jack Orchard, the hero of Ramsey Campbell's **The Count of Eleven** (Macdonald, £13.95).

It is at a comparatively late stage in the novel that Jack thinks, in an aside, that he probably hasn't been much affected by his late father's numerology-mania. Much. By this time we have seen Jack repeatedly total up the letters in his own name, his wife Julia's, his daughter Laura's, and half the population of Merseyside. Eleven is lucky. Thirteen is not. Not lucky at all...

But this is getting ahead of ourselves. Jack Orchard is a good man; a self-styled clown. He owns a failing video store — failing largely because he refuses to stock the grand guignol horror and comedy movies which would make it profitable, a fact which has its own later ironies. He has the kind of batshit-irreverent verbal humour which it is not wise to exercise on, say, one's bank manager. Jack restrains it (just) as he has to ask for a loan, after the shop burns down in a wonderfully Laurel-and-Hardy accident with a loopy pensioner and a blowlamp...

Of course, such things are just bad luck. Got to laugh, haven't you?

But as more bad luck pursues him and his family, Jack finally works out the reason why. He received a chain letter, which promised him the ability to "turn ill luck into good," or dire penalties and death if he failed to pass the letter on. Of course he'd made his thirteen copies and posted them. So where is the bad luck coming from?

Some of the thirteen recipients, obviously, *threw their letters away*. Bad luck is leaking back to the Orchard family. Having picked thirteen names at random out of the telephone book, Jack now has to track them down and enquire, very politely, whether they've passed the letter on or not. And if they haven't, will they please do so. Surely it won't take much to persuade them to accede to such a reasonable request?

Jack makes some headway. But then the bad luck spreads to include his whole family, as if he were straight man to a malevolently slapstick universe. So, however reluctantly he admits the necessity, he still has his blowlamp...

The Count of Eleven (also Jack's joking title for himself) is grounded firmly in the nineties and Liverpool and everyday small detail: The ex-partner working in a computer firm who may or may not have fiddled him over the shop insurance. The friends who own a restaurant. The remarkable mother of three hard-done-by sons. Jack's sense of humour, which becomes his alter ego to cheek authority. And the book is grounded, too, in the small details of superstition — making the random-

ness of numbers work out right, passing on a letter. There can't be anything very terrible in that, surely?

The novel steers away from the details of the Merseyside Burner's victims, leaving perhaps too much to implication. In horror fiction suggestion can work supremely well. But there is also a place for the horror of the outright slaughterhouse, which is not present here. Concentrating on the psychological tricks and tropes by which Jack becomes what he does enables him to stay likable. Even, I guess, to the point of one having too much sympathy for him.

I mean, what's so damn difficult about passing on a letter when someone asks you to? No need to get so hot under the collar.

Horror fiction usually revolves around two not mutually exclusive tropes: psychological horror and blood-drenched grue. Campbell's last, *Midnight Sun*, was a stunning Lovecraftian and M.R. Jamesian transformation of the haunted-house genre. Peter James' **Sweet Heart** (Sphere, £4.50), on the other hand, turns hand-springs to get itself to resemble the archetypal married-couple-buys-haunted-house movie.

There have to be plot excuses, these days, to have the (house)wife permanently at home, assuming she is of the relevant yuppie age and wage-bracket. In the case of Charley, age 36, she has been ordered to give up her job and relax so that she can successfully conceive a child. She and her husband are moving to the country; he will continue to work in London. Somewhat uncharitably, one suspects that the isolation of the woman is also necessary for any stalk by supernatural forces and slash by the ungrateful dead.

Charley and her husband Tom purchase Elmwood Mill, a modernized Tudor structure in Sussex, despite Charley's misgivings. Don't these people exist in the same world as we do? Surely they've watched *The Amityville Horror*? With an atmosphere you could hack with an axe, disappearing stables, a maggot-ridden corpse recently removed from the building, and a village in which one immediately gets co-opted onto the local cricket team, wouldn't anyone in their right mind run a mile from this des. res.?

Of course not. They are buying this house by the kind of sheer coincidence which is never sufficiently explained, even by the end of the plot. Tom duly goes back to work, Charley potters about; visits her best friend Laura, and her adoptive mother. No conception. Fairly soon, Charley finds herself being prevented by a series of strange circumstances from tracing her unknown birth mother.

Charley's adoptive mother is elderly,

in a home, and largely silenced by Alzheimer's Disease, a useful fact which means that we don't have to bother with any messy character-development within the adoptive triangle. I suppose one could ask why bother with character development in category fiction; but I like to care about people as I enjoy watching them perish horribly. That's what horror's all about...

Horror and crime writers also, these days, seem to use the adopted with the carefree abandon that Victorian writers used the foundling child. All together now: *it's a plot device*. You just know that if someone's adopted, they're going to have dodgy manifestations following them around, almost as if it was a judgement, know what I mean. Not that Charley displays any of the anxieties of the adopted.

The main focus of *Sweet Heart* is on hypnotic regression to past lives, a phenomenon of enduring interest. Could it be that Charley's inability to conceive is caused by a past-life trauma? Tom pours scorn on this, best friend Laura is not so sure. Other explanations are offered. Village life unfolds — actually a quite reasonable late-20th-century rural village spectrum between yuppies and agricultural pensioners. Sexual tensions appear as the married couple are driven apart. And the manifestations of something at Elmwood Mill begin to resonate uncomfortably with Charley's hypnotic regressions...

Sweet Heart builds nicely, and doesn't, to its credit, end quite where you think it will. But pretty close.

Something very curious has happened in Mercedes Lackey's **Jinx High** (Tor, \$4.99), which is part horror, part detective, and part teen novel. Admittedly this is the third in a series. But it is assumed — without any sense that this is alternate history, and with no info-dump from the prior books — that the 20th-century American world works by Wicca, Magick, and psychic powers, and that apart from the occasional exclamation of "Oh god!", Christianity has completely vanished.

Excuse me, did I miss something? Next thing you'll be telling me there's no USSR any more. Hey, I guess anything's possible...

Regarding *Jinx High*, I guess when you want to set a fearless occultist heroine against a 300-year-old New England witch in an 18-year-old body, you don't want a Christian fundamentalist rolling in to cry *A pox on both your households!*

Diana Tregarde is an occult Modesty Blaise without the balls. Her sidekick Larry is married (wife offstage) and has a son, Deke, who is psychically powerful but has always been shielded by his parents' own psychic powers. He does not seem as annoyed on discovering

this as one might expect, and one of the book's charms is Larry wondering how he (ex-Sixties radical) could have fathered such a stuffed-shirt 15-year-old. Fairly early on, the reader knows all about the villainess, while Diana doesn't; and from there on it's a straight slug through small-town America, teen romance and blood magick, and prom night. All quite good fun.

Diana Tregarde, by the way, is also a writer. A real Writer. A Romance writer – come to take classes at Deke's school by way of cover for being in the area. There are stern lectures included for teen readers on how one always delivers on time, always rewrites for an editor, and always writes what the market wants. Anything else is artsy-farting around and probably unAmerican. So now you know. It's not anything like an obsessive-compulsive disorder, it's a business.

Tell that to Scott Fitzgerald, I say. And Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, while you're at it.

Elizabeth Hand's *Winterlong* (Bantam, £3.99) is sweet on the tongue but fades from the digestion. There is a school of writing now, that runs from early Delany through Gene Wolfe to Richard Grant and others, in which the future loses its connotations of steel-bright-clean or cyberpunk-dirty, and becomes luscious with the sense of being exhausted history.

Winterlong is textured and referential. This is not quite Illyria, Lady, but pretty close. Two teenage children seek the mystery of their origin through a city devastated, rebuilt, redevastated, and awaiting the advent of the Ascendant; a rich, jungle-bright ruin.

Of the children, Wendy Wanders is the product of a human engineering project: an autistic child altered by drugs and neurosurgery into something that can experience others' minds by tasting their blood. Fleeing the laboratory, she takes refuge with an acting troop, some human, some – like the ape, Miss Scarlett – not human, but nonetheless good actors. While she hides out with them, Wendy is, of course, a girl, who disguises herself as a boy, acting women's roles on stage. And there is, if not *Twelfth Night*, at least a masque in the offing.

The other child, Raphael of House Miramar, is a highly accomplished teenage whore, from a prestigious establishment. Already worried about his fading beauty in a culture that seems to idolize paedophilia, he becomes betrothed to one of the Curators. This ruling class live, among other places, in vast museums whose earliest history barely stretches back to our latest.

Both Raphael and Wendy are haunted by a boy with green eyes, Pan

in both senses, who may exist both within and without neural reality, and whose name is Death. A heady perfume of seduction pervades the book, and an obsession with young beauty only fitting in a culture at the end of its history, existing under persistent "rains of roses" in a bio-engineered haze. As with a masque, characters appear in different guises, perform stylized actions, and complete a ritual. The sexual heat of the city is contrasted with the madness of the Engulfed Cathedral beyond its borders. There are lazars, and a jackal familiar. There are gods among the scenery flats. There is a brother and a sister. Never mind the plot, enjoy the sensuality and atmosphere of danger.

Winterlong covers a great deal of territory, from Peter Pan through Sumerian mythology to Dante, but for all that it leaves curiously little impression. It may be one of those books whose images are recalled as if they were things one dreamed, once, rather than remembered. There is not the narrative engine of a Shakespearean or a Dantean plot.

There are the movements of a masque dance. Maybe obsession.

But no compulsion.

(Mary Gentle)

Gawd Strewth Wendy Bradley

Torture looms large in this batch of novels; torture for the characters, for whom a visit to the chamber of horrors is an essential heroic qualification, and torture for the reader, who suffers clumsy story-telling in the continued absence of really good fantasy editors.

Bridget Wood's *The Lost Prince* (Headline, £15.99) is a case in point. Wood returns to the mythic Ireland of her first novel *Wolfking*, where once more the line of Wolfkings is exiled from Tara, now possessed by dark sorcerer Medoc. The exiled high queen Grainne does a bit of minor questing, but it is her lover Fergus who has to do the main bit of trying to get into the future to chain and bring back the mythical beast "Apocalypse" to defeat Medoc. Fergus is imprisoned in the fearsome otherworldly Prison of Hostages but after a bit of gruesome ritual mutilation manages to stroll out with a band of children like some manic reversed Pied Piper – and blunder into the main search party, Taliesin the Tyrian and a woman from the future, who are fleeing from the four horsemen of the Apocalypse under a magic mountain.

Wood is a splendid writer with a vivid, sick imagination, and it is a pleasure to see a major talent struggling

out of her chrysalis to spread her wings. This novel is less clumsy – but no less vivid – than her first, but it is still marred by elementary flaws which a competent editor should have spotted at once: Grainne is bound on a sacrificial altar but can still cover her ears with her hands, for example. Brilliant when not unintentionally Pythonesque.

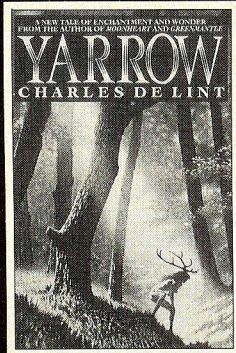
The *Spiral Dance* by R. Garcia y Robertson (William Morrow, \$20) is a historical fantasy in which Anne Percy, Countess of Northumberland, is part of a Catholic rebellion against Elizabeth I in favour of Mary Queen of Scots. She finds herself caught up in magical events when she flees into Scotland and falls in with a werewolf and witches, pursued by visions of the Virgin Mary who is also of course the Goddess. Not my period, so I can't really comment on its historical accuracy although it positively reeks of research – the kind of book that can't mention a landscape without explaining the geological formation that underpins it. An extremely vivid description of being taken for a witch and the worse than Kafkaesque absurdity of being tortured for denial with the alternative of being burned at the stake for admission. However, would a character's mental baggage of the period really include comparing her circumstances to a golfing holiday, and using America as a measure of distance? And would it not make her brain hurt to have to rethink her religion on becoming, for real, a witch? Nevertheless I look forward to the sequel.

Stephen Brust's *Brokedown Palace* (Pan, £5.99) is a disappointing alternate Hungarian fable about the fourth – not the third – son. Laszlo is the king and won't admit his palace is falling down. Miklos is the youngest and wants it rebuilt. Vilmos blows in the wind, and Andor is a giant whose loyalty will decide the issue. Laszlo beats Miklos near to death. Miklos is rescued by a talos horse – an irritatingly symbolic magic talking horse, but don't worry, it's not in there too much – and goes off to Faery to learn a bit of magic so he can come back and have a go at sorting it all out. Castle falls down, new one grows from magic tree that sprouts from a drop of blood Miklos shed in his room when being beaten near to death... Give it a miss: Brust is going for a definite Style here, and the Style involves lots of authorial preaching and parable-spinning at you until you want to tell him to get off it and get on with the story. And if they use that same Zelazny quote on one more Brust cover I think I'll puke.

The *Grail of Hearts* by Susan Shwartz (Tor, \$21.95) has an interesting idea. The Wandering Jew



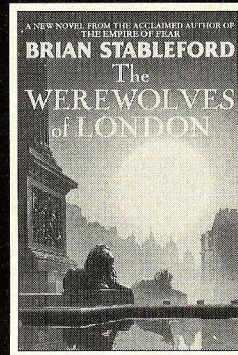
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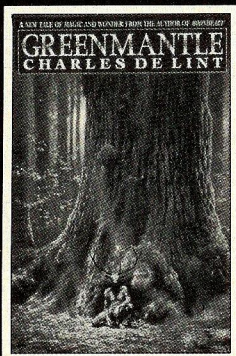
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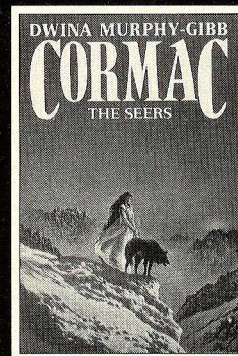
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condemned to live for ever for laughing at Christ at the crucifixion is, here, a woman and the story begins a thousand years or so on, when she is used by the sorcerer Klingsor to lure the Fisher King Amfortas away from his chaste guardianship of the Holy Grail and into the sin that leads to his symbolic wounding and the degeneration of his and Arthur's kingdoms. The plot is Parsifal, but it is racingly told and there is an extended flashback sequence into the crucifixion period which is pleasingly vivid.

However my quarrel here is with the woman Kundry's motivation. Klingsor tortures her by sending her back in time to a few days before the crucifixion and she finds she is not locked into an immutable chain of events – she buys some silk she recalls not buying before and muses briefly about whether this small change will change other aspects of her future – but, in spite of a thousand years of Christianity and her own intimate knowledge of “Joshua ben Joseph”'s power (an actual, physical power, visible as white light, which raised Lazarus from the dead and which has already extended her own life past reason) it still does not occur to her to have a quiet word with Joshua before it all gets crazy again. Instead she finds herself crouching awkwardly in the bushes at crucial Biblical moments so that she can have a viewpoint on the gospel accounts, and we have to wait for some extremely unconvincing wandering around in the forest mindlessly repenting before Parsifal can come along and make it all all right.

Finally two books which are sheer torture for the reader. **Mortal Mask** by Stephen Marley (Legend, £8.99) is a piece of Chinoiserie about a black-clad lesbian demi-goddess, “Chia Black Dragon – powerful, sexy, lonely,” as the cover blurb has it. Actually the cover blurb is the best thing about the book: Chia would be a splendid character if she were set against something a bit more gruesome or a bit more horrific. As it is, her demi-god brother and mortal enemy and his silver-masked cohorts go around ripping people's faces off, but the “ripping” is more often than not symbolic: their souls are taken so that their faces become meat-masks of neither life nor death. The evisceration that goes on here and there is coolly referred to but never makes the stomach heave, and the psychic horrors didn't chill me for an instant so that Chia hovers lifeless in a void where she should have shone vivid against darkness.

And Mike Jefferies' **Shadows in the Watchgate** (Grafton, £8.99) has a mad taxidermist using black magic to revivify his stuffed animals, and a beam of light carrying the magic to the life-size model soldiers in a nearby

museum just at the moment a visiting American model screams for help, so that the magic is purged of evil by the time it gets to the soldiers (by a flaw in the window glass, of course; how can you be so cynical as to ask?) and they revive sworn to protect her, which is handy because the taxidermist has, just at that same moment, conceived of the idea of kidnapping, skinning and so “preserving” her beauty. What with hordes of stuffed animals rampaging through the streets and battalions of stuffed soldiers on horseback ranging around her house to protect her, you would think someone might have noticed something was going on other than the mild-mannered scientist and amateur fireman who rescues her from the burning museum (don't ask).

What with the corpses lying around and the arson, you would think our heroine might try telling the police “the taxidermist done it!” rather than just assuming no one would believe any of this tosh. They wouldn't, obviously, but they might believe “I saw the taxidermist set the fire, and he tried to chloroform me the other day,” both of which happen to be true. No, the three characters, evil taxidermist, beautiful heroine and plucky hero, move through a landscape heavily peopled with vivified dummies but otherwise devoid of real life, and they and the book are as credible as their names: Ludo Strewth, Tuppence Trilby and Dec Winner. Gawd strewth.

(Wendy Bradley)

John Barth Meets Craig Shaw Gardner Chris Gilmore

The experimental novel has become the one thing that in theory it could never be: a genre form. The reason for this isn't far to seek – a genuine experiment can only be based on a new idea. Most ideas aren't new, and most new ones don't work. A publishable novel based on a new idea is therefore rare, but not necessarily worth reading. Examples include Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (a series of statements used in place of conventional narrative, dialogue and introspection); Roy Lewis's *The Evolution Man* (a paleolithic first-person novel, written with the full array of 20th-century literary and technical vocabularies); Eric Frank Russell's *Wasp* (a story about a fifth-columnist in wartime Rotterdam, written as if it was science fiction); Richard Adams's *Shardik* (an attempt to revive the Miltonic form of the epic simile, in a context of sword without sorcery); T. J. Bass's *The*

Godwhale (a novel written almost wholly in terms of physiological changes experienced by the characters) and Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* (two stories, in neither of which anything much happens, and which have nothing to do with each other, written in alternate chapters). These books vary enormously in quality, and have nothing else in common either; that's what genuine, as opposed to genre, experimentalism is about.

In **The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor** (Hodder & Stoughton, £15.99) John Barth, being a genre experimentalist, has rehashed someone else's idea, in this case Sturgeon's, though he invents a perfunctory connection between the parts which finally connects them at about page 400. The eponymous Somebody, in fact a 20th-century German-American called Behler (not Vonnegut? missed a trick there!), appears at Sindbad's dinner table, where he recounts his life in counterpoint to Sindbad's recitation of his first six voyages. As Barth adapts his style to the subject matter, the effect is a bit like watching soap opera and pantomime in alternate acts. The Arabian passages bear an eerie resemblance to Craig Shaw Gardner's *The Last Voyage of Sinbad* (sic), and honours are about even. Barth's plot mechanisms creak to much the same extent, and his way with a rude joke varies from a lot less crass to a lot crasser than Gardner's, but he also has more complex ornamentation and fewer graceless sentences. Not that he's quite free from these; he's a good writer who'd be a lot better if he didn't insist on taking the role of a great one, so we sometimes get this sort of thing:

Some itinerant tinker or passing camel-driver must have caught old Jayda one night between the kitchen garden and the buttery, and first had, and then gone his way.

Not wrong syntactically, only wretchedly inept: “have” is far too distant from “gone” for the syllepsis to work, while the repeated *ands* are clumsy. The pity is that some people are going to think it's clever, rather than the sort of *gaucherie* to which only the clever succumb.

In the story of Behler/Somebody's life Barth abandons his mannerism, to write in the folksy, *faux-naïf* style which everyone, from Faulkner to Vonnegut by way of Richard Bach, uses to stab at *The Great American Novel*. The opening is very hackneyed – childhood in an unfashionable backwater of the United States; the characters stylishly and economically drawn, but without the least concession to psychological credibility; and the tweeness telegraphed, to disarm criticism. At one point he compares his own book to “living in (and living out) a John Updike novel” – fer Chrissakes,

can't you see it's done on purpose? Well, yes; but malice aforethought isn't usually a defence. This is not to condemn it entirely; Barth's writing flows well, with extremely detailed visualization which makes for exceptionally effective sex-writing (porn isn't quite the word – it's too wholesome) so that if you experience no physical reaction from pp 110-13 especially, you're either past it or have very strange tastes indeed.

Altogether, it's a relief to get back to Sindbad's table (where the construction of the original stories imposes some discipline) and the bedroom of his daughter, Yasmin. She's a beauty but in her late twenties (well past the sell-by date for an Islamic maiden) and worse still, no longer virginal. She's therefore ready for a wholesome fling with fifty-year-old Somebody/Behler. First Bragg, now Barth – it must be catching.

As Behler grows older we get the usual madness, incest etc., without which no Barth novel is complete, while the silliness shines through unabated: Barth mixes first and third person in a desultory sort of way, much as Nabokov did in *Ada*, but does not achieve individuality thereby. He constructs obtrusive but inconsequential echoes between and within the narratives, of the sort that used to be hailed as proving the writer's "architectonic power." The ending is limp under cover of being fey.

This is a long book, so I suppose you could say you're getting two novels for the price of one (you also get a snatch of sub-Shakespearian blank verse). Well enough, provided you like both genres; I suspect most readers will like one much more than the other. Some others may be upset by the anti-Islamic jokes, which have a lot more bite than anything in *The Satanic Verses* – as well fatwahas seems to have lost their vogue. Against that, the book is exceptionally well printed, bound and designed, and costs only about a pound more than many shorter hardback novels of which the opposite is true. If you can afford to buy in hardback, I guess it's worth the difference, though doubtless the difference will disappear when the Royal paperback comes out. (Chris Gilmore)

The Twee and the Dangerous Jones & McIntosh

“Why don't they write them like they used to?” asks the back-cover blurb of *Once Upon a Time* (Legend, £9.99) edited by Lester del Rey and Risa Kessler – the “them” (as you'll have guessed from the title of

this anthology) are fairy tales. And the answer? Well, according to the blurb, it's because nobody asked them (the writers, that is) until our two editors came along.

Now, despite their sugar-coated contemporary image, the most effective fairy tales (as well as being “full of mystery and magic” as the blurb informs us) were also imbued with a powerful dark streak of allegory. They were cautionary tales, folk wisdom to be heeded by the unwary, young and old alike. They were dangerous, unsettling – and so clearly there's considerable potential in the idea of asking some contemporary writers to come up with their own versions. Sadly, apart perhaps from one story, the anthology doesn't deliver on this level at all. What we get instead is the coffee-table version – fairies and dragons in abundance, wicked sisters and noble knights cantering here there and everywhere. The form – and almost none of the vital substance.

Actually the book is strong on appearance all right and you get some very decent illustrations. The cover blurb describes Michael Pangrazio's work as “superb” and, even allowing for the obligatory hype-factor, his paintings are pretty good at that. Too good, very often, for the tired old tales they are intended to illustrate, and you're likely to find yourself thinking that the lumpen prose and the retreat ideas it contains fall far short of doing justice to the well-realized scenes that the artwork depicts.

There are ten stories here, including the winsomely titled “Prince Delightful and the Flameless Dragon” (Isaac Asimov) and “The Tinkling of Fairybells” (Katherine Kurtz), which let us know in no uncertain terms that we're in the land of the wee and the twee. The Asimov leads the collection, features a malodorous and supposedly humorous dragon, and is about as woodenly unfunny a story as you might expect going by the title alone. (And the title, by the way, is really all you need to know about the Kurtz story.) The dragon lady herself, Anne McCaffrey, gives us “The Quest of a Sensible Man” which has boy-meets-girl, missing amulets and magic animals blending together into a seamless grey mush. And there's editor Lester del Rey, whose “The Fairy Godmother,” a desperately dull happy-ever-after story with enough fortuitous tie-up endings to make Dickens blush, is front runner, admittedly against strong competition, for the weakest story in the book.

There are dragons, albeit disguised, in Barbara Hambly's “The Changing.” The story's overlong, but it's constructed with some care, and here's one story where the monster isn't slain. Lawrence Watt-Evans' “Portrait of a Hero” is also a dragon story, and

nothing too special, although it's told well enough and has some reasonably interesting characters. Wayland Drew's “Old Soul” is promising but desperately in need of trimming, and ditto for Susan Dexter's “Thistle-down.” One story that steps outside the mythical Celtic twilight is Terry Brooks' “Imaginary Friends,” which uses a child's battle against a dragon as emblem for his real-life struggle against illness. Full marks to Brooks for acknowledging that a fairy tale can just as well be set in suburban USA as downtown Camelot. Unfortunately, this said, the story itself is fairly lame, and there's never the slightest doubt which protagonist is going to come up smelling of roses.

But C.J. Cherryh's “Gwydion and the Dragon” does succeed in reminding us of the power that real fairy tales used to have, and arousing that feeling of deeper, darker forces at work in the world. As well as being a thoughtful, sinewy and literate re-working of the dragon-slayer quest, it's also head and shoulders above the rest of the bunch and the only one that comes close to being written “like they used to.”

A handful of stories as strong as the Cherryh and *Once Upon a Time* might have been worth reading. As it is, if you really want fairy stories you'd best go back to the originals. This book looks good, but you're only likely to get turned on by it if you like New Age wallpaper reading for the dragon-conscious. Never mind why don't they write them like they used to, on this evidence just be thankful that they don't.

Now, then – **I Shudder at Your Touch** (Roc, £4.99) ushers itself in with a blurb promising “22 tales of sex and horror,” and has a cover featuring a gloved hand stealing over a woman's bare shoulder. Goodness! The windows in the review bunker were steaming up even before we'd got past the cover. But then sex has always had such a good market profile, that the publishers just can't pass it up. Get into the 22 stories themselves, however, and what you find is something quite different from the potentially exploitative promise of the cover art. *I Shudder* is a mixture of reprinted and original horror and dark fantasy stories loosely linked by the theme of sexuality. Sometimes sex is at the core of the story, sometimes it is merely tangential, the stories range from good to excellent – and none of them seemed exploitative to us. A few are fairly old, one (R. Murray Gilchrist's “The Basilisk”) dating back to the last century, and whilst these stories do hold a certain antique curiosity, it's probably as well that they don't add up to any more than a minor side-show. Of the remaining, more-or-less contemporary stories, there's a roughly even

split between original work and reprints. We've criticized other anthologies (principally the *Interzone* collections, since you ask) in the past for mixing new and old stories in one volume, and, whilst it must be admitted that pretty well all of this material was new to us, better-read horror fans might perhaps balk at being asked to buy a list of stories they already know just to be able to read a handful of new ones. But, since this wasn't our problem, we were happy enough to go along with Michelle Slung's choices.

At the top of our list come Christopher Fowler's "The Master Builder" and T.L. Parkinson's "The Tiger Man Returns to the Mountains." Both stories build a sense of anticipation and – well, yes, fear – in the reader, something which may sound self-evident about horror fiction but is in fact astonishingly rare. "The Master Builder" is one of those creepy, claustrophobic, "behind you!" stories which is crying out to have a movie made from it. The Parkinson is better still, a deep and dark fable which pays homage to the old horror adage that, just when you thought things couldn't get worse, they do. There's also "The Swords" from the late Robert Aickman, well known to horror connoisseurs, which has a story of a seedy fair with a very disturbing exhibit – and a young man's "first experience."

Two very big-name horror writers, Stephen King and Clive Barker, top and tail the anthology to powerful effect. King's "The Revelations of 'Becka Paulson'" opens with the heroine accidentally shooting herself through the skull, which isn't enough to stop her going on from there to become quietly and chillingly insane. Barker's "Jaqueline Ess: Her Will and Testament" starts off in similar territory (repressed housewife going scarily off the rails), but the sexuality here is both more overt and far more disturbing. Although it starts incredibly powerfully, it can't quite sustain its intensity; nevertheless it's an impressive read.

Michael Blumlein, surely well known to longtime *IZ* readers, has justly established himself as an accomplished writer in the sf/horror crossover field. "Keeping House" is less physically demanding than the "typical" Blumlein story (ie, you can read it whilst you're eating your lunch), but scores well in its telling of a woman whose domestic world crumbles into insanity as it becomes clear that the "haunting" is coming from within her. It is, it must be said, yet another story written by a man featuring a female protagonist going barking mad. A few stories which cut the other way might have helped to redress the balance. As it is, there are only a handful of women writers featured here. Ruth Rendell, writer of detective

fiction but also of superior crime novels that shade into psychological horror, contributes the disappointing "A Glowing Future," which is a relatively minor reworking of the spurned lover story; whilst fans of Angela Carter will doubtless find "Master" com-fortingly weird and well-up to expected norms. Also worth your time is Carolyn Banks' short but successful "Salon Satin," this time a woman's version of the housewife who slips the leash.

Amongst the remaining works are a couple of humorous stories – Patrick McGrath's vampires (?) at the crease in "Not Cricket" and Thomas Disch's very readable "Death and The Single Girl," in which Death has trouble demonstrating his novel way of dispatching his victims. Plus there's a story by Jonathan Carroll, brief but skilfully delivered, "A Quarter Past You."

And the final verdict is... an impressive collection of stories. Unsettling, perhaps, even dangerous, and not a dragon or a unicorn among them. Recommended.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

Small-Press Roundup Paul Beardsley

The selection of magazines is a bit sparse this time. I had hoped to review *R.E.M.* issue 2, but editor Arthur Straker has run into financial difficulties and says it is unlikely to appear. *Exuberance* issue 4 and *Auguries* issue 15 are, I am told, ready for production but have not appeared in time for this column. An altogether different mag whose appearance is imminent is **Sound SF: The Tape Magazine**, edited by Neville Barnes and (ahem) Paul Beardsley. The "zeroth" issue, featuring stories adapted from *Auguries*, is available for £2 from Aslan Studios Ltd, Paravel House, Guildford Road, Loxwood, West Sussex RH14 0QW. (This is news, not a plug, okay?)

Scheherazade edited by Elizabeth Counihan, St Ives, Maypole Road, East Grinstead, West Sussex, RH19 1HL. Quarterly (?), A5, 34pp, £1.99 per issue, £7.50 for 4.

Scheherazade is delicate and pretty; the cover for issue 2 is blue with a gold logo. The title refers, of course, to the woman in *The Arabian Nights* who stayed alive (and saved the lives of many other women) by telling stories which kept her husband too enthralled to kill her. The magazine's editorial policy is one of good story-telling, with a feminine (rather than feminist) slant.

Interestingly, the readership appears to include roughly equal numbers of men and women.

Unfortunately my first reaction was, "Is that all there is?" Compared with *Auguries* (they're both A5), *Scheherazade* has more words per page, but less than half the page count, and it costs more. It has four stories, none of them very long, an interview with someone called David Pringle, a map for a forthcoming graphic novel by Jane "Atlas" Gaskell, and clips from readers' letters.

The first story, "How Enlightenment Came to the Tower" by Storm Constantine, is a well-imagined and well-written fairy tale about a woman imprisoned, by choice, in a marble tower. The allegorical elements are a little heavy-handed: a stranger tries to persuade her to return to the town of Tooreal. The accompanying artwork by Deirdre Counihan is impressive.

There are some amusing touches in Sebastian Wildish's portrayal of a United Europe in "Creative Gardening," which include liberal-minded policepersons, ageing hippy parents with New Age sensibilities, and a protagonist whose first name is Geldof. The story tells of Geldof's attempts to tolerate (or terminate) the insufferable intrusion of an elderly relative who keeps plants, and as far as it goes it's quite entertaining. It doesn't go far enough, though, and in the end it just, well, ends – there's no satisfying resolution, no "Yeah!" feeling.

The longest story, "The Spell Merchant (A Tale From the Edge of Time)" by Phil Emery, is perhaps the closest to the magazine's ideal. There are Emirs and Caliphs and camels and magic in this one, and place names that sound Arabian. The two main characters are wicked without being evil – likeable enough to be welcome in later stories – and their quest is colourful, strange and risky (slightly reminiscent of Clark Ashton Smith, in fact). The only letdown is the Emir, whose motivation is too obviously plot-driven. Nevertheless, this is the story most likely to keep *Scheherazade's* husband from beheading her.

Finally, there is "Another Day, Another Dream" by Peter T. Garratt. There are references here to the assassination of JFK, and a soap opera celebrated for its novel technique of dealing with continuity problems. And unless I am missing something subtle, nothing actually happens. Is this yet another story that asks, what is real and what is dream?

With two issues out already, and a third by the time you read this, *Scheherazade* appears to be doing well. I certainly wish them well. But £1.99 is a lot of money for four short stories of variable quality.

Far Point edited by Charlie Rigby, Victoria Publications, PO Box 47,

Grantham, Lincs, NG31 8RJ. Bimonthly, A4, 68pp, £1.95 per issue, £11.00 for 6.

With an arrogance or confidence that takes one's breath away, the first issue of *Far Point* is subtitled "The Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine." *Interzone* beware! (Or something.)

The editorial policy is similar to that of *Scheherazade*, in that the emphasis is on entertainment. "Has anyone else noticed the absence of fun and enjoyment from SF and Fantasy magazines these days?" we're asked. We are promised "Warlocks and starship pilots, thieves, princesses and aliens, computer programs, AIs and youths on quests," because it "only reflects what we see on the bookshelves." An all-cards-on-the-table approach if ever there was one.

The first story, Stephen Markley's "Home is a House Called Percy," is an amusing account of a living house. The idea is worked out rather well, but, because the conclusion is bound to be a bit predictable, one of the characters explicitly states that the story won't end the way you think. It turns out he's lying. The plot of "Blind the Mouse" by Mark Close is inadequate but some of the imagery is quite good.

"Adam's Offspring" by Duncan Long is an action/adventure story set on a planet where things like this happen: "Tearing his vibraknife from its sheath, Drognir flicked on the ceramic blade of his weapon, its edge vanishing in a blur of motion as he faced the creature." Despite a lot of repetition (about 50,000 of the said creatures get killed, and each death is described), a clumsy mix of info-dump techniques, and hints of said-phobia, I found this suspenseful and exciting. Should appeal to gamers, *Blake's 7* fans and the like. And why not?

The aversion towards using the word "said" becomes obtrusive in Nicola Ashton's "Conspiracy of Souls." This is a fantasy set in the middle ages, where, presumably, medieval religious beliefs hold sway. Nonetheless Hugh, the ingenuous protagonist, is flabbergasted to discover that Hell actually exists. The omniscient narrator withholds vital information, and the eventual "twist" merely explains why the preceding events made no sense. Another medieval piece about souls is the nasty "Justice" by Brian Stableford, a horror story that doesn't distance the reader because it's too clinical, too plausible, too human for that. This, together with the tension between what the author says and what he actually means makes for a memorably unpleasant tale.

David Raven's "The Crow and the Dragonfly" is a charming tale about two warriors setting out from their respective towns with the sole intention of killing one another. The tension never lets up, not even when they are

compelled to join forces against a greater foe, and I was impressed at the way the author avoided a mawkish ending. I was also impressed by Maggie Freeman's "The Door Specialist." It is set in Russia in the early 20th century, but has its own internal logic and a jolt-inducing revelation near the end. This is good imaginative writing, as is "Do You Love?" by Jo Raine, an almost poetic interpretation of Malory 4:1 in which Nimue defeats Merlin and takes his power. Her gain is cleverly described in the negative: "There were doors that would no longer open at her touch, paths that she would no longer be able to tread. The prophecy of her eventual suicide was with her always."

"The Firing Line," we are told in the contents-page blurb, covers 65 million years and 40,000 AU. Such is the stuff of Sense of Wonder (or Sensawunda as it is called by those who can't evoke it), and author Martyn J. Fogg knows his science. Shame about his aliens, though – they talk in punctuation marks. I was beginning to like the two main characters and found their conversation interesting; a pity they (and the human race) had to be killed in the middle of it. I came away feeling that this is the first draft of a much better story. In addition to the fiction, there are three book reviews and some stand-alone artwork. This is a worthy first issue, with plenty of variety and a few very good stories. Even the worst stories had something about them – that elusive quality "fun," perhaps?

New Moon (formerly *Dream*) edited by Trevor Jones, 1 Ravenshoe, Godmanchester, Huntingdon, Cambs, PE18 8DE. Quarterly (?), A4, 52pp, £2.25 per issue, £8.00 for 4.

Dream has been criticized for being overtly, for want of a better phrase, middle-of-the-road. The *New Moon* editorial seems to address this issue by declaring its policy for 90s sf. "And what is 90s sf?" I pretend to hear you ask. "Anything that isn't 60s, 70s or 80s sf." (Even so, there's some cyberpunk in this issue.)

Readers of Stephen Baxter's "Journey to the King Planet" (*Zenith 2*) will be aware of anti-ice, the controllable antimatter used by the British Empire to launch Victorian spaceships. In "Before Sebastopol," told in (I thought) convincing period prose, we learn of its use in the Crimean War, bringing about a special loss of innocence that might have lasted another 90 years. There are more stories to come in the "Anti-Ice" series; I look forward to them. "Sonnie's Edge" by P.F. Hamilton is set in a post-greenhouse future and tells of a tough-woman-gonna-kick-ass type protagonist who remotely controls a monster in a mini-Godzilla spectator sport. Readers of *Interzone* 41 might be reminded here of Glenn

Grant's "Suburban Industrial," but "Sonnie's Edge" at least has a satisfying pay-off. I found plenty to nitpick, however; the line, "One day, gene-tailored plants will replenish the ozone," is nonsense, as is the suggestion that the returning frosts will quicken life, or that such a future will be lacking in excitement – what about the scramble for the remaining land and resources?

In Matthew Dickens' "Desdemona," nearly all humans have lost their capacity for emotion. The rest, Emotives, are sometimes allowed into the community, whereas "normal" people find fulfilment in intellectual stimulation. This is not a radically original idea, but it is well-handled. My only gripe is the overuse of the word "irony" – okay, we're told they have "a highly developed sense of irony," but that's no reason to use it ten times! John Duffield's "Green Soldier" is a well-written account of a raw recruit becoming a fully-fledged soldier: "Lewis had signed up to save the third world, only he hadn't realized there'd be so much killing." There is a lot of description of action (liberally punctuated with onomatopoeias) and weaponry that "would take your head off at five hundred yards." While that kind of thing normally leaves me cold, I was quite taken by this story, not least because I found the characters sympathetic, for all that their actions were (at best) morally ambiguous.

"A Breaking Heart" by Philip Sidney Jennings, is an unusual love story about an alien who comes apart. I enjoyed the quirky dialogue and metaphors-meant-literally, and found the overall effect surprisingly convincing. It even has a happy ending! Duncan Lunan's article, "Science Revisited," will be welcomed by people who got into sf through an interest in science. It's a concise and interesting summary of (mostly) recent happenings, and is occasionally enlivened by Duncan Lunan's personal opinions. Elsewhere comics are reviewed, and books of course. And there's a letters page where recent arguments about "pandering to market forces" are echoed: "One might even [argue] in favour of an entrepreneur who gives the readers what they want," writes one reader. The reply, "Our position on this matter must now be so well known that we shall not comment further," tends to contradict the editorial welcome to new readers.

(Paul Beardsley)

UK Books Received December 1991

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates,

where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alexander, Marc. **Enchantment's End: Part the Fourth of The Wells of Ythan**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3834-0, 434pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Marc Alexander" appears to be a pseudonym, and the book is copyrighted Edward Casson Promotional Services Ltd.) 16th January 1992.

Bear, Greg. **Anvil of Stars**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-3890-3, 442pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; sequel to *The Forge of God*; according to the blurb, Greg Bear has "a godly sense of wonder"; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £14.99, as well as a limited edition priced at £40 [not seen].) 13th February 1992.

Bear, Greg. **The Venging**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-5051-2, 269pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf collection, first edition [?]; it contains the complete contents of Bear's first US collection, *The Wind from a Burning Woman* [1983], plus revised versions of two previously uncollected early stories, one of which is the title piece; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £14.99 [not seen].) 13th February 1992.

Blommendaal, Laurens J. **The Desperado of the Metal**. Edge Creations [PO Box 7, South Delivery Office, Manchester M20 0BR], ISBN 0-0517552-0-X, ix+137pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf/fantasy [?] novel, first edition; it has been compared by local-press reviewers to the work of William S. Burroughs; the Dutch-born author has lived in Manchester for ten years; the book is quite nicely produced but for some reason the paragraphs aren't indented: is this a DTP glitch?) Late entry: November 1991 publication, received in December.

Card, Orson Scott. **The Worthing Saga**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-973450-8, 493pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989 [?]; a fix-up novel comprising material originally published in the books *Capitol* [1978], *Hot Sleep* [1979] and *The Worthing Chronicle* [1982].) 2nd January 1992.

Carpenter, Scott. **The Steel Albatross**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3728-X, 475pp, paperback, £4.99. (Near-future techno-thriller, first published in the USA, 1991; the villains in this book by an American former astronaut are members of the "Polituro" of something known as the "Soviet Union" – how quaint.) 16th January 1992.

Collins, Nancy A. **In the Blood**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-56196-8, 301pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991 [?].) 2nd January 1992.

Crowder, Herbert. **Missile Zone**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-20303-4, 348pp, hardcover, £13.95. (Near-future techno-thriller, first published in the USA, 1991; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; according to the blurb, "missiles, warplanes, radar systems and satellites converge, as the plot twists and turns to its electrifying climax" – which is as good a description of the techno-thriller as we've seen.) 12th December 1991.

Crowder, Herbert. **Weatherhawk**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4849-4, 413pp, paperback, £4.99. (Near-future techno-thriller, first published in the USA, 1990.) 12th December 1991.

Disch, Thomas M. **The M.D.: A Horror Story**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13148-9, 401pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror/fantasy

novel, first published in the USA, 1990; Disch's first new novel since *The Businessman* [1984] is a welcome event, and here it comes tricked out with cover quotes from Stephen King and Dean R. Koontz, just as though it were the latest from Richard Laymon or whoever; let's hope the public buys it in droves.) 23rd January 1992.

Friesner, Esther. **Hooray for Hollywood**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-5004-9, 217pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; sequel to *Here Be Demons* and *Demon Blues*.) 30th January 1991.

Gentle, Mary, and Roz Kaveney, eds. **The Weerde, Book 1: A Shared World Anthology**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-014562-1, 365pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first edition; contains all-new stories by Storm Constantine, Colin Greenland, Liz Holliday, Josephine Saxton, Brian Stableford, Charles Stross and the editors, among others; Neil Gaiman's name is given prominence on the cover and spine as one of the "devisers" of this book, but he's not actually specified as an editor.) 30th January.

Gifford, Denis, ed. **Mad Doctors, Monsters and Mummies: Lobby Card Posters from Hollywood Horrors!** H.C. Blossom [6/7 Warren Mews, London W1P 5DJ], ISBN 1-872532-59-4, unpaginated, trade paperback, £8.95. (Sf/horror film-poster collection, first edition; amusing and colourful; yes, this book has two exclamation marks in its title, whereas the companion volume [see below] has only one.) 12th December 1991.

Gifford, Denis, ed. **Things, Its and Aliens: Lobby Card Posters from Sci-Fi Shockers!** H.C. Blossom [6/7 Warren Mews, London W1P 5DJ], ISBN 1-872532-58-6, unpaginated, trade paperback, £8.95. (Sf/horror film-poster collection, first edition; the accompanying publicity bump, from Midas Public Relations Ltd, gives the publisher's name for this and the above title as "Green Wood," but we can't find evidence of it on the books themselves.) 12th December 1991.

Grabien, Deborah. **Plainsong**. "A fable for the millennium." Pan, ISBN 0-330-31833-0, 231pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 10th January.

Gross, Martin L. **The Red Swastika**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0465-9, 282pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-future thriller, first edition [?]; according to information on the reverse of the title page and the back cover flap, Martin Louis Gross, born 1925, is an American journalist and the author of two previous novels of a similar type, *The Red President* and *The Red Defector*; this one is about a near-future link-up between fascists in Germany and Russia.) 9th January 1992.

Heinlein, Robert A. **Farnham's Freehold**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-000-0, 299pp, paperback, £4.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1964.) 12th December 1991.

Huanzhulouzhu. **Blades from the Willows**. "A Chinese novel of fantasy and martial arts adventure." Translated by Robert Chard. Illustrations by Mark Haywood. Wellsweep [719 Fulham Rd., London SW6 5UL], ISBN 0-948454-05-9, 256pp, paperback, £7.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in Shanghai, China, 1946; according to the inside cover, Huanzhulouzhu, which means "The Master of Pearl-Rimmed Tears" was the pseudonym of Li Shanji [1902-1961], one of the most popular writers of this type of fiction in pre-revolutionary China; apparently, this is the first volume of a trilogy, "The Swordsmen's Haven at Willow Lake.") Late entry: August 1991 publication, received in December.

Jones, Jenny. **The Edge of Vengeance: Volume Two of Flight Over Fire**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3714-X, 462pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 51.) 16th January 1992.

Jordan, Robert. **The Eye of the World: Book One of The Wheel of Time**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7474-0987-0, 814pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 41.) 12th December 1991.

Jordan, Robert. **The Great Hunt: Book Two of The Wheel of Time**. Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8364-8, 598pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 44.) 12th December 1991.

Kafka, Franz. **The Transformation and Other Stories: Works Published During Kafka's Lifetime**. Translated and edited by Malcolm Pasley. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-018478-3, 236pp, paperback, £5.99. (Collection of stories and essays; first edition; the contents were originally published variously in German, 1909-1924; the title piece is of course much better known as "Metamorphosis" [why does the new translator feel it necessary to retitling it?] and this story may be claimed as one of the greatest fantasy novellas of the 20th century; needless to say, Penguin have not released the book as part of their "Roc" line.) 30th January.

Koontz, Dean R. **Cold Fire**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3605-4, 506pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 46.) 2nd January 1992.

MacAvoy, R.A. **King of the Dead**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0466-7, 286pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sequel to *Lens of the World*; proof copy received; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 54.) 13th February 1992.

McCaffery, Larry, ed. **Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction**. Duke University Press, ISBN 0-8223-1168-2, 387pp, trade paperback, £14.95. (Anthology of sf stories and criticism, first published in the USA, 1992; contains fiction by Acker, Ballard, Burroughs, Cadigan, Delany, DeLillo, Gibson, etc., and non-fiction by Baudrillard, Jameson, Leary, Lyotard, etc.; this is the US edition, imported to the UK and appearing here two months after American publication; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £45 [not seen].) March 1992.

Meyrink, Gustav. **The Golem**. Translated by M. Pemberton. Introduction by Robert Irwin. Dedalus [Langford Lodge, St Judith's Lane, Sawtry, Cambs. PE17 5XE], ISBN 0-946626-75-8, 304pp, paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1915; this is the fourth Dedalus printing since 1985.) December 1991?

Niven, Larry. **N-Space**. Introduction by Tom Clancy. Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 0-356-20242-9, 617pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf/non-fiction collection, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Stephen Baxter in *Interzone* 41.) 23rd January 1992.

Peyton, Richard, ed. **The Ghost Now Standing on Platform One: Phantoms of the Railways in Fact and Fiction**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4997-0, 382pp, paperback, £4.99. (Ghost-story anthology, first published in 1990.) 12th December 1991.

Power, David. **David Lindsay's Vision**. Preface by Colin Wilson. Pauper's Press [27 Melbourne Rd., West Bridgford, Nottingham NG2 5DJ], ISBN 0-946650-30-6, 38pp, paperback, £5.95. (Critical chapbook

devoted to a major British fantasy author; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £13.95 [not seen.] December 1991?

Saberhagen, Fred. **The Fourth Book of Lost Swords: Farslayer's Story.** Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8371-0, 252pp, paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 30th January 1991.

Schow, David J. **The Shaft.** Futura, ISBN 0-7088-5352-8, 361pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 23rd January 1992.

Scithers, George H., and Darrell Schweitzer, eds. **Another Round at the Spaceport Bar.** Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-54418-4, 248pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1989; contains stories old and new which follow the "tale told in a bar" format; they range from Lord Dunsany and Robert A. Heinlein to the contemporary likes of John Gregory Betancourt and W.T. Quick.) 2nd January 1992.

Scott, Michael. **Image.** Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0884-X, 370pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 12th December 1991.

Silverberg, Robert. **Lord Valentine's Castle.** "The first book in the bestselling *Majipoor* trilogy." Pan, ISBN 0-330-26462-1, 506pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1980; it has been repackaged as "pure" fantasy, with no mention on the cover of the fact that the story is set on another planet.) 10th January.

Simmons, Dan. **Prayers to Broken Stones: A Collection.** Introduction by Harlan Ellison. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7935-7, 311pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1990; proof copy received.) 13th February 1992.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **André Norton: Grand Master of the Witch World—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 41." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-30-0, 9+74pp, paperbound, £3. (Author bibliography, first edition.) December 1991.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Gene Wolfe: Urth-Man Extraordinary—A Working Bibliography.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 19." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-31-9, 9+53pp, paperbound, £2.50. (Author bibliography, first edition.) December 1991.

Strieber, Whitley. **Unholy Fire.** Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-203336-6, 375pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; proof copy received.) 13th February 1992.

Swithin, Antony. **The Lords of the Stoney Mountains: The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse, Book Two.** Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617853-7, 374pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 51.) 9th January 1992.

Thompson, Carlene. **Black for Remembrance.** Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-55981-5, 248pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1990; a debut novel.) 2nd January 1992.

Thurston, Robert. **Falcon Guard: Legend of the Jade Phoenix, Volume 3.** "Battletech." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-015248-2, 253pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-world sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; it contains about 20 unnumbered pages of "mechanical drawings" by Steve Venters as an appendix.) 2nd January 1992.

Wilson, Colin. **Spider World: The Magician.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13440-2, 345pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition; third in the series which began with *Spider World: The Tower* and *Spider World: The Delta*; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 6th January 1992.

Overseas Books Received

Blaylock, James P. **Lord Kelvin's Machine.** Illustrated by J.K. Potter. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-163-3, 262pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf/fantasy ["steampunk"] novel, first edition; this appears to be a sequel, or somehow related, to the author's Philip K. Dick Award-winning novel *Homunculus* [1986]; as an object, it's the usual scrupulously produced Arkham House product, with highly effective J.K. Potter photo-montage pictures.) 3rd February 1992.

Carver, Jeffrey A. **Dragons in the Stars.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-53303-8, 312pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; an expansion of the novelette "Though All the Mountains Lie Between," this is a sequel to Carver's early novel *Star Rigger's Way* [1979].) April 1992.

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Fantasy Tales.** "Issue No. 4, Winter 1991" [i.e. the same as the British Vol. 13. Issue No. 7]. ISBN 0-88184-735-6, 186pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Fantasy magazine in book form; first published in the UK, 1991; contains mainly new stories by Ramsey Campbell, Adrian Cole, Garry Kilworth, Samantha Lee, Thomas Ligotti and others; reviewed by Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh in *Interzone* 57.) 15th January 1992.

[Martin, Diane, ed.] **The Bakery Men Don't See Cookbook.** "Published for the benefit of the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award." Introduction and design by Jeanne Gomoll. SF3 [PO Box 1624, Madison, WI 53701-1624, USA], no ISBN shown, 90pp, paperbound, \$10 [plus \$2 postage overseas]. (Sf writers' cookery book, first edition; contains recipes provided by Pat Cadigan, Sherry Coldsmith, Ellen Datlow, Karen Fowler, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, Ursula Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Pat Murphy and many more.) Late entry: October 1991 publication, received in December.

Monteleone, Thomas F. **The Blood of the Lamb.** Tor, no ISBN shown, 413pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Horror [?] novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "a thriller of the Second Coming" and is set in the run-up to the millennium, a few years from now.) April 1992.

Van Vogt, A.E. **The Book of Ptath.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-788-7, 159pp, paperback, \$3.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1947; originally published in shorter form in *Unknown* magazine, 1943.) 15th January 1992.

Vinge, Vernor. **A Fire Upon the Deep.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85152-0, 391pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this appears to be a major new hard-sf work by the none-too-prolific author of *The Peace War* and *Marooned in Real Time*; Poul Anderson, Charles Sheffield and the like commend it.) April 1992.

Wolfe, Gene. **Storeys from the Old Hotel.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85208-8, 333pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the UK, 1988; proof copy received; this book won a 1989 World Fantasy Award as best collection, and it's now being released in America for the first time; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 29.) April 1992.

Editor's Note: we've also been sent a Romanian science-fiction anthology, *Timpul Este Umbră Noastră*, by its editor, Cornel Robu (Str. Prof. Ciortea no.1, Bloc H, sc.2, ap.18, 3400 Cluj-Napoca, Romania). We can't list this above, as it's mainly in the Romanian language, although there's a 25-page afterword, "About the Stories and Their Authors," which is in English. It's a large volume of some 520 pages, with work by Mircea Eliade, Vladimir Colin, Mircea Horia Simionescu and many others.

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THE WAY TO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION by Brian Stableford is offered to *Interzone* readers at discount rates: £8 hardcover/£5 paperback, post free. Further discounts for writers' groups and workshops: 20% on orders of 10 or more copies; 40% on orders of 20 or more. Order from Brian Stableford, 113 St Peter's Road, Reading RG6 1PG.

THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE by Edward Ashpole. Third printing since 1989. "The speculation is objective and open-minded. A very thought-provoking survey" – *US Booklist*. Soft cover, photographs and line drawings. Current published prize £8.95. Offered at £3.95, including postage and packing, UK or overseas. Edward Ashpole, Greenfield Cottage, Gilfach Hill, Lampeter Velfrey, Narberth, Pembrokeshire SA67 8UL.

VENUS RISING, a new novelette-length chapbook by World Fantasy Award winner Carol Emshwiller. "Venus Rising is...lyrical in its language, delightfully idiosyncratic in its thinking, filled with laughter and strange pain" – Pat Murphy. \$6.00 USA. \$7.00 overseas. Edgewood Press, P.O. Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA.

THE EMPIRE OF FEAR by Brian Stableford. Signed copies are offered to *Interzone* readers at a special rate: the hardcover first edition at £10, the large-format paperback at £5, post free. Order from Brian Stableford, 113 St Peter's Road, Reading RG6 1PG.

SCHEHERAZADE: fantasy, sf and gothic romance. Stories by Storm Constantine, Phillip Mann, Brian Sibley. Graphic novel by Jane Gaskell. Beautiful artwork. From: St Ives, Maypole Road, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 1HL. One issue £1.99; subscription (four issues) £7.50.

THE CANONGATE STRANGLER by Angus McAllister (reviewed *IZ* 48). Cover and design by Alasdair Gray. Author-signed copies £5 post free from Angus McAllister, c/o Futureshock Bookshop, 89 Byres Road, Glasgow G11 5HN.

INCONSEQUENTIAL – SF/Fantasy convention with the emphasis on humour and new ideas. May 22nd-25th, Derby. GoH Robert Rankin, Art GoH David Hardy. Attending £21 (£25 after Eastercon). *Inconsequential*, 12 Crich Avenue, Littleover, Derby DE3 6ES.

COLD TONNAGE BOOKS issues regular large catalogues of second-hand SF, Fantasy and Horror. Most new titles (hardcover) and many o/p for collectors. Contact Andy Richards, 136 New Road, Bedford, Middx. TW14 8HT (081-751 3162).

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J.G. BALLARD – a critical monograph by David Pringle. Copies available from *IZ*'s address. See advert on page 24 of this magazine for further details. Also for sale: copies of *Interzone: The 2nd Anthology*, paperback edition.

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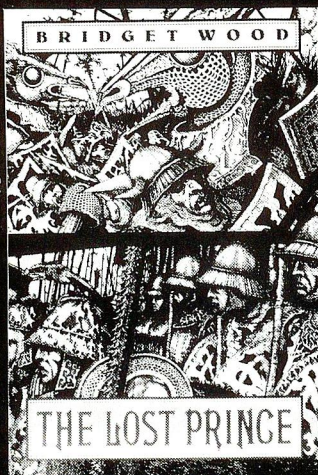
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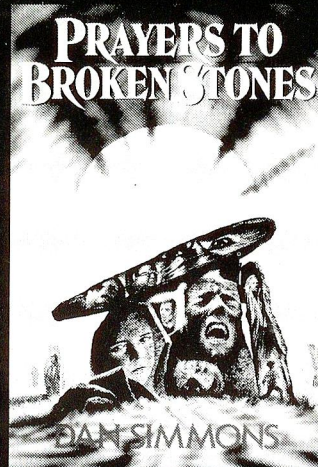
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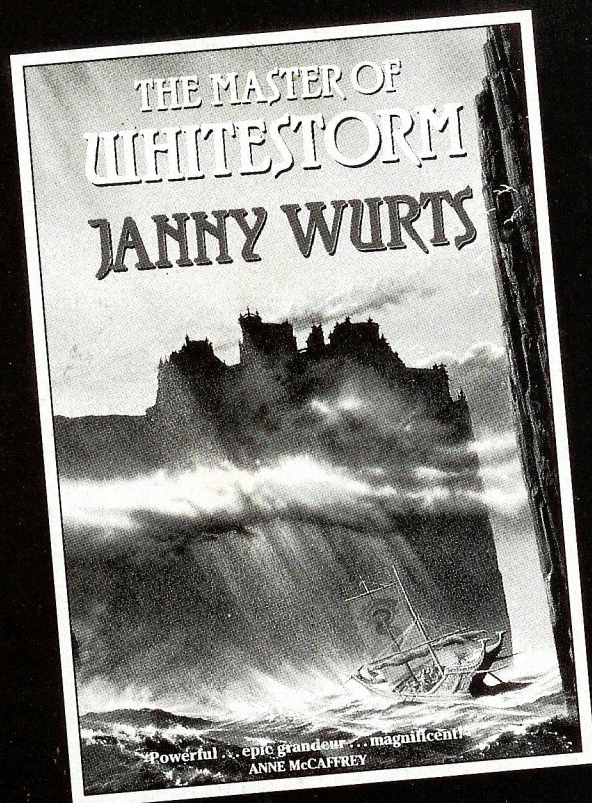
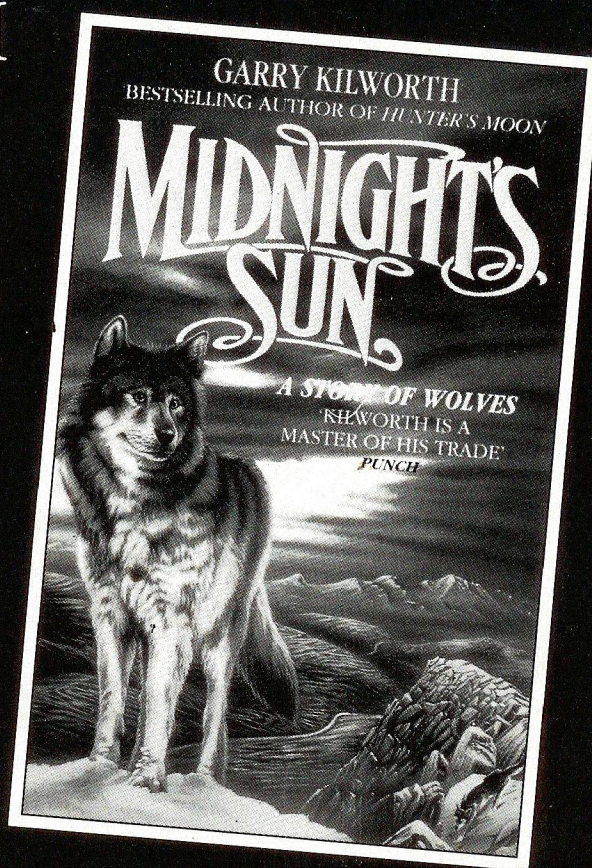
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